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SHIRLEY JACKSON

(1916-1965)

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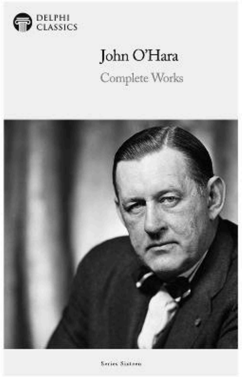
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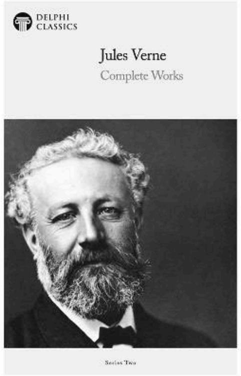
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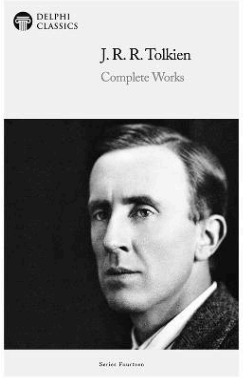
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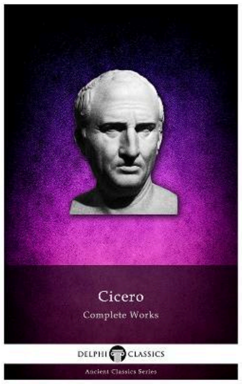
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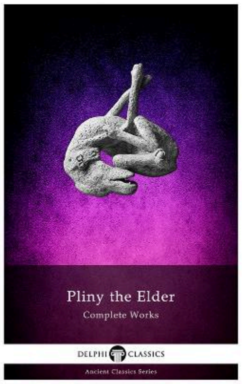
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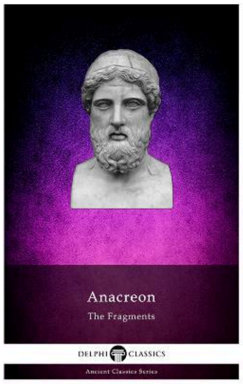
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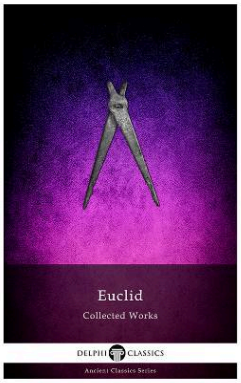
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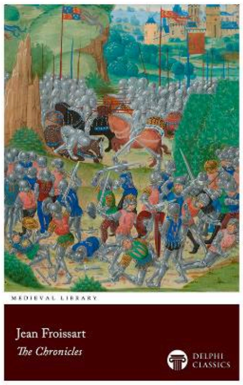
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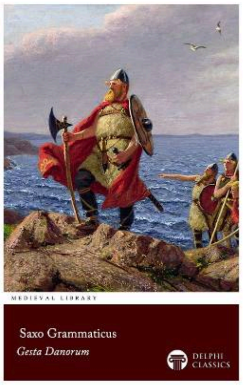
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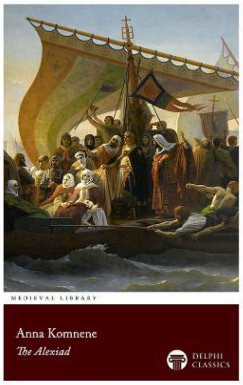
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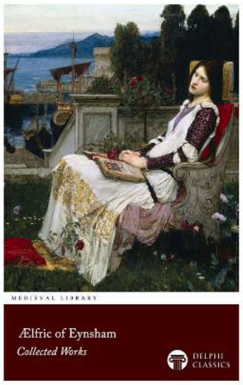
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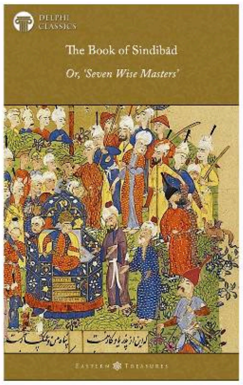
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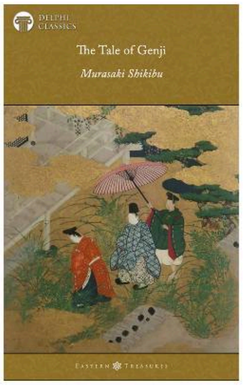
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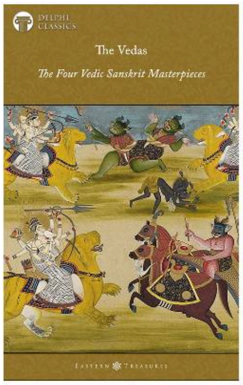
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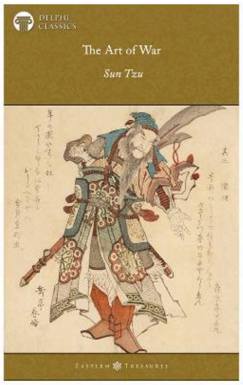
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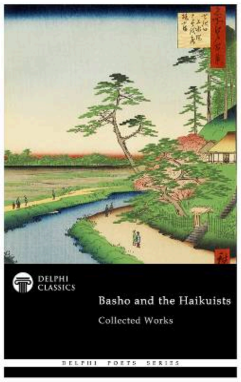
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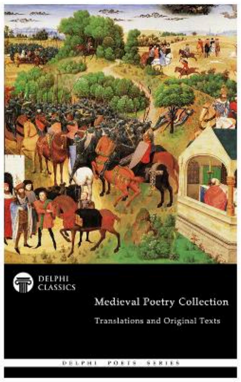
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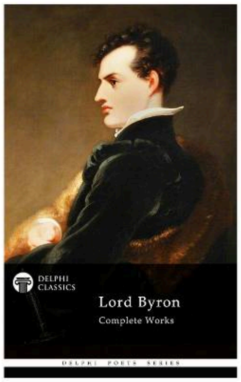
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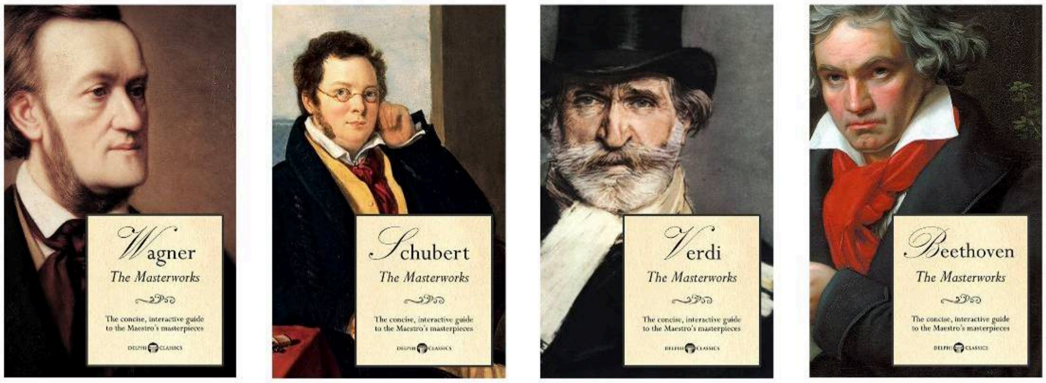
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DELPHI CLASSICS

The Complete Works of

SHIRLEY JACKSON

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The Novels

Colour lithograph of San Francisco, 1878 — Shirley Jackson was born in the city in 1916.

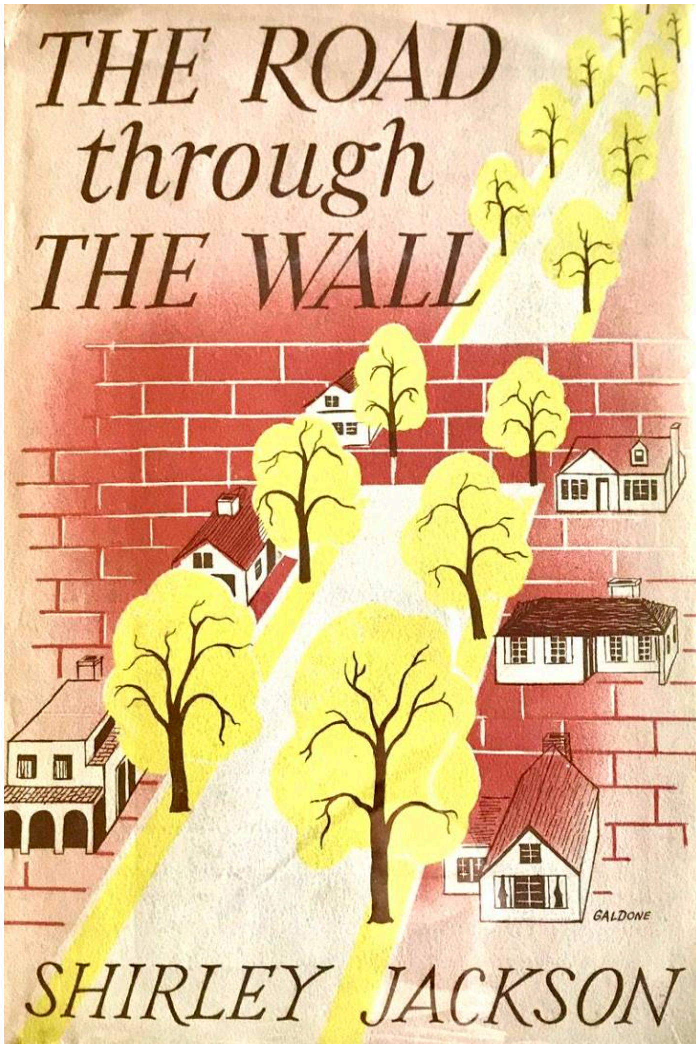
San Francisco, today

The Road through the Wall (1948)

Shirley Jackson's first novel, *The Road through the Wall*, was first published in the USA in 1948 by Farrar, Straus and Company. It was released the same year as her classic short story 'The Lottery', which launched her highly successful and respected career as a writer of horror and mystery fiction. She had developed an interest in literature, writing and the supernatural as a child, when seeking refuge from an unhappy home life. While studying for an undergraduate degree in journalism at Syracuse University in the late 1930's, Jackson established and edited a campus literary magazine called *Spectre*, alongside fellow student, Stanley Edgar Hyman. Jackson and Hyman soon became a couple and married in August 1940.

The Road through the Wall was inspired by the author's affluent, but unsatisfying and emotionally damaging childhood spent in Burlingame, California. The novel is set in an upper-class, insular neighbourhood called Pepper Street. It appears almost idyllic from the outside, but under the façade it is a world populated by selfish, superficial and bigoted citizens. The inhabitants are mortified by a plan to knock down a wall at the edge of their neighbourhood to build a new housing development; they fear that they will be forced into contact with uncouth and dangerous poor people. When a violent and shocking event occurs in Pepper Street, the true cruelty and darkness of the community is exposed in the most horrific manner.

Jackson at the beginning of her writing career


THE ROAD through THE WALL
GALDONE
SHIRLEY JACKSON

The first edition

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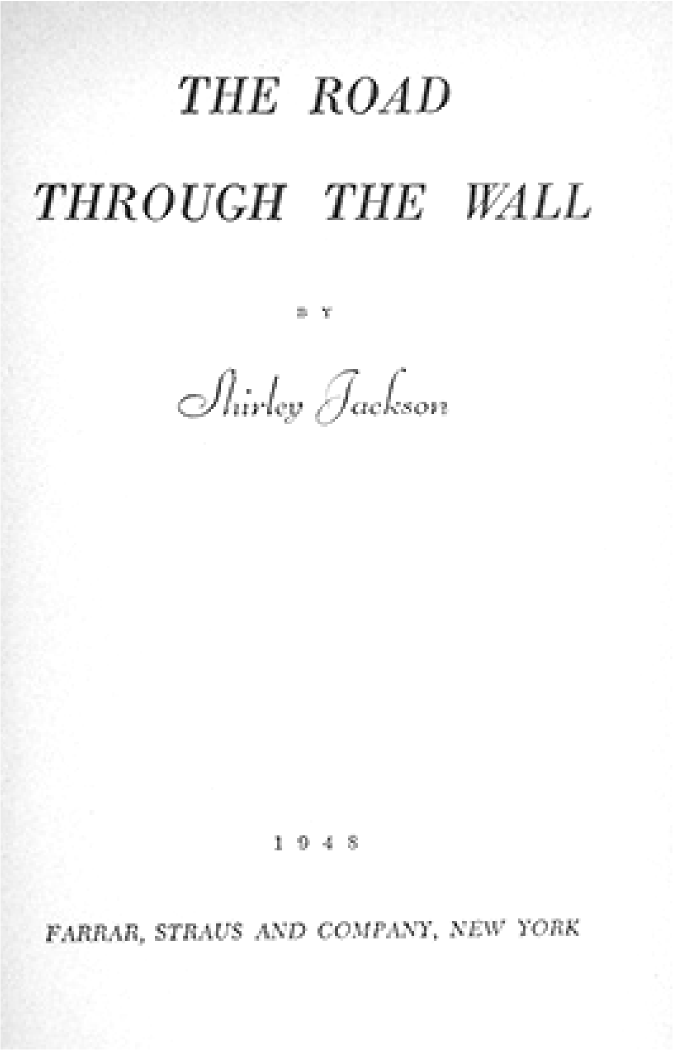

THE ROAD
THROUGH THE WALL

BY

Shirley Jackson

1948

FARRAR, STRAUS AND COMPANY, NEW YORK

The first edition's title page

PROLOGUE

THE WEATHER FALLS more gently on some places than on others, the world looks down more paternally on some people. Some spots are proverbially warm, and keep, through falling snow, their untarnished reputations as summer resorts; some people are automatically above suspicion. Mr. John Desmond and Mr. Bradley Ransom-Jones and Mr. Michael Roberts and Miss Susannah Fielding, all of whom lived on Pepper Street in a town called Cabrillo, California, thought of their invulnerability as justice; Mr. Myron Perlman and possibly Mr. William Byrne, also of Pepper Street, would have been optimistic if they thought of it as anything less than fate. No man owns a house because he really wants a house, any more than he marries because he favors monogamy, but all these men were married and most of them owned houses, and they regarded themselves as reasonable and unselfish and even, to themselves, as responsible. They all lived on Pepper Street because they were able to afford it, and none of them would have lived there if he had been able to afford living elsewhere, although Pepper Street was charming and fairly expensive and even comfortably isolated. The town of Cabrillo, in 1936, was fortunate in housing such people as Mr. Desmond and his family.

The Desmonds had lived on Pepper Street longer than anyone else, because when Mr. Desmond was able to build his home (he rented the first house he lived in with his wife) he chose a good location in a neighborhood not yet developed but undeniably "nice." The Desmond house was on the corner of Pepper Street and Cortez Road, facing Pepper Street, with a large garden to the side along Pepper Street and tall blank windows on the Cortez

Road side. The tall windows belonged on the inside to the Desmond living-room where the family sat in the evenings, and the Venetian blinds were always closed after dark. When the Desmonds moved in, their daughter Caroline had not been born, and the hedge around the visible sides of the house was inches high. By the time Caroline was three, the hedge was waist high and required the services of a boy every Saturday to keep it trimmed. Beyond the hedge the Desmonds lived in a rambling modern-style house, richly jeweled with glass brick. They were the aristocracy of the neighborhood, and their house was the largest; their adopted son Johnny, who was fifteen years old, associated with boys whose families did not live on Pepper Street, but in neighborhoods where the Desmonds expected to live some day.

Next door to the Desmonds, on Pepper Street, was the orchard of apple trees which successfully hid the house of crazy old Mrs. Mack, and beyond that was the Byrne house where fourteen-year-old Pat Byrne and twelve-year-old Mary lived under Mrs. Byrne's rigid faith, and from which they issued every morning with faces glowing from hard soap. Their house was a recent regrettable pink stucco with the abortive front porch made of a mantel over the front door and a slight unreliable iron railing on either side of the one step, a front porch unhappily popular in late suburban developments. Mr. Byrne had not built this house, neither did he own it, but he paid the rent for it regularly.

Next door to the Byrnes were the Robertses. Mike Roberts had been a cavalry officer in 1917 and had felt ever since that life without his horse was restricting. His wife had helped the architect with the plans for their house, and it began with bravado and ended weakly with a flat ugly goldfish pond never finished in the back yard. In front it had a sweeping wide concrete porch upon which bougainvillea would not grow — although the

Perlmans next door had it in profusion — and was thickly surrounded with bushes which were inadequate to disguise the fact that the roof was colonial, the windows modern, and the whole a gaudy yellow. The Roberts family had two children, Art and young Jamie. Art Roberts and Pat Byrne were free with one another's houses, and had once built a telephone of tin cans and pieces of string between their bedroom windows.

The Perlmans were the only Jewish family on Pepper Street, and lived sheltered under their masses of bougainvillea. They lived in a house which they rented, although it must have had the proper number of bedrooms and adequate closet space, since they never moved. The Perlmans' driveway was barely separated from the vacant lot next door by a grey picket fence; from their dining-room windows the Perlmans would survey the reaches of empty grass and shortcut paths which ended at Winslow Road, cutting north and south across Pepper Street's east and west. There was another vacant lot just across Pepper Street; it lay next to the Ransom-Jones house, which was then roughly across the street from the Perlmans'.

Mr. and Mrs. Ransom-Jones and her sister lived on Pepper Street, probably, because like Mr. Desmond they were not rich enough to live in the style they coveted and not proud enough to live in opposition to it. They devoted themselves, instead, to a garden which swept up from the sidewalk to the end of their lot, compensating for the tiny house, which might have been quaint and cottage-like, but was inadequate by Ransom-Jones standards. The Ransom-Jones garden, however, stretched so far that the house was almost hidden from its neighbors, and it was necessary for Mrs. Ransom-Jones to leave her front door and walk halfway down the stepping-stones before she could see the street. The Donalds were the Ransom-Jones's neighbors, pushed so far down the block by the garden that they were almost directly across the street from the Byrne house. Mr. Donald was another one who only rented his house; it had never occurred to him to build a house of his own, and so he spent all his life living in the patterns set out by other more enterprising men. His present house, which suited him and his family admirably, was made of bricks put together in a square, ample enough for Mr. and Mrs. Donald and their three children, and pretentious enough for Mr. Donald's wife and daughter to feel at home.

The one thorn in the side of the Donald women was the house-for-rent, which crowded them boorishly, in contrast to the Ransom-Jones garden; it went up for rent regularly and was never suitably tenanted during the Donalds' residence; one completely unsatisfactory family after another moved in and then out. Mrs. Donald suspected, and said publicly, that it was because the landlord rented it too cheaply for Pepper Street standards; it was a white elephant, she said, because it was badly planned and dreadfully dark. Someone obviously aiming at another effect than he got had intended it to be beautiful rather than comfortable; it was a thin greyish building with, blessedly, four thick trees crushed between itself and the Donald house, and a wall made of rough stones cemented together between itself and its other neighbor, Miss Fielding. The front of the house was also built of the same rough stones; Mrs. Donald had remarked accurately that it looked like a reform school.

Miss Fielding paid her rent and was never known to dislike her house and had probably never looked carefully at the outside of it. Pepper Street was one of the few neighborhoods where an old single woman like Miss Fielding could live alone in a house that suited her. By some architectural sleight-of-hand, Miss Fielding's house seemed to be set high above ground, as though she were living in a tree, or on a houseboat: there was a long flight of shallow steps shielded by a stone balustrade, and at the top the incredibly small house perched, with its small windows and door looking kittenishly down at the street. Miss Fielding had a little front porch with a continuation of the stone balustrade protecting it from falling down into the street, and the whole was colored white, with green frames around the windows and doors; it was on the front porch that Miss Fielding sat, day after day, with her cat — one of the Ransom-Jones's Angel's kittens — on her lap. The small space of ground in front of this house was bare earth, but her neighbors forgave Miss Fielding this on consideration of the steps, which were really too much, they thought, for a woman her age.

The Merriams had the corner of Pepper and Cortez opposite the Desmonds, but the Merriam house made no attempt to compete with the grandeur of the Desmond semi-modern. For one thing, the Merriams lived officially on Cortez Road, that being where their front door was. For another, Mr. Merriam, although he owned his house and would not live in a rented one, owned other houses at various places in the county, and lived in this one because it was the slowest to rent, and the least likely to sell. It had been built before the Desmond house by about ten years, and remodeled when Mrs. Merriam took it over; consequently it had the appearance of age which none of the other houses in the neighborhood had attained as yet. It was grey and weatherbeaten, and, since it had been modeled originally after someone's grandfather's manor-house, looked even older than it was.

Finally, next door to the Merriam home, defiantly on Cortez Road, was the house inhabited by the Martins, a stolid family who lived where they had to and held on to what they had; the house belonged to old Mr. Martin and his wife, grandparents to George and Hallie Martin, fourteen and nine years old, children whom Mrs. Merriam found regrettable; she would have preferred to keep her own fourteen-year-old, Harriet, far away from the Martin children, but this was almost impossible, since both Harriet and the Martins played communally with the other children in the neighborhood.

Moreover — and this was one of Mrs. Merriam's objections — the house next door was also the dwelling of young Mrs. Martin, mother to George and Hallie, who worked as a waitress somewhere downtown. The house itself was yellow, and ended with two apple trees by the back door; it was a step downward from the Merriam house, and certainly not fit to go around the corner on to Pepper Street.

Because Cabrillo was perhaps thirty miles from San Francisco and was, in 1936, halfway between a suburban development and a collection of large private estates, and because Pepper Street was, in turn, on the borderline between these two, it possessed an enviable privacy; beyond the Martin house, and running along behind all the houses on the south side of Pepper Street, was a heavily wooded section, probably unexplored except by the Pepper Street children, which included a dried-up creek and ended far south in a golf course. Backing on the houses of the northern side of Pepper Street — that is, the Desmonds' to the Perlmans' — was a row of apartment houses which in turn faced a main highway. Pepper Street was rarely troubled with invasions from this quarter, probably because the apartment houses and the people who lived in them and the cars traveling the highway were all intent in another direction, toward the center of town, with little concern about what went on in back of them. One of the apartment houses had stolen around the corner near the Desmond house to have an address on Cortez Road; it had even gone so far as to stretch a numbered awning out across the sidewalk, but people rarely went in or out that way, preferring the larger, double-awninged entrance on the highway. This apartment house, the Merriam house, and the Martin house were the only three places in the world to have addresses on Cortez Road. On the side of Cortez Road opposite these three was the wall.

The wall was the limit of a large estate which had originally encompassed all the property around Pepper Street, and which had been sold off lot by lot. At present the wall ran down one side of Cortez, along the highway for a block, and then up the corresponding street on the other side; it was a thin high brick wall, taller than Mr. Donald, who was the tallest man on Pepper Street, and never scaled within the history of the neighborhood. It was called the wall, and the highway was called the highway, and the gates were called the gates. These stood at the head of Cortez Road, where the wall reached its own estate and became self-important, having more ground to circle than a city block. The gates were square piles of brick on either side of the street, with no bars between, nothing to indicate that they were a barrier, but they were an effective end to Pepper Street life. Beyond them lived the rich people, on a long curving road from which you could not see any house; beyond them was a neighborhood so exclusive that the streets had no names, the houses no numbers. The people who owned the wall lived there; so, although no one knew it very surely, did the people who owned some of the houses on Pepper Street, and the man who owned the bank that owned the house-for-rent. Mr. Byrne’s employer lived there; so did Hallie Martin’s future husband.

The sun shone cleverly on Pepper Street, but it shone more bravely still beyond the gates; when it rained on Pepper Street the people beyond the gates never got their feet wet; beyond the gates all the houses were marked “No Trespassing.”

In any case, at two-thirty in the afternoon, Pepper Street was very quiet and pleasant, with the California sunlight of early summer almost green coming through the trees, almost painful straight from the sky. The trees lining Pepper Street on either side, which the children called locusts and the parents regarded vaguely as peppers, had spent the spring through with tiny pink blossoms, meeting to make a bedroomish arch overhead for a month, and then, suddenly, turning green and leaved, abandoning the pink blossoms overnight, so that the street was rich with pink blossoms underfoot. For a few days the pink blossoms would be everywhere — in the gutters, on the lawns, tracked into pleasant living-rooms, lying on the tops of bags of groceries carried home — and then they would vanish, again overnight, and the trees would continue to be greener and greener until school started in the fall, and then the street would be full of leaves and the trees bare all winter, preparing new pinkness for the spring.

The pink blossoms were underfoot now on Pepper Street, which made middle June almost certain. Mr. Ransom-Jones and Mr. Merriam and Mr. Desmond had all breakfasted in their homes by early morning sunlight before driving together to San Francisco, as they did every morning. Old Mr. Martin, who left before dawn for his greenhouses, regarded the warm weather as encouraging for the roots of growing things. Miss Fielding's cat liked the weather, and so did little Caroline Desmond.

It was the last day of school; fortunately the weather was to continue warm and fair until the end of summer, when school began again.

CHAPTER ONE

MRS. MERRIAM CAME to her back window, which saw Miss Fielding's house and Pepper Street beyond, and looked anxiously down Pepper Street. Mrs. Merriam's clock had stopped; it was easier to look out the back window than go upstairs to the bedroom clock. Mrs. Merriam's kitchen had a built-in electric clock (and a built-in dishwasher and a built-in refrigerator) but the electric clock had broken long ago, and when the refrigerator broke and the electrician came to fix it Mrs. Merriam could have him fix the clock. So that when the living-room clock stopped Mrs. Merriam was without the time downstairs.

At quarter-past three Mrs. Merriam had gone back to her sewing, but she heard the children coming up Pepper Street. They came from Winslow Road, from the school, and they came past the vacant lots first and then down past the Ransom-Joneses on one side and the Perlmans on the other (Marilyn Perlman, however, was always home last, because she left the school a few minutes after everyone else, and walked home alone), and then they passed the Robertses and the Byrnes on one side and the Donalds on the other, and the Roberts boys dropped off, and Pat Byrne, and Tod Donald went home while Virginia Donald and Mary Byrne came along the street slowly with the girls, Harriet Merriam and Helen Williams, and the girls stood on the corner of Pepper and Cortez and talked while the boys went home to leave their jackets and receive from their mothers an apple or a piece of cake, or, in the case of Pat Byrne, a glass of milk and two graham crackers. Miss Fielding heard the children coming when they reached the Donalds' house; she went inside with the cat, and lay down on the living-room couch. Mrs. Merriam, who was anxious, heard the children when they passed the house-for-rent, and from her back window saw Harriet coming down the street, carrying her books, along with the other girls, while the two Martin children, always the least enthusiastic and with the farthest to go, hesitated constantly — George outside the Desmond house till Johnny Desmond put his head out of the kitchen window and said, “Go on home, Martin,” and Hallie, who was only nine, around the group of girls on the corner, trying artfully to get a word into the conversation, until the group broke up and Hallie came tagging up Cortez Road with Harriet.

Mrs. Merriam prevented herself from going to the door to meet Harriet; she sat in the long light living-room with the basket of sewing on the floor beside her, unaware that with her tall thin body silhouetted against the big window, and her narrow severe head bent slightly to the sewing, she looked bleak and menacing after the cheerful sunlight outside. She heard Harriet say, “‘Bye, Hallie,” and come noisily up the front steps and open the door with a crash. Mrs. Merriam kept her eyes down on her sewing; Harriet would know she was offended. She heard Harriet’s steps in the hall, and then the hesitation that would be Harriet in the living-room doorway, recognizing that her mother was offended.

“I’m home, Mother,” Harriet said. “No more school till September.” It was her nervous voice, trailing off at the end of the sentence with a little giggle. Harriet was a big girl, large-boned and stout, and Mrs. Merriam braided Harriet’s hair every morning and dressed her in bright colors. For the last year or so, from twelve to almost fourteen, Harriet had begun to speak awkwardly when she was uneasy, missing her words sometimes, and stammering. Mrs. Merriam thought of it as Harriet’s nervous voice, and it made her own voice even more precise.

“I see you’re home,” Mrs. Merriam said. “That is, I *heard* you.”

Harriet looked down at her large feet, in heavy-soled oxfords. “I’m sorry I slammed the door,” she said.

“Of course you are,” Mrs. Merriam said. She leaned over and selected a spool of thread from the sewing-box beside her on the floor. “You always are, afterward.”

Harriet waited for a minute, politely, and then said, “Can I go on down to Helen’s? They’re waiting for me. I just wanted to tell you I was home.”

“You *can* go to Helen’s,” Mrs. Merriam said. She heard Harriet’s gusty sigh of relief, and added daintily, “but you *may* not.”

“Why?”

Mrs. Merriam tightened her mouth over her sewing. “I think you know what you’ve done, Harriet.”

“Mother,” Harriet began, only what she finally said was, “M-m-m-mother,” and she stopped helplessly.

“Please, Harriet,” Mrs. Merriam said. “There’s nothing to talk about. Go to your room.”

“But—” Harriet began. Then she said, “Oh, Lord,” and started heavily up the stairs.

“You might spend the time writing letters,” her mother said, raising her voice slightly.

The word “letters” carried Harriet hastily up the stairs and into her room; if there had been a lock on the door she might have been able to lock herself in, but she slammed the door violently, and then walked miserably over to her desk, although she knew, had seen from the doorway, that it was open. The slant-top, which should have been securely locked, was dropped down to make the table surface, and Harriet’s small papers and notebooks lay as she kept them, mercilessly neat, put back in the pigeonholes, perhaps even put back more carefully than Harriet, who loved them, ever did. Harriet went to the bed and looked under the pillow; the key was there, where it belonged. Harriet sat down heavily on the bed and said aloud, “What shall I do?” not because it was meaningful to her, or because she was concerned about what to do — she knew now, without question, the eventual series of acts to be forced from her — but because “What-shall-I-do?” seemed the formation of sounds most likely to apply to a situation like this.

From where she sat on the bed she could see out of the window which looked down on the corner of Pepper and Cortez; Hallie Martin, eating what seemed to be a doughnut, was rounding the corner, apparently bound for Helen’s. For a minute Harriet thought of calling to Hallie (“All is discovered”? “Burn the evidence”?), and then she said, “What shall I do?” again and got up and went over to the desk.

She put her hand lovingly on top of it; it had been a present from her father, who probably supposed that her mother had a key to it, from long knowledge of her mother. Harriet sat down in the desk chair and picked up the letter she had begun last night; her mother had set it open in the center of the desk, the only thing left out of place. It was a letter to George Martin, and it was written on shiny pink paper, and it began, “Dearest George.” Helen set the style; it was the way love letters were written, she said, and sometimes Helen’s letters to Johnny Desmond began, “Dearest dearest Johnny.” Harriet had chosen George to write to because he was dull and unpopular and she felt vaguely that she had no right to aim any higher than the one boy no one else would have; if she understood this feeling at all, she thought of it as “George always liked *me* best.”

Virginia Donald was writing to Art Roberts, and Mary Byrne was, cautiously, writing to her own brother. Hallie Martin carried the letters around, and Helen had written one for her to James Donald, who was seventeen and in third year high and the neighborhood hero. Hallie gave her letter to James Donald one evening when he came home at dinner time from football practice at the high school, and he read it while Hallie lurked excitedly on Helen's front porch; and when James tore the letter up and dropped it in the gutter Hallie sneaked down and got the pieces and took them home. "They *always* do that," Helen said wisely. "Men who don't care, they're callous."

Harriet looked down at the "Dearest George" on the pink paper, and read on, in her own writing, "Let's run away and get married. I love you and I want to—" The letter ended there, because Harriet had not been able to think of what she wanted to do with George; Helen's letters ended, "kiss you a thousand times," but Harriet could not bring herself to write such a thing, at least partly because the thought of kissing George Martin's dull face horrified her. She felt, although she had not confessed it to Helen, that she could possibly bear to kiss James Donald's face, but then Hallie had already written to him. Harriet tore the letter up slowly and threw it into the wastebasket. It was written, it had been read, she had no doubt that her mother would remember the words, and it was unpleasant to look at.

It was when she reached out for the other papers in the desk that she began to cry. She took down a notebook with "Poems" written on the front of it in pink and blue letters, and turned the pages slowly, reading and trying to pretend that she was her mother reading. The notebook labeled "Moods" she put aside unopened; it was dedicated "To my unknown hero," and perhaps if she did not read it now, her mother would not have read it earlier. There were more notebooks, one called "Me," which was the start of an autobiography; one named "Daydreams."

* * *

"Pat," Mrs. Byrne said softly, "you're not drinking your milk."

"I've got to hurry, Mother," Pat said. He put the books down on the table and picked up the milk to drink it standing.

Mrs. Byrne reached out one of her hands, chapped and red from much housework, and took the glass away from him. "That's not the way my boy does," she said. "Sit down, son."

Mary Byrne looked up from her crackers and milk. "For heaven's sake sit down or get out," she said. She was small and anemic and she had sinus trouble and she sniffled when she talked. Mr. and Mrs. Byrne both loved her dearly, but Pat was tall for his age and dark and almost handsome; both Pat and Mary were top of their classes in school, but Mary wore glasses and her hair straggled on her neck. "Golly," Mary said, "other people are in as much of a hurry as you are."

"I'm going to the library," Pat said. "Artie and me."

"You can drink your milk first," Mrs. Byrne said. "Mary, finish before you go out."

"What's for dinner?" Mary asked. She moved her chair to see what Mrs. Byrne was doing at the sink. Her brother poked her arm, and she turned.

Pat gestured with his head at his mother, her back toward them, and took the folded papers out of one of his books. "Yours," he mouthed at her.

Mary's letters were written on blue paper; she recognized them and picked them up, thinking from her brother's clandestine attitude that she might risk a knowing grin, but his eyes were looking away and his mouth was turned in disgust. Mary Byrne added another brick to her hatred for her brother and said, "Thanks." She put the letters in to the pocket of her dress and said, "'Bye, Mom," as she left the kitchen. Pat watched her go out the door into the front hall and then he said quietly, "Mother?"

"Pat darling," said his mother without turning around.

"Listen," Pat said quickly, "I don't want to be a tattletale, but you better stop Mary from writing letters to boys."

His mother turned, paring knife in her hand, and regarded him. "And what kind of letters is Mary writing to boys?"

Pat looked down at the table, at his hands moving nervously. "Letters," he said, and wriggled. "*You* know."

"And how do *you* know?" his mother said.

Pat's face was red, and his voice went more and more quickly. "All the girls are doing it. It's that Helen Williams. I just happened to see the letters."

"And what boys?"

Pat stood up and picked up his books, but he said, "That's the trouble. I don't know *what* other boys."

"I'll speak to Mary," his mother said. "But you mind your own business after this."

"But it's dirty," Pat said.

"I'm not worried," his mother said. "I want you to be a gentleman. A *real* gentleman. Don't go out without your jacket."

Pat hesitated and then said, "I didn't mean to tell on her."

"That's my fine fellow." His mother put down the knife and came over to kiss him. "Now don't get all interested in the library and forget to come home for dinner."

Mrs. Byrne had her potatoes pared and set on top of the stove, and the string beans cut and ready to start, when the phone rang. Drying her hands on her apron, Mrs. Byrne went into the hall and picked up the phone.

"Hello?" she said, and the telephone said steadily, "Hello, this is Josephine Merriam. Harriet's mother."

"Of course, Mrs. Merriam." Mrs. Byrne bowed politely to Mrs. Merriam at least once a day. "How are you?"

"I am very much disturbed, Mrs. Byrne, and I think you ought to know the facts immediately, which is why I called. Our daughters have been doing some rather indiscreet things."

"Yes?" said Mrs. Byrne.

"This morning," Mrs. Merriam went on, "I happened to discover a letter my daughter had written to one of the neighborhood boys. It was a childish," and Mrs. Merriam laughed shortly, "but improper letter. She tells me that the other girls in the neighborhood have been writing the same kind of letters."

"Mary?" Mrs. Byrne said.

"Mary indeed," said Mrs. Merriam. "And Virginia Donald, and of course, the source of it all, Helen Williams. I don't know, naturally, whose *fault* it is," she said lingeringly, "but of course I think the girls should be spoken to."

"Of course," Mrs. Byrne said. "I'll speak to Mary, of course."

"Harriet also tells me," Mrs. Merriam said, "that your son has been *getting* letters."

"Who from?" Mrs. Byrne's voice was suddenly flat.

"I think *he's* the person to tell you *that*," Mrs. Merriam said. "I'm sorry, Mrs. Byrne, to be the one to tell you."

"You couldn't do anything else," Mrs. Byrne said.

"After all, my own daughter is in it too," Mrs. Merriam said.

"I'll speak to Mary," Mrs. Byrne said.

* * *

Marilyn Perlman came into the house quickly, opening the front door with her key. She put her books down on the hall table and read the note sitting there: “Dear, have gone to Mrs. White’s, back about five. If anyone calls take message. Love, Mother.” Marilyn wondered vaguely why her mother always ended even the slightest notes formally; her father had once told her solemnly that the notes left for the milkman always ended, “Yrs. sincerely, R. Perlman.”

The Perlmans’ home was probably the wealthiest-looking on the block, although presumably the Desmonds had more money than the Perlmans, and Mrs. Merriam was vaguely noted for her “taste.” The Perlmans’ living-room was pale green and beige, and Mr. Perlman liked to see a wood fire in the fireplace, although the Donalds had theirs stacked with imitation logs, and the Byrnes had a grate with a red light behind it. When Marilyn came into her living-room she was able to take a book from a bookcase; it was a limp-leather bound volume of Thackeray, but Harriet Merriam, after all, spent Saturday morning dusting the photograph album which lay on a side table in the Merriams’ living-room, and the first secular book in the Byrne house was Pat’s copy of *Robinson Crusoe*.

Marilyn was reading through Thackeray for words; from *Vanity Fair* she had gleaned “adorable” and “fearsome” and “horrid”; from *The Virginian* she already had half a dozen. Her word for today was “storied”; it had turned up in English class in school, and Marilyn had written it on the margin of her English book, for copying later.

With the Thackeray under her arm, Marilyn went into the kitchen and opened a bottle of coke, and took the bottle and the book out to the front porch. The Perlmans’ porch was heavily screened by vines, and in the glider Marilyn was hidden and secure to watch the movement of people up and down the block. She knew some of the people very well; the Ransom-

Joneses across the street, and Harriet Merriam, toward whom she felt a respectful sympathy, and James Donald, whom she loved desperately. The Perlmans were far down the block from the Desmonds and Helen Williams, but Helen Williams was a terror to Marilyn and young Mrs. Desmond an ogress. Mrs. Desmond cut Mrs. Perlman on the street, almost certainly not intentionally, but Helen Williams followed Marilyn around the schoolyard, into the schoolroom, and up and down the halls. At home, Marilyn rarely went past the center of the block; to go below the Donald house meant probably meeting Helen. One day, at the noon recess, Helen and a group of friends had found Marilyn reading in an empty classroom and sat down around her, and Helen said, "Perlman, we've been looking for you." (Thinking about it, on her own front porch behind the vines, thinking as she did almost daily, Marilyn remembered the sudden sickness, looking up from her book to see Helen and, cruelly, Harriet Merriam.) "We've been wondering," Helen said, looking at the other girls, who laughed, even Harriet, "we've been wondering about Christmas."

"What about it?" When Marilyn remembered herself in this scene, she saw herself as small and frightened and ugly; Harriet, on the other hand, remembered herself as dirty and fat and overbearing; and perhaps Helen Williams, if she thought of it, remembered *herself* as friendly and teasing.

"Well," Helen said elaborately, "in about ten months it's going to be Christmas again, and you know around here at Christmas on the last day of school all the kids give each other presents." The story had not been planned; so much might be Harriet's defense; the girls listened to Helen with smiles and some wonder. "And we thought," Helen went on, watching first Marilyn and then the other girls, "that maybe when we all got together to draw names for the Christmas presents you maybe would think it was nicer of us just not to put your name in. So you won't be embarrassed."

For so long a story it had very little point; Harriet was confused and looked at Helen, frowning. Marilyn put both hands down on the open pages of her book and looked around at Helen and at Harriet frowning and at the other girls, one of whom was fidgeting toward the door, and said, “I don’t know why you want to do *this*.”

Helen laughed. “Maybe you have two Christmases,” she said. She turned around to the other girls, to Harriet, and said, “Marilyn has *two* Christmases. One of her own and one she gets in on with us.”

“I don’t get it,” one of the girls said, and the one edging toward the door said, “Come *on*.”

“Marilyn knows what I mean,” Helen said.

It was the feeling of having them all around her that bothered Marilyn; they were all together, and when one of them left they would all go, even Harriet. They were all looking at Marilyn at once, and she could only look at one of them at a time. She looked at Harriet and said, “If you’re through, I can go back to my book. I was studying.”

“I’ll tell you all about it,” Helen said. She stood up and gathered the other girls and led them out. Perhaps she stopped them outside the door, in a little group in the hall, perhaps she wrote it in a note and sent it around the schoolroom, perhaps it was nothing at all, but Marilyn was afraid of her, and when she wanted someone to die it was always Helen Williams.

She finished her coke and read her Thackeray, and went inside with the book and the empty bottle at half-past four. She put the book back in the bookcase and the empty bottle on the back porch, and went upstairs to her own room, which was the prettiest place she knew, and out of her top dresser drawer she took her notebook and sat down on the bed with it. She opened it to the first blank page, and “storied,” she wrote, and “grisly.”

* * *

Mrs. Roberts was a big woman fortunate enough to be married to a big man, and when Mr. and Mrs. Roberts sat down at either end of their dinner table, the dining-room seemed full and the table setting dwarfed. Jamie Roberts, their younger son, showed signs already of continuing the family tradition: he was broad-shouldered and long-legged, at ten, and looked so emphatically like his father that Mrs. Roberts frequently addressed all her remarks to him when she was quarreling with her husband.

Artie, the older boy (and Mrs. Roberts supposed always that it was because she had never really wanted Artie and then only kept on to have Jamie because Artie was such a disappointment) looked like Mrs. Roberts's brothers and uncles, small and thin and pale, with colorless hair and eyes and the mouth that in Mrs. Roberts's Uncle Frank was always half-open. It was difficult for anyone as hearty as Mrs. Roberts to see a puny son at her dinner table and not be angry; Artie was already fourteen years old, and Mrs. Roberts honestly despaired of making a man of him. She and Mr. Roberts both spoke to him gently, when they remembered, because secretly they were both a little afraid that a boy who read books instead of playing baseball might someday turn on them with a dreadful sure knowledge that would cut away their confidence and their muscles and leave them insecure and frightened, their stronger son as weak as they.

"*Eat*, Artie," Mrs. Roberts said. "You've got to get some meat on you."

"Little exercise," Mr. Roberts said. He put down his butter knife and looked at his older son appraisingly. "If you'd get outdoors more and get a little exercise, you wouldn't look like a bag of bones."

"I eat," Artie said defensively to his plate.

"Artie would rather play with the girls," Mrs. Roberts said jovially. "What's this I hear about you and the girls, Artie?"

"Artie?" Mr. Roberts said.

Jamie looked up with his mouth full, turning his head around the table to hear every word. “Artie?” he said thickly.

“Our son,” Mrs. Roberts said formally down the table to her husband, “has been getting love letters from some young lady.”

“Good for you,” Mr. Roberts said. He laughed and pointed his finger at Artie. “Make them chase you,” he said.

Artie knew that across the table his brother’s broad face was shining with unbelieving delight. “That silly stuff,” Artie said inadequately. He felt himself blushing, his face hot and horrible, and there was a sudden gleeful shout of laughter from his mother and father and brother.

“Look at him,” Jamie howled. “Look at Artie!”

“Why, Artie,” his father said. “Kiss and tell?”

When the laughter died down Mrs. Roberts said with apparently meaningless amiability, “Well, just the same it’s nice to see the *girls* doing the chasing for a change.”

* * *

“John,” Mr. Desmond said soberly, “your mother has asked me to speak to you.” He had taken Johnny into a corner of the living-room where no one usually sat, in a spirit of manly formality. Johnny sat on a stiff chair, looking his father in the eye, his expression all attention. Mr. Desmond, who found the experience completely enjoyable, went on gravely, “It’s a serious responsibility, John. The responsibility of a father talking like this to his son. And you know you *are* truly my son.” Mr. Desmond laid his hand on his son’s knee for a minute, and found his own eyes almost tearful. “A *man*, John,” Mr. Desmond said, “must never take admiration lightly, whether it comes from a silly young girl, or a maturer young lady, or even from a mother or sister or aunt. It is the duty of a *gentleman*, John, to regard all this admiration as a compliment. It *is* a compliment, John," Mr. Desmond went on very earnestly, "in the very deepest sense of the word. I'm *proud* to know that my son is admired. We must never dismiss the emotions natural to the feminine heart—" Mr. Desmond stopped to chuckle paternally, and lost the thread of his sentence, so he began again, "You'll find, as you grow older, John, that many women will feel the same way, and you must never dismiss—"

* * *

Helen Williams grabbed her little sister by the hair and shook her wildly back and forth. "Did you tell?" she said. "Did you go and tell, you bad, bad girl?"

Mildred stared wild-eyed. "Grandma," she whispered.

"*She* can't hear you," Helen said. She shook her sister again. "*No one* can hear you. You tell me now, did you tell on me?"

"Grandma," Mildred whispered again. "Mommy."

Disgusted, Helen let go of her sister and looked down on her, with her hands on her hips. "You just listen to me," she said in her normal voice, "if you ever tell on me again, if you ever tell anything, I'll cut out your tongue and I'll slice off all your fingers and I'll cut a big hole in your stomach with a carving knife and I'll hit you with a hatchet."

* * *

"Look," Pat Byrne said viciously to his sister, "You cut it out, do you understand?"

"Cut what out?" Mary Byrne said innocently.

Pat looked around to make sure that his father was still reading his paper in the living-room and that the kitchen sounds were going on peacefully where his mother was finishing up the dishes. Pat and Mary were in the hall, and because Pat spoke almost in a whisper Mary kept her voice quiet. “You just cut it out,” Pat said.

“Pat,” Mr. Byrne called harshly from the living-room, “Mary! No secrets whispered around this house!”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Mary said. She put out her lower lip and turned her back to walk away, but Pat pushed her shoulder and she turned around, her face ready to call her mother.

“You cut out all this dirty stuff,” Pat said. He put his face close to his sister’s and said again almost helplessly, “You just *cut it out*, that’s all.”

“You’re crazy,” Mary said. “I didn’t do anything.”

“I don’t want any more of those dirty letters,” Pat said. “I don’t care what happens, don’t *you* write any more to *me*.”

* * *

Hallie Martin walked slowly down the block, scuffing the loose sole of her shoe through the pink flowers, cautiously experimenting with a side tooth that might very well be coming out. She stopped for a few minutes, open-mouthed, across the street from the Desmond house, watching little Caroline moving around the flowers. Caroline was little and delicate and clean, and Hallie was lean and dirty and wet-faced, and after a minute Hallie moved on down the block without crossing the street.

Hallie, who was nine years old, Jamie Roberts, who was ten, and Mildred Williams, who was seven, were the youngest children around except for Caroline; they were an in-between generation, awed and overruled by the thirteen- and fourteen-year-olds, expecting in their turn a younger generation to bully and educate. If Hallie had crossed the street and stood outside the Desmond yard, Mrs. Desmond would have come out on the side porch to sit quietly until Hallie was gone away; if Hallie stayed Mrs. Desmond would finally take Caroline indoors.

"Old Caroline," Hallie said to herself as she went down toward Helen's, where the older girls would be, "old Caroline wets her pants."

At Helen's house you didn't bother to ring the bell or call Helen outside; you opened the door and went in, walking around inside the house until you found whomever you were looking for. Mrs. Parnatt, whom the children called Old Lady Parrot, and who was Helen's grandmother, spent most of the day in a back room with the door locked; when she came out to the bathroom or to the kitchen to make herself coffee they saw an old woman with a tiny head and shoulders and huge from the waist down; an aged Pekinese following her in and out of her room. The dog's name was Lotus, and when the girls were in Helen's room next to her grandmother's, they could hear the old lady crying over the dog, or sometimes stamping around the room and screaming because the dog had fouled the rug.

"That dog snaps," Helen was fond of saying to her friends. "Some day she's going to hit him with a chair or something and he's going to bite her hand off."

When Harriet Merriam came to the house — the other girls thought this was funny and tormented her with it — she would open the door a crack, peering down the long dark hall inside to see if the grandmother's door were open. If the door were open that meant that Lotus was abroad, and Harriet would wait outside. "I don't want him to snap at *me*," she said reasonably.

"If he snapped at *me* I'd kick him in the head and kill him," Hallie said wisely. "That's how you kill dogs anyway, kick them in the head."

"You just kick my grandmother's dog," Helen said. She laughed. "My *grandmother* would bite you."

In Helen's room at the back of the house were old fashion magazines and pictures of movie stars and collections of lace and ribbons the girls used to dress up in; Helen's mother worked in the city, and she bought Helen neat young girl's clothes which Helen decorated with bows or lace collars or five-and-ten jewelry and wore to school. Sometimes the girls at Helen's house would go into the dark front room where Helen's mother sat alone in the evenings, and play records on the phonograph and dance together. Once or twice they brought George Martin in to dance with them, although he was clumsy and had to be bribed with penny candy before he would stand up patiently for a minute or two and walk around the floor holding one of the girls.

"When I go live with my *father*," Helen said frequently, "I've got to know how to dance and how to dress pretty, because my father is going to take me out a lot and we're going to travel and everything."

"Where is your father?" someone, probably Harriet, would ask, and perhaps Virginia Donald would add respectfully, "You're terribly lucky."

"My father goes everywhere," Helen said. "Maybe Paris, or New York. Paris is where they have men who kiss your hands." She giggled, and it made the other girls giggle too. With a lace shawl over her head, Helen stood up and curtseyed, holding out her hand. "Why, Mr. Paris," she said in a high voice, "you mean you want to kiss *my* hand?"

Hallie stood in back of her, shouting, "Why, Mr. Johnny Desmond, you mean you want to kiss *my* hand?"

And Helen said seriously, "Boy, I'm not going to stay here much longer. I'm going to find my father pretty soon now."

The Williams family was moving soon; Mrs. Williams had mentioned to Miss Fielding, who was the only person outdoors in the very early morning when Mrs. Williams left to catch her bus to the city, that it was too hard to try to get back and forth every day, and she wanted to put the girls into a city school. Miss Fielding told Mrs. Desmond, who said timidly that perhaps it was just as well. Little Mildred Williams, Mrs. Desmond said, was entirely too sweet and kind to be away from her mother all the time, and Mrs. Desmond added, with a stronger note to her voice, that perhaps the grandmother (out of respect for Miss Fielding's age Mrs. Desmond did not say "that almost bedridden old lady," as she did later to Mr. Desmond) was not quite — Mrs. Desmond lifted her hand gently — not *quite* the person to deal with dear little Helen.

The word that dear little Helen had for Mrs. Desmond was "horse's behind." "Thinks she owns the world," Helen said.

Helen's little sister Mildred came home the last day of school and went immediately out into the back yard, where for the last month or so she had been building an elaborate playhouse, partly underground, dug out with a spoon, and partly put together with pieces of board salvaged from vacant lots and other back yards. The playhouse was just big enough for Mildred to crawl in and lie down, and her dolls were in there and what pillows and dishes she could take from her own house. "It's for my mommy and me," she told Mr. Donald over the fence. "When Helen and Gram go away my mommy and me will live here."

The afternoon that Harriet's mother found out about the letters, Hallie found Helen alone in the living-room, dancing solemnly around to "Missouri Waltz" on the phonograph. Hallie fell into line behind Helen, imitating her and saying, "Bet when you find your father you'll be the best dancer there."

"I'll dance all day long," Helen said. "I'll never stop dancing till I'm hungry and then I'll eat ice cream and chicken and chocolate creams."

"I wish I could go with you," Hallie said.

Helen stopped dancing and fell down on the couch. Hallie lifted the needle off the record and set it aside. She came over and sat down next to Helen and said, “Listen, Willie, can’t I go with you?”

“You want to know something?” Helen said dreamily.

Hallie nodded, leaning forward.

“Don’t tell,” Helen said, and Hallie nodded again. Helen looked around sharply, and Hallie crossed her finger over her heart, and Helen said impatiently, “Don’t do that, baby. Swear on your honor.”

“I swear on my honor,” Hallie said obediently.

“Well,” Helen said, “you know where I was last night?”

Hallie shook her head, her mouth a little open.

Helen laughed excitedly. “Well,” she said, “I went out for a walk and I went over down by the stores.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know,” Helen said vaguely, “I just *felt* like going that way. And you know this guy, the one in the gas station, the one we stopped and kidded with once?” She waited while Hallie nodded again, and then went on, “Well, he was there and we got to talking and he says he’ll take me to the city some night and we’ll go somewhere and dance.”

* * *

“*I* don’t know, sweetie,” Dinah Ransom-Jones said to her sister, “I really don’t know, you have such a *sense* of flowers.”

“But it’s *your* garden, dear,” her sister said gently. “You’ll be here a good deal longer than I will.”

“Brad always says the flowers look prettier when you do them,” Mrs. Ransom-Jones said.

"But I won't do them always," her sister said. "He loves the way you plan them."

"Sweetie," Dinah said, "you've just *got* to decide. Nothing *ever* goes well around here unless you help. You know that."

"Well." Her sister hesitated. "Over *there*, then." She pointed to a far corner of the garden, near the street hedge.

"Really?" Mrs. Ransom-Jones said. "You really think *there*?"

"Not if you have a better place," her sister said.

"Of course not," Mrs. Ransom-Jones said. She picked up the gardening basket and the bag of bulbs. "Don't you lean over," she said, "I don't want you overtiring yourself."

"It doesn't matter, really," her sister said.

Mrs. Ransom-Jones moved with determination, and her sister said, quickly, "Not *that* way, dear. By the street hedge."

"Oh." Mrs. Ransom-Jones stopped and looked around. "I thought you said over *here*," she said.

"Well, I *did* say by the street hedge," her sister said, "but if you have a place you like better...."

"Of *course* not, sweetie," Mrs. Ransom-Jones said. She started off again toward the corner of the garden. "Brad will think this is wonderful," she said. "That's just the spot for shy flowers."

"He loves everything you do," her sister said, following.

* * *

It was evening, and the kids were all outside; Harriet could see them from her bedroom window, Miss Fielding could see them from her chair on the porch, Marilyn Perlman could see them from the living-room window, past her father's head bent over papers at the desk. Early evening and twilight were always longer on Pepper Street than anywhere else; dinners were early up and down the block so the children could play longer; even Miss Fielding, who did not play, felt uncomfortable sitting down alone to her dinner later than anyone else, hearing the noise of dishes being washed at the Merriams'. Mrs. Perlman served dinner early because Marilyn might want to play with the other children.

They played tag and hide-and-seek and long involved games with a line across the street from curb to curb and elaborate systems of bases and penalties. Mr. Desmond, who walked out for the evening air, met Mr. Roberts halfway down the block, and together they stood on the sidewalk and watched the game.

"If those young animals could put half that creative ability into their school work," Mr. Desmond commented drily.

"Healthy kids," Mr. Roberts said. "Good to see."

They stood quietly in the half-darkness, smiling vaguely. Past them their own children and the children of their neighbors moved swiftly back and forth, following some ancient ritual of capture and pursuit, dance steps regulated as far as the placing of the feet. With a wild howl little Jamie Roberts made a capture in the gutter near his father, and Mr. Roberts took the pipe out of his mouth to say, "Good boy, Jamie." He lifted his eyes to where, across the street, his older son sat with Pat Byrne on the Donalds' lawn. They were half-watching the game, half-talking. Mr. Desmond followed his attention, and said quietly, "That's a very good boy, that Art of yours. Bright kid."

Mr. Roberts sighed and turned to watch Jamie shrieking up the street.

"I guess just anywhere where you could find a job," Art Roberts was saying. "Anywhere not here."

"They send you right back," Pat Byrne said. "You can't get a job because you're too young, and they send you right back."

"In another year, maybe," Art said. "I could say I was eighteen."

"They take you in the navy at sixteen," Pat said, "I *think*."

Hallie cornered Helen for a minute, away from the glow of the street light, and said insistently, "Are you going to take someone? A friend?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," Helen said, turning away.

"Tell me," Hallie said insistently. "You said to him you'd take a friend?"

Helen looked down on the top of Hallie's head. "I said I'd take a *friend* with me, not a dirty little baby."

James Donald came out of his house, spoke to Art Roberts and Pat Byrne on his way down to the sidewalk. He was all dressed up, and when Mr. Roberts and Mr. Desmond saw him they smiled at one another and waved across the street to him. He stood uncertainly for a minute and then crossed over to where they stood and said, "Evening, Mr. Desmond, Mr. Roberts."

"How're you?" Mr. Desmond said. "And your family?"

"Dad's not well again." James turned, hands in his pockets, and surveyed the game as though he belonged with Mr. Desmond and Mr. Roberts instead of with the kids in the street.

"Got a date?" Mr. Roberts said cheerfully.

James moved nervously, and swallowed. "Thought I'd go out for a while."

"Young men," Mr. Roberts said, and he and Mr. Desmond laughed.

James straightened his shoulders and laughed with them.

"Have a fine time, son," Mr. Roberts said, and began to walk on. "Good night," he said over his shoulder, and James and Mr. Desmond both said, "Good night."

“Come in and see me some evening,” Mr. Desmond said to James. He smiled tolerantly and added, “Sometime when you’re not so busy.”

“Thank you,” James said awkwardly, “I’d like to.”

“Still set on architecture?” Mr. Desmond asked.

“Guess so,” James said.

Mr. Desmond put his hand on James’s shoulder for a minute before he turned away. “Good fellow,” he said. “You come in and see me.”

“I will,” James said. He watched Mr. Desmond go down the street, and then he looked ostentatiously at his watch and began to walk in the other direction, proudly aware that the children in the street were watching him over their game. He had not gone as far as the Perlmans’ house when he heard footsteps behind him and Helen Williams caught up with him.

“Hey, James Donald,” she was yelling.

He turned with dignity and waited, his head held back and his arms folded across his chest in a manner strongly reminiscent of Mr. Desmond. “You running away from me?” Helen asked.

“You’re very much mistaken,” James said.

Helen looked up at him from under her eyelashes. She was very blond and wore her hair in a long straight bob, and when she bent her head down her hair fell softly along her cheeks. “You never came over to see me at my house like you said you would,” she said.

“I don’t have much time any more to play with the kids,” James said.

Helen put out her lower lip; all her gestures were very much exaggerated because she practised them alone in front of a mirror. “I wouldn’t play with the kids, either,” she said meaningly, “if there was anything else to do.”

James looked at his watch again. “Well,” he said.

“Where you going?” Helen demanded.

“I am going,” James said elaborately, “to an orchestra rehearsal at the high school. Now are you happy?”

“Bet you got a girl there,” Helen said to his back, and when she saw his shoulders tighten she said more loudly, “You got a girl at school, James has got a girl.”

When he was past hearing her she turned and went back to the game still going on. Tod Donald ran up to her and said loudly, “We missed you, Willie, you don’t want to talk to my old brother.”

“Let me alone,” Helen said. “I’m going home.”

* * *

“I suppose I should be used to this by *now*,” Mrs. Merriam said. She took out her clean handkerchief and put the damp one down on the table next to her. “After all,” she said, “I’ve been your wife for eighteen years, Harry, and I think by now I deserve a little consideration. Every sort of humiliation and insult....” With a wail she lifted the clean handkerchief and began to cry again.

“Oh, Mother,” Harriet said irritably, and her father began heavily, “Josie, honey.”

“Don’t *call* me that,” Mrs. Merriam almost screamed. Harriet looked at her father, but he turned his face away and sighed.

“I try to make my daughter into a good decent girl in spite of—” Mrs. Merriam sobbed, “ — in spite of everything, and I work all day and I worry about money and try to make a good decent home for my husband and now my only daughter turns out to be—”

“Josephine,” Mr. Merriam said strongly. “Harriet, go upstairs again.”

Harriet went upstairs away from her mother’s sorry voice. Her desk was unlocked; instead of eating dinner, she and her mother had stood religiously by the furnace and put Harriet's diaries and letters and notebooks into the fire one by one, while solid Harry Merriam sat eating lamb chops and boiled potatoes upstairs alone. "I don't know what it's all about," he said to Harriet and his wife when they came upstairs. "Seems like a man ought to be able to come home after working all day and not hear people crying all the time. Seems like a man has a right to have a quiet home."

Alone in her room again Harriet sat down by the window. Outside, the eucalyptus trees in the first rich darkness were quiet and infinitely delicate, a rare leaf moving softly against the others. Harriet was accustomed to thinking of them as lace against the night sky; on windy nights they were crazy, pulling like wild things against the earth. Tonight, in their patterned peacefulness, Harriet rested her head somehow against them and stopped thinking about her mother. Lovely, lovely things, she thought, and tried to imagine herself sinking into them far beyond the surface, so far away that nothing could ever bring her back.

"Harriet," her mother said from the foot of the stairs. Her voice was steady. "Harriet, dear, come downstairs."

Harriet came down the stairs, hitting every step violently with her great shoes. Her mother waited at the bottom, newly powdered and very tall and gracious. "Dear," she said, "I want to apologize."

In the living-room her father was reading the paper. His face was very tired and his mouth stiff, but when Harriet came in with her mother's arm around her he looked up and said, "Now everyone's happy," and went back to his paper.

"Your father," Mrs. Merriam said meekly, "has made me feel that I have been too severe with you today. I was very much upset, of course."

"Oh, Mother," Harriet said. Now that her mother was calm Harriet felt at last like crying. She loved her mother again, as one should love a mother, tenderly and affectionately. She put her arm around her mother and kissed her. “I’m sorry,” she said.

Her mother patted her shoulder. “We’ll spend more time together from now on. Reading, and sewing. Would you like to learn to cook, really *cook?”* she added brightly.

Harriet nodded, and her mother laughed deprecatingly. “We can write together, too. I used to write poetry, Harriet, not very *well*, of course, but that’s probably where you get it.”

Warmly Harriet smiled at her mother, and thought how pleasant it always was after these scenes, how for a little while the three of them would live together in vast amiability.

“You’ll show your mother everything you write, of course,” her father said.

“Everything,” Harriet said earnestly. The room was so quiet, so friendly.

“And we won’t see that Helen Williams any more,” her mother said. “Now that there’s no more school, there’s no need for my girl to run around with that sort of person.”

“She’s not going to be here much longer, anyway,” Harriet said. “She’s going to live with her father.”

Mrs. Merriam raised her eyebrows delicately and said, looking obliquely at her husband, “And perhaps next year, some really *nice* private school.”

There was a long silence, and then Mrs. Merriam sighed and went on, “I’m not going to punish you any more, Harriet. As I said, I feel that some of this is my fault.”

“I’m really sorry,” Harriet said. She put her head on her mother’s shoulder, and her mother touched her hair lightly.

“I’ll try to make it up to you, dear,” Mrs. Merriam said.

* * *

"I do not know why," Mrs. Roberts said with a deadly level voice, "I really do not know why a grown man is not capable of conducting his affairs so that his women know their places."

"I don't know anything about this 'women' business," Mr. Roberts said sullenly.

"Arthur took the message," Mrs. Roberts went on. "*Arthur*. Someone named Jeanie." She said "Jeanie" with a great casual gentleness, as though the name itself were precious to her.

"Arthur wouldn't know," Mr. Roberts said. "Why don't you mind your own business?"

"It is my business." Mrs. Roberts stopped and said, "Be quiet. Here come the children."

Artie and Jamie hurried in, taking off jackets as they came. Mrs. Roberts called Jamie over to her and pushed his hair back out of his eyes. "Both boys look mostly like you," she said reproachfully to her husband.

"Why weren't you playing with the other fellows tonight?" Mr. Roberts asked Artie.

"Talking to Pat." Artie had his foot on the bottom step, his hand on the stair rail. He waited.

"You might come in and talk to your mother and father once in a while," his father said.

"I was just going upstairs to read." Artie came reluctantly into the living-room and sat tentatively on the piano bench.

"If we'd been going to a movie you'd be down here fast enough," his father said.

"Mike," Mrs. Roberts said.

Artie looked at Mr. Roberts solemnly. "There was a phone call for you," he said. "Some dame wanted you."

“Bedtime, darling,” Mrs. Roberts said to Jamie. “Artie, you may go upstairs now. Turn off your light in half an hour.”

She went to the foot of the stairs with both boys. “I’ll be up to kiss you good night,” she said. She watched them up the stairs, and then turned back to her husband.

CHAPTER TWO

NOBODY EVER NOTICED Tod Donald very much. He was a quiet boy who had spent nearly thirteen years trying hard to be moderately good at what his older brother James was able to do naturally and effortlessly. James was tall and pleasant-looking; Tod might be tall some day, but at thirteen he wore a perpetual nervous smile which deepened occasionally into apprehensive trembling, and he was what his brother James called “a bad sport.” Tod had learned, painfully, to ride a bicycle and play football and rollerskate; no one had ever taught him anything; but when Tod sat on his front steps or walked off to school or joined in a game or brought out his bicycle, no one waited for him or asked him to wait. No one ever chose him for a side in a game; he was always allowed to merge himself undesired into one team or another, never allowed to bat in the baseball game.

Perhaps if Tod’s father had been more interested in his children he might have favored Tod beyond anything he could feel for either James or Virginia, but Stephen Donald (perhaps, once, he had been very much like Tod, never like James) had no pity to waste on anything so distant as his youngest child. There was no recognition, now, in any look Stephen Donald gave the world; he had absorbed too much disappointment already to jeopardize himself needlessly for his children.

James Donald privately regarded his younger brother as an imperfect copy of himself, and was as irritated by Tod as he might have been by any cruel, pointed parody. Much of James’s athletic sense of good and evil was invested in Tod; Tod was inefficient and a bad sport, which was evil; he was smaller, and could not be struck, which was a delineation of good.

Consequently, James never required himself to include any form of evil in his own personality; such things belonged naturally to Tod, and were accepted numbly by Tod as his portion.

Much more, however, of Tod's lack of independent existence was due to his sister Virginia, who was a year older than Tod and his contemporary in a narrower sense than James — she played with the same children, and she hated Tod as she hated everyone upon whom it was not necessary to intrude her ingratiating personality. Tod was used to having his sister ignore him before the other children, and to hearing her say, "Don't let Toddie play, he does *everything* wrong."

The other children followed Virginia's example, because she was tacitly assumed to know, being Tod's sister. If Virginia had called Tod names, or refused to play with him, he would have gained prestige as a participant in a family fight, but when she seemed to believe sincerely that he had never wholly existed, he was lost. If he had been able to do any single thing better than either his brother or sister, he might have won some small place in the neighborhood hierarchy, or perhaps even in school; as long as he was the patient, desperately-clinging minority of the family, he had to be content with the opinion his family were known to have of him.

However, one day during the early summer he came close to winning a foothold. The older children were lying in the heat on the Donalds' front lawn, the only spot where Tod could rightfully assume a position anywhere near the heart of the circle. Helen Williams was holding forth on her father; she had just sent her baby sister home crying, and she was saying, "And when I go to live with my father, Mildred will have to be in a nunnery."

"What's wrong with a nunnery?" demanded Mary Byrne. She looked for her brother, her support on all theological questions, but he was in the street playing catch with George Martin. “Why do you say a nunnery like it was a punishment sort of?”

“A nunnery,” Helen explained patiently, “is a place where they put you and you never get out as long as you live. And sometimes they starve you,” she added convincingly.

“That isn’t true at all,” Mary said with the conviction of inside information.

Helen turned the corners of her mouth down and looked around at her audience. “Let’s hear *you* say what a nunnery is.”

“It isn’t like that at all,” Mary said. “I bet your sister would like it in a nunnery even.”

“Where they starve you?” Helen said. “Not Mildred, not Mildred at all. She eats like a pig.”

“I eat like a pig too,” Virginia Donald said dreamily. “I ate almost a whole apple pie once. You should have seen me eat a whole apple pie.”

Tod was on his own front lawn. “I ate a whole mince pie once,” he said, giggling.

According to neighborhood ethics, there was only one person who could lead the attack on Tod on his own land. His sister turned slowly to look at him and then back to the other children. “He never does anything really,” she said.

“You never did it,” Helen said. “Your sister says so.”

“I did so,” Tod began weakly, but Mary Byrne said, “I don’t believe you could eat even one piece of mince pie.”

“Even a piece as big as a ant,” Hallie Martin said.

Having nine-year-old Hallie join in against him was the lowest indignity. Tod stood up, said, “Guess I’ll get in the ball game,” and walked down to the street while his sister said, “Tell more about nunneries, Willie.”

Tod stood for a few minutes waiting to be asked to play ball, but neither George nor Pat offered to include him. As an indication that he would play if asked, Tod picked up a handful of stones from the gravel driveway and began tossing them into the bushes. After a minute he tossed one at George's foot and laughed weakly when George said, "Cut it out, Toddie."

He threw another so that it landed about a foot from George, and George looked at him crossly and hesitated for a minute before throwing the ball, as though debating whether or not to walk over and give Tod a lesson in interference. When he decided against it and went back to the game, Tod was afraid to throw any more pebbles in that direction and faced directly around to throw at the girls. He was possessed of as strong a desire for punishment as he had ever achieved, but he wanted more for his penalties than tapping George Martin on the ankles with a pebble. He threw a pebble at his sister and hit her in the arm, and she said, "Hey," and looked around; if it had been any of the other boys who threw it she would have been in a fantastic exaggerated rage and would have stood up, most likely, and found rocks of her own, but she only said, "Oh, run *along,* will you, Toddie?"

Tod threw his next pebble at Hallie Martin because she had spoken up against him, but he missed her and she laughed at him.

"Toddie," Virginia said sharply, "if you don't cut it out you can just go and stay in the house."

His sister had no right to give him orders, particularly not in a tone indicating that she expected them to be obeyed. Possessed by a sort of frenzy, Tod threw a handful of pebbles together, as hard as he could, into the group of girls on the lawn, and Mary Byrne howled and fell over backward, her hands over her face.

"Tod Donald," Virginia shouted, "I'll tell Mother on you!"

It was glory of a sort, and Tod ran up to Mary and stood next to her while she lay on the ground crying. “I’m sorry, Mary,” he said. “I’m *awfully* sorry.”

Pat Byrne pushed him aside and said impatiently, “What’s the matter now?” and Helen Williams said, “Tod put Mary’s eye out with a rock, that’s all,” and Hallie began to wail, and someone went running for Mary’s mother, and Pat said, “*Toddie* did?” and George Martin said, “Golly,” over and over again.

Mrs. Byrne came running across the street, and the children stood silently while she knelt down beside Mary on the grass and pulled Mary’s hands away from her face. Tod, wondering vaguely what happened to people who put other people’s eyes out with rocks, said, “I’m sorry,” again, and Mrs. Byrne let her hands drop in relief and said, “She’s got a little scratch on her cheek; she’s no more hurt than a fly.”

“Someone was throwing rocks, and she got in the way,” Pat said.

“You children shouldn’t be throwing rocks,” Mrs. Byrne said, standing up. Mary sat up and wiped the tears off her face. “You’d think she’d been killed.”

She started back across the street, and Pat said, “Come on, George,” and they went back to their ball game. “I knew she wasn’t much hurt,” Pat said, “when I heard how she was hollering.”

“I’m certainly glad you weren’t really hurt,” Virginia said to Mary.

“I’m sorry, Mary,” Tod said.

She looked up at him, surprised. “That’s all right, Toddie,” she said. “You didn’t mean to do it.”

“What were you aiming at?” Virginia asked cruelly. “A window?”

* * *

“I only wish,” Mrs. Roberts said crossly, “that the summer was over and school was starting again. Sometimes I think—” Her voice trailed off as she leaned over her workbox to choose a thread.

“I don’t know,” Mrs. Desmond said gently.

“Well, *Caroline*,” Mrs. Merriam said. She looked sweetly down at Caroline, who sat on a small stool between Mrs. Merriam and her mother, absorbed in a collection of bright scraps of ribbon she was cutting into pieces. “Caroline is simply an angel.”

“She loves to come here,” Mrs. Desmond said to Mrs. Merriam. “You treat her as though she were grown-up.”

“No need for *you* to worry about school for a while,” Mrs. Roberts said.

Mrs. Desmond laughed and let her embroidery lie on her lap. “I don’t know what I’ll *do* when Caroline goes to school,” she said. Mrs. Desmond always did embroidery while Mrs. Roberts and Mrs. Merriam darned socks and mended torn sweaters; it would have been incongruous for Mrs. Desmond, with her small delicate hands always so near Caroline’s blond head, and her pale face so like Caroline’s, to sit with great socks or spools of darning cotton on her lap. Mrs. Desmond brought her sewing in a lacquer box, and Caroline had a miniature lacquer box filled with her bright ribbons. Mrs. Roberts and Mrs. Merriam had no objection to seeing their own sufficiently ladylike hands dealing competently with heavy mending, but either of them would have been faintly surprised at Mrs. Desmond’s doing it; it was an unexplained aristocratic principle.

“Caroline is just an angel,” Mrs. Merriam repeated. “Aren’t you, darling?” Caroline looked up gravely, and Mrs. Merriam said, “She’s an angel.”

“Boys, now—” Mrs. Roberts said, holding up a middle-sized brown sock, fearfully torn at heel and toe.

"I don't know," Mrs. Merriam said. "Harriet's almost as bad. Sometimes I worry about her," she went on confidentially, "about her being so heavy, I mean. It's very hard on a girl."

"Harriet's a nice girl, Josephine," Mrs. Desmond said. "She'll outgrow it in time." Her soft voice made Harriet sound slimmer.

"I was very heavy at Harriet's age," Mrs. Roberts said. She straightened her shoulders and took one hand away from her sewing to pull down the front of her dress where it had a tendency to blouse. "I can't say I completely *outgrew* it—" she laughed richly " — but I guess I *tamed* it."

Mrs. Desmond and Mrs. Merriam smiled, and Mrs. Desmond said, "I always used to admire girls who could really *wear* clothes. Caroline and I will always have to go around in pale colors and ruffles." She made a small face and looked fondly down at her daughter.

"But Harriet is getting to an age where it's really important to her," Mrs. Merriam said.

"When she gets interested in *boys*, Josephine," Mrs. Roberts said emphatically, "it won't take her long before she starts cutting out candy and potatoes and begins to watch her figure. I *know*," and she laughed again.

"Did you girls," Mrs. Merriam said carefully, looking down at her sewing, "did either of you girls hear anything about this silly business?" She looked at Mrs. Desmond and Mrs. Roberts, and said, "I mean, the letters the girls were writing to some of the boys?"

"Artie was in on it," Mrs. Roberts said, with a note that sounded like pride. "One of the girls had a crush on Artie. Can you imagine, Marguerite," she went on, looking helplessly at Mrs. Desmond, *"Artie?"*

"Some day Artie is going to surprise you," Mrs. Desmond said. "He's a very quiet boy, but that type usually turns out well."

“Well, *you* don’t need to worry,” Mrs. Merriam said unhappily. “I was never so *shocked*.”

“These things happen,” Mrs. Roberts said philosophically.

“I really couldn’t believe it of Harriet,” Mrs. Merriam said. “Those letters — I saw one — they were *disgusting*.”

“The ones Artie got were silly,” Mrs. Roberts said, “but I wouldn’t have called them exactly disgusting.”

“Who wrote them?” Mrs. Merriam asked quickly.

Mrs. Roberts shrugged. “The Donald girl,” she said.

“I’m not surprised.” Mrs. Merriam set her sewing aside and leaned forward earnestly. “I don’t know what you think of that girl,” she said, “but I think she has more to do with these things than anyone knows.”

“There’s no real harm in Virginia,” Mrs. Desmond said.

“Well, I know her,” Mrs. Merriam said, and tossed her head angrily. “I’d be the last person to defend Harriet — I think her conduct was absolutely *disgusting* — but I’d be inclined to think that nothing at all would have happened if certain young ladies around this neighborhood weren’t a good deal too *mature* for their own good.”

“Well, Helen Williams—” Mrs. Roberts said.

Mrs. Desmond snipped off a long length of blue embroidery thread and held it out to Caroline. “Here you are, darling,” she said. Then she said to Mrs. Merriam, “I don’t know very much about Helen, of *course*, but I think that kind of person is very often more sinned against than sinning.”

“I don’t think she’s done anything really *bad*,” Mrs. Merriam said, shocked.

“It’s just that she’s so much older, mentally, Marguerite, than the other girls,” Mrs. Roberts said. “It’s a shame they’ve gotten to know her so well.”

“Well, *Harriet* won’t know her any longer,” Mrs. Merriam said.

“I don’t think it’s entirely wise,” Mrs. Desmond murmured, “to keep girls apart. As soon as they know someone is bad for them—”

“I didn’t even mention it to Artie,” Mrs. Roberts said.

“Well, a boy....” Mrs. Merriam stood up. “How about some tea?”

“Oh, don’t bother,” Mrs. Desmond said.

“Really,” Mrs. Roberts added.

“No trouble,” Mrs. Merriam said, as though she had not planned anything. “It’s all ready.”

She went into the kitchen, and Mrs. Roberts said, “I think she’s a little hard on Harriet sometimes.”

“I suppose she takes it very seriously,” Mrs. Desmond agreed.

“You know,” Mrs. Merriam said, coming busily in from the kitchen with a full tray which had obviously been sitting out there waiting, “You know, it seems strange to have only the three of us this week.”

“Sylvia Donald had to take Virginia to the dentist,” Mrs. Roberts said. “I don’t know *what* happened to Dinah.”

“Probably that poor woman had another spell,” Mrs. Desmond said. “It must be a terrible thing to have to take care of an invalid like that.”

“Worse than children,” Mrs. Roberts said heartily. She threw her sewing aside and came over to Mrs. Merriam’s tea tray, which she inspected critically. “Those *wonderful* sandwiches, Josephine.”

“Next week you’ll all come to my house,” Mrs. Desmond said. “Aren’t you *nice*?” as Mrs. Merriam presented a slim glass of milk to Caroline.

“The sweet child,” Mrs. Merriam said. “She sits there so quietly and never says a word.”

“One thing about you,” Mrs. Roberts said enthusiastically to Mrs. Merriam. “You always have the most *wonderful* sandwiches.”

“They’re *only* cream cheese with a little sherry,” Mrs. Merriam said. “I’ll write it down for you.”

* * *

“Are you *sure* you’ll be all right, sweetie?” Mrs. Ransom-Jones asked earnestly. “I can very easily—”

“Not at all,” her sister said. “I wouldn’t dream of it. I’ll be fine.”

“But I just feel so sort of *guilty*,” Mrs. Ransom-Jones said. “You so much worse and all.”

“I’ll be perfectly all right,” her sister said. “You go right ahead.”

Mrs. Ransom-Jones smoothed the long black skirt of her evening dress; her dark hair was pulled up on top of her head instead of gathered at the back of her neck, and she looked very dignified and sure. She put her hand on her sister’s forehead and said, “I’m sure you’ll be all right. If we hadn’t planned it for so long.”

“You couldn’t know I’d be worse,” her sister argued. “Don’t give me a single *thought*, dear.”

“Brad would be terribly disappointed,” Mrs. Ransom-Jones said. “If he were only coming home instead of meeting me in town.”

“You *look* perfectly lovely,” her sister said. “He’ll be proud of you.”

Mrs. Ransom-Jones touched her earrings. “The Roberts boy is very reliable. You know him.”

“Of course, dear,” her sister said. “Just don’t worry.”

“I’ve left the doctor’s name and telephone number on the hall table,” Mrs. Ransom-Jones went on, counting on her fingers, “and your emergency medicine is right beside it. And he can always call his mother and father if there’s anything.”

“And the Donalds are home right next door,” her sister said.

"I'll call during the evening," Mrs. Ransom-Jones said. "We can get home at any time in less than half an hour."

"You'll be late, dear," her sister said. "You don't have to wait till the boy comes."

"I'd *feel* better," Mrs. Ransom-Jones said vaguely. "Now are you *sure*—"

The doorbell rang, and she took up her evening bag and gloves as she went to the hall. "Hello, Arthur," her sister heard her say. "You're very nice to come."

"That's all right, Mrs. Ransom-Jones," Artie said. "I was just going to read anyway."

"It's just that my sister had another attack two days ago." Mrs. Ransom-Jones dropped her voice, but her sister could still hear her. "She has to be very quiet, and I just wanted someone here in case anything should—" She hesitated slightly. "In case anything should happen," she repeated.

"I see," Artie said.

"Here's the doctor's name and telephone number, and Lillian's medicine, which she gets if she *should* happen to have another attack, and the telephone number where we'll be, and—"

"I can tell him all about it, dear," Lillian said, raising her voice. "Don't you bother."

Mrs. Ransom-Jones came in, bringing perfume and the sound of black velvet moving softly. "Well, sweetie," she said.

"Good night, dear," Lillian said, raising her face. "I'll most likely be asleep when you come in."

"Good night," Mrs. Ransom-Jones said. "I'm sure everything will be fine," she said to Artie in the doorway.

"Have a nice time," Artie said politely. "Hello, Miss Tyler."

"Hello, Arthur," Lillian said. Mrs. Ransom-Jones waved from the doorway and went out, closing the door very gently. Lillian sat back and smiled at Artie. "She does worry *so*," she said.

Artie sat down gingerly. He had been in the Ransom-Jones house before, but never in a position of responsibility. He felt proprietary about the tapestry chairs standing carefully against the walls, about the oriental rug, the thick scarf on the piano. He knew Miss Tyler as a person of authority, a grown-up in his children's world, someone his mother knew, and now he was in charge of her; he sat back more comfortably and smiled at Miss Tyler on the couch. "Can I get you anything?" he asked.

"No, indeed." Miss Tyler smiled back at him, tenderly, as though drawn away from an enchanting reverie. "They do have such good times together," she said.

Artie smiled again, blankly.

"Brad and that woman," Miss Tyler said. "My sister."

"Have you lived here long?" Artie asked idiotically. He had understood that Miss Tyler would be in bed, an invalid, and he was to read quietly until Mr. and Mrs. Ransom-Jones came home, alert only for an emergency that would require the medicine, the doctor, the various phone numbers. But Miss Tyler sat on the couch across from him, looking fragile in a lavender negligee, and he was, atrociously, condemned to polite conversation until Miss Tyler should remember her duty and go obediently to bed.

"He brought her here when he married her," Miss Tyler said. She looked up at the ceiling, around the walls. "They've always lived here. You can tell by the flowers." Artie stared, and she said tolerantly, "Flowers grow best when they have always been tended by the same hand. My sister and I planted this whole garden. It was a wilderness." She nodded her head vehemently. "It was a real wilderness at first."

“You’ve certainly made it look good,” Artie congratulated himself; the remark had made sense, it belonged in the conversation, it was complimentary.

“When I was *your* age,” Miss Tyler said, and laughed lightly. “It must have been twenty years ago,” she said, “I used to tend an acre of roses all by myself. Lady Hamiltons.” She looked at him vaguely. “You wouldn’t remember that far back,” she said.

“I’m afraid not.” Artie was troubled with thoughts of his responsibility; she ought to be going to bed soon, that was certain; he had a grave burden on him. (“Shall I help you to bed, Miss Tyler?” “Don’t let me keep you up, Miss Tyler,” “You ought to rest now, Miss Tyler.”) “Miss Tyler,” he began, but his voice was weak and he stopped.

“Such a pretty wedding,” Miss Tyler was saying. “She carried armfuls of my roses. *My* roses.”

“You have beautiful roses here,” Artie said. It was the same kind of remark as before, the kind he was proud of.

“*I* never married,” Miss Tyler said. “Young men like you — how old are you, dear? Eighteen? Twenty?”

Artie cleared his throat. “Miss Tyler,” he said. (“Shall I help you to bed, Miss Tyler?”)

“Young men like you passed me by,” Miss Tyler said. “Brad was the only one.”

“That’s too bad,” Artie said. That was the kind of remark he was not proud of.

“Well,” Miss Tyler said soberly, “it’s time I retired. You don’t mind?”

“Of course not,” Artie said. “Can I get you anything?”

“Thank you, no,” Miss Tyler said. “You won’t be bored?”

“No, no,” Artie said. “I have to read this book.”

He stood up when she did, standing back respectfully to let her pass him. "Will you help me?" she asked suddenly, and swayed a little so that he was frightened when he ran forward and took her arm. "Over there," she said. "I have my room downstairs now. There's a bathroom and everything." He helped her into the hall and she stopped at her doorway. "My sister is so kind," she said, leaning her head against the closed door. Then she took her arm away from him gently and said, "Thank you very much, Arthur."

"Can you manage all right now?" Artie said. He felt a very real sympathy, not quite realizing that it was because he could walk perfectly well, could run if he wanted to, could go upstairs fifty times a day. "Please let me help you."

"I'm perfectly all right now," Miss Tyler said.

Artie realized with hideous embarrassment that she was waiting for him to go before she opened the door to her bedroom. He backed away, gasping, "Good night, then," and Miss Tyler waved one finger rougishly at him. "You *gay* young men," she said.

Artie, sitting tentatively on the edge of one of the tapestry chairs in the living-room, listening for the sound of a fall or a scream, heard her say tenderly, "Always some rash young fool, my darling dear," and then she was quiet.

He read his book, finally, accustomed to the silence, never leaving the living-room except for one tiptoed journey down the hall to see if he could hear her breathing. After an eternal minute outside her door he came back to his chair and read peacefully until Mr. and Mrs. Ransom-Jones came home shortly after one.

"Everything's been fine," he said.

"I *knew* she'd be all right," Mrs. Ransom-Jones said, "that's why I didn't bother to call." She gave him a quarter.

* * *

“When I grow up,” George Martin said to his grandfather, “I’m going to drive a truck. A ten-ton truck.”

“First you grow up,” his grandfather said. He nodded sagely. “First you grow up,” he said. “Once,” he went on slowly, “I thought I would be a doctor, myself. Now I am a gardener.” He nodded again, as though a point had been proved. He was sitting on a broken box in the Martins’ back yard, wild growing things in profusion around him and the morning sunlight heavy on his old head. It was his custom to sit here Sunday mornings when the weather was good, and regard phlegmatically the garden which belonged to him and which he never had time to cultivate; except for George’s abortive efforts and an occasional fussing over by the children’s grandmother, the back yard was allowed to run a wilderness. In one corner, near the Merriams’ fence, was an aged plum tree which no longer bore plums; next to it was the rabbit-house built by George, where one sickly rabbit had perished miserably the summer before. There were two more plum trees and an apple, the plum trees all barren and the apple given to wry unpalatable fruit. The rest of the yard was wild grass, weeds, and junk, and a climbing rose tree which grew up the back of the house and caught at the grandfather’s shoulders when he sat on his broken box.

George was building something again; it was to be either a skate coaster or a wagon. He had nailed an orange crate on to a board and was busy trying to fit two halves of an old skate onto it for wheels.

“If I had a truck, you know what I’d do?” George continued in an even singsong that corresponded rhythmically with his work; when he became most careful, in some delicate operation, his words slid out and became long and breathless; when he worked steadily along, hammering or measuring, he spoke evenly and smoothly. Occasionally he looked up at his grandfather, to prove some important statement, and then the sunlight touched his eyes and mouth, and gave him an expression of intelligence usually lacking in his vacant face.

“You know what I’d do?” he insisted, turning to look at his grandfather. “I’d run it right into old Missus Merriam’s house and I’d run right over her. Run over Missus Merriam, run over Missus Merriam, and I’d run over Misssssssssster Meeeeeeeeerriam.” This became very long because George was trying to straighten a skate wheel. Then his voice quickened again. “And I’d run over old Harriet and I’d run over old Missus Merriam. If I had a truck that’s what I’d do.”

The sun made the old grandfather sleepy, and he half-closed his eyes. He found it difficult to understand much of what his grandchildren said; they spoke so quickly, and with such strange words, and the tongue itself was still alien to an old man. When George looked up at him, the grandfather smiled and nodded, exactly as he had smiled and nodded at the immigration officials forty years before. “You grow up,” he said sleepily.

“When I grow up,” George went on, “I’m going to have a tractor.”

“Tractor?” the grandfather said.

“I’ll run into the whole world and kill them,” George said. “And Missus Merriam.” He began to sing, monotonously, “Old man Kelly had a pimple on his belly and it tasted like jelly.”

His grandfather stirred in the sun, and the leaves of the climbing rose rustled gently.

“Old man Kelly,” George said. “How’d you like to run a streetcar, Gramp?”

His grandfather opened his eyes and smiled.

“Boy,” George said. “Clang, brrrrrrrrrr, clang, clang.” He left his work and moved about the yard, pulling imaginary levers, steering a desperately maneuvering machine, ringing the bell. “Clang, clang,” he shouted. “Clang.”

With a faint surprise, the old grandfather watched. A leaf of the rose tree touched his cheek, and he reached up and pulled the leaf around to look at it. Scrutinizing it carefully, he called, “George, come, boy, to me.”

George stopped careening around the trees and came over to his grandfather. “What you want, Gramp?” he said. He kicked at his skate coaster to come over and stand next to his grandfather.

“See?” the grandfather said, holding the leaf close to George’s face. “See?” He pointed to a tiny spot on the leaf. “Not good,” he said.

* * *

Harriet Merriam and Virginia Donald walked down Cortez Road arm in arm. They were going to the nearest store, three blocks away, where they would each buy a popsicle and then walk home again. They were passing the big apartment house on the corner of the highway and Cortez when a man, hurrying into the building, ran into Virginia and knocked her nickel out of her hand. “Darn it!” Virginia said loudly, and the man, who had said, “Pardon me,” and hurried on, turned and came back to them. “Is something wrong?” he asked.

“I lost my nickel,” Virginia said. She was looking around on the sidewalk and did not see that the man was Chinese, but Harriet saw him and pulled Virginia’s arm. “You can have *my* nickel,” Harriet said. “Come on, Virginia.”

“It was my fault,” the man said. “Let me make it good.” He took a handful of change out of his pocket, and Virginia said, “No, no, please,” before she looked up and saw him. Then she said, “Of course not,” very coldly, and took Harriet’s arm again.

The man smiled at them sadly. “I insist on giving you the nickel,” he said. He had selected a nickel from the change in his hand and now he put the rest of the money back in his pocket and held the nickel out to Virginia. “It was my fault, after all,” he said.

Virginia hesitated. “You can have my nickel,” Harriet said again.

“Such a charming young lady,” the man said. “And I have troubled you.” He held out the nickel, more urgently. “You would be very unkind to refuse,” he said.

“Thank you,” Virginia said. She took the nickel, and the man bowed and said, “Thank *you*. Now I feel less clumsy.”

Harriet thought that he had forgotten how much of a hurry he was in before; he stood there as though anxious to talk to them, his head on one side and his smile courteous and expectant. He was excellently dressed, as well dressed as Mr. Desmond, and there had been a lot of money in the change he took out of his pocket. Virginia said, feeling the expectancy in his face, “Do you live here?” She waved at the apartment house.

He turned and looked at the house curiously. “Yes,” he said. “Yes, I do.”

“I’ve never been inside,” Virginia said. “Is it nice?”

“Very bad taste,” he said. “No modesty.”

“I remember when they built it,” Virginia said. “Do you, Harriet?”

Harriet shook her head, continuing her steady faint pull on Virginia’s arm.

“That was when we were kids,” Virginia said. “We used to play here when they were building it.”

The man listened intently, and nodded when she was through talking. “I have lived here for two years now,” he said. “Perhaps some day you will visit me and see the inside of the house.”

Harriet made her pressure on Virginia’s arm more violent, but Virginia said, “Thank you. Some day I’d like to.”

“Perhaps you would like to come to tea some day,” he said. “With your charming friend, of course.”

Virginia pulled back as violently against Harriet, and said, “Thank you. We *would* like to.”

The man thought for a minute, and Harriet said, “Virginia, we’ve got to *go*.”

Then the man said, “Perhaps a week from today?” He looked at them, and his smile faded. “No?” he said as politely. “Another time, then.”

“We’d *love* to,” Virginia said hastily. “I was just trying to think if we were busy that day.”

He smiled again. “Next Tuesday, then,” he said. “About four. I’ll meet you right outside here, so that you won’t be uncomfortable, coming in by yourselves.”

“Thank you,” Virginia said. She yielded slightly to Harriet’s tugging, moving slowly along the sidewalk after Harriet while she talked. “It’s very nice of you,” she said. “We’ll be here.”

“Thank *you*,” the man said. He bowed to them and then went into the house, in a hurry again.

“Virginia,” Harriet said, “you must be *crazy*. Stopping to talk like that.”

“What could he do to us?” Virginia said. “He gave me a nickel.”

“Suppose someone saw us?” Harriet said. “Suppose my mother had come by?”

“What of it?” Virginia said. “We were looking for my nickel, is all.”

“You’re not going to go next week?” Harriet said, frightened by something in Virginia she did not understand.

“I may,” Virginia said, turning down the corners of her mouth tantalizingly. “*Helen* would go.”

“I won’t,” Harriet said.

“Anyway,” Virginia went on, “I found mine. Look.” She held out her hand with two nickels in it. “We can get gum,” she said.

“You shouldn’t have,” Harriet said uncertainly.

“What of it?” Virginia said again. “It doesn’t hurt to take money from a Chinaman.”

* * *

“I’ll bet this old thing used to be deep enough for swimming,” Pat said.

“That would be something, swimming right next to home,” Art said, “right around the corner almost.”

They were lying in the deep grass in the old creek bed. Above them on either side were the steep banks, grown over with moss and grass and high above the eucalyptus and fir trees heavy and ending far up in the sky. The old creek was the border of the golf course which spread over a vast area near Pepper Street; the golf course belonged to the better neighbors beyond the gates, but because golf courses are large and the better neighbors only played on this one and never tried to live there, the fairways were allowed to meander democratically past the strict border line of the gates and touch, formally, the neighbors on the other side, even to the extent of permitting young boys like Pat and Art on its fringes. They could have caddied on the course if their fathers had not opposed their working, but they would have had to go around through the gates and up the long road where no home was permitted to be visible, around in a great circle to the clubhouse, barely distinguishable from the edge of the creek. Starting from the clubhouse and following dutifully along with bags of clubs, they might have approached the creek from the better, or well-tended, side, might have reached the place where they were lying now, in search of erring golf balls. (It is a known fact that George Martin once retrieved a golf ball from the creek bed, and kept it to play with, although the act was eventually, in neighborhood conclave, accepted as stealing.) The golf course was in no sense a forbidden heaven to the Pepper Street children; James Donald had been, correctly dressed, to the clubhouse for dinner, and Mr. Desmond played on the golf course regularly of a Sunday; as a member, he had even taken Mr. Roberts occasionally.

What the golf course represented, actually, was a reminder that within the sphere which the people who lived on Pepper Street allowed themselves, there was a maximum and a minimum attainment; Mr. Desmond, for instance, belonged to this club and another in the city, and a further club in which he played squash, but before long Mr. Desmond intended to promote himself beyond the gates; John Junior and Caroline would grow up in a house not visible from the street; they might even have a tennis court and be called rich. Mr. Byrne, on the other hand, preferred bowling and performed every Saturday night with as select a group of men as those with whom Mr. Desmond played golf, although Mr. Byrne's friends lived without the gates and never planned to live within. To Mr. Byrne and his friends, Pepper Street was the ultimate goal and they reached it with as much satisfaction as Mr. Desmond would reach his home inside the gates and, eventually, his estate outside town. At present Mr. Byrne and Mr. Desmond met as equals and respectful acquaintances; eventually they would be as far apart as they had been when they started, although probably equally wealthy. Pat Byrne and Johnny Desmond would almost certainly meet at some expensive university, but all they would have in common would be the old times on Pepper Street and recollections of the creek, not the golf course.

Except that there was the faint chance of being brained by an overzealous golf ball, the creek was very nearly ideal for a neighborhood hideout. Mildred Williams had never been there, nor had Caroline Desmond, nor Marilyn Perlman, but they were the only ones. The creek was filled with big stones for making walls, with heavy grass for sod fights; it was called the creek only by courtesy, for it was a long time since water had flowed there. Sometime in the far distant past a tree had fallen across the widest part of the ravine, from the vacant lot on the one side to the golf course on the other, making a dangerous bridge. James Donald was the only person — it did much to establish his neighborhood reputation — ever to ride across this log on a bicycle; Pat and Art, and Helen Williams, who would do anything a boy could do, could walk across it upright; Johnny Desmond had run across it once and fallen into the grass below, breaking his arm; Tod Donald and such younger children as Jamie Roberts were able to inch across it on their stomachs. Mrs. Merriam did not know of its existence, Mr. Roberts approved of it enthusiastically, and Mr. Desmond, although the children were unaware of the fact, had once walked across it dead drunk in the middle of the night, starting from the golf-course side.

Pat lay in the grass on his back with one arm over his eyes, and Art sat up, his arms around his knees. They spoke only occasionally, without much regard to communication, in a sort of pleasant comfort that came partly from their great familiarity with one another, and mostly from the feeling of ground and grass under them and trees and sky overhead, with no houses to be seen. Pat twisted a blade of grass in his fingers, feeling it more tangible than food, than books; he saw the sky overhead as arched personally for him, and concerned in his immediate welfare; Art, on the other hand, liked the way the grass smelled, and the way the creek sides crowded closely against him, hiding him.

"My father," Art said finally, "might be over playing golf now."

"He isn't," Pat said, his voice muffled through his arm. "He's in the city working; today's Tuesday."

"If he wanted to he could play golf today," Art said.

"Mine couldn't." Pat rolled over on his stomach and began pulling small handfuls of grass and scattering them. "Mine couldn't do a darn thing except work and criticize other people."

"I'd rather have your father than mine," Art said. He put his chin down on his knees and regarded the trees sideways. "Bet those trees are fifty feet high," he went on.

"I'd rather have *your* father than *mine*," Pat said. "Yours just doesn't pay any attention to people."

"You *think* he doesn't," Art said. "He's *always* sounding off about something."

"Mine," Pat said carefully, "he just can't leave a person alone. He's always spying and prying and criticizing and pestering other people."

Art giggled. "My father's a windbag," he said.

Pat giggled. "My father's a pest," he said.

"My father's a bully," Art said.

"*My* father's a bully," Pat said.

"My father's a dope," Art said.

"*My* father's a dope," Pat said.

"My father's a big fat slob," Art said.

"My father's a *little* fat slob," Pat said. They both laughed again.

"My father's an old pig," Art said.

"*My* father's an old pig," Pat said.

"My father's a stinker," Art said.

"*My* father's a..." Pat hesitated. Then: "My father's a bastard," he said.

There was a pause, and then Art said, "*My* father's a bastard."

They were both quiet for a while, Pat with his face in the grass and Art looking at the trees. It was getting darker; over on the golf course the fairways were emptying, and men were changing their clothes in the locker-room, having a drink, talking cheerfully. The sky over the creek was changing from bright blue to pale green, and the trees were deepening. The wind, which seldom came far down into the creek bed, touched the grass along the sides lightly, and turned in the trees. Finally Pat raised his head. "Almost dinner time?" he asked.

"We better be going," Art said. They both got up and brushed the grass and dead leaves from their clothes; then, Art leading and Pat following, they climbed skillfully up the side of the creek and started across the vacant lot toward home.

* * *

"I understand the Williams girl is moving away," Mrs. Merriam said to Harriet at the dinner table.

Harriet looked up, surprised. "I didn't know that," she said. "Helen was always talking about it, though."

Mrs. Merriam nodded. "Miss Fielding told me today. They're moving in a week or so."

"I wonder where," Harriet said.

"As long as it's away from here," Mrs. Merriam said. "More potatoes, Harry?"

Mr. Merriam looked up from his plate blankly. "More what?"

"Potatoes," Mrs. Merriam said patiently. Lately, since she and Harriet had been seeing more of one another, she would look significantly at Harriet when Mr. Merriam did something indicating his personal coarseness; frequently, in the long talks which Mrs. Merriam and Harriet had so often now, Mrs. Merriam would say, "Never marry a man who is *inelegant*, Harriet; I can tell you it brings nothing but sorrow." If Harriet tried to press her on the subject she would shake her head and smile sadly; only when she was angry did Mrs. Merriam permit herself to sink so low as to reproach her husband for not being daintily bred. Now, saying, "More potatoes," she looked at Harriet and smiled, and Harriet smiled back confusedly.

Harriet had not told her mother about the Chinese man and the invitation to tea, and she was afraid. It was only two days until the appointment, and Harriet knew that Virginia was going to make her go. The subject preyed on her and made her uneasy. Several times her mother had said, putting a hand gently on Harriet's, "My dear, you're *worrying* about something. What is it?" and Harriet, moving nervously, had said each time, "Nothing." It was always easy to move Mrs. Merriam's mind from Harriet's troubles to her own; she was writing a poem, moreover, entitled "Death and Soft Music" (Harriet was writing a poem at the same time, called "To My Mother"), and any unseasonable disturbance in Harriet was readily attributed to the familiar and reasonable agonies of artistic creation.

"No more potatoes, thanks," Mr. Merriam said. "What's for dessert?"

"Pie." Mrs. Merriam rose and started into the kitchen with the plates. Harriet followed, and together they brought in the pie. Mrs. Merriam sat down and cut a single stately piece for Mr. Merriam.

"Apple pie," Mr. Merriam said. He looked around. "Am I the only one eating pie?"

"Harriet and I are not pie-eaters," Mrs. Merriam said delicately, and Harriet added virtuously, "I don't see how you can eat it." She would have eaten a piece of pie with enthusiasm, but artistic creation and delicate upbringing argued against it.

"I'll be very happy when the Williams girl is gone," Mrs. Merriam said. "I have always felt that she was a bad influence on all the children in the neighborhood. Ever since...." She coughed lightly, and looked at Harriet, who blinked her eyes miserably. "Not that I believe her influence on *you*, Harriet, was as bad as, say, some of the *other* girls." Her finger touched the edge of her coffee-cup lightly. "I think you know who I mean."

An idea came suddenly to Harriet, and before she had time to consider it carefully she found herself saying, "I heard something *awful* about Helen Williams the other day."

Mrs. Merriam looked up eagerly; Mr. Merriam went on eating his pie.

"Virginia Donald told me," Harriet said.

"Virginia is a very sweet girl," Mrs. Merriam said. "Don't misunderstand what I said before."

"It's about Helen. One day she and Virginia were walking down the street and they met a Chinaman who lives down on the corner in the apartment house." Harriet hesitated. It would be unwise to incriminate Virginia too deeply. "And Helen started talking to him."

"Of course she *would*." Mrs. Merriam sighed.

"And he ended up by asking them to come down and see him some day."

Mrs. Merriam widened her eyes and opened her mouth.

"He lives in the apartment house," Harriet went on, feeling relief carrying her away, "and he said they could come down some day and visit him in the apartment house."

"Did they go?" Mrs. Merriam asked. "What did he do to them?"

Harriet thought quickly. "I don't know whether *Helen* went or not. Virginia didn't say."

“I’m sorry about Virginia, of *course*,” Mrs. Merriam said. “But it’s just what I’d expect of that Helen Williams. Fooling around with Chinamen.” She shivered violently. “I’m glad it wasn’t *my* girl,” she said.

“*I* wouldn’t,” Harriet was beginning enthusiastically, but Mrs. Merriam was saying, “Harry, did you hear that? Helen Williams is running around with Chinamen now.”

“That so?” Harry Merriam looked up at his wife and then reached down for his cup. “More coffee, please.”

Filling her husband’s coffee-cup, Mrs. Merriam said to Harriet, “I’d like to hear what happened. You know,” — She dropped her voice slightly, glancing sideways at her husband— “they just *love* white girls.” She smiled slightly in spite of herself, and said, even lower, so that Harriet had to lean forward to hear, “Their houses are made with heavy walls, extra heavy, so you can’t get out and no one can hear you if you scream. Scream,” she repeated with relish, and Harriet felt herself hot and embarrassed. “I’ve heard of cases,” Mrs. Merriam said. She sighed again, leaning back. “Poor Helen,” she said.

“But in the apartment house,” Harriet said. “After all....” She felt a need to protest; she believed everything her mother was saying, but that her mother should appear to enjoy it so much... “I’m *sure* nothing like that could happen,” Harriet said.

Mrs. Merriam laughed shortly. “You wait and see,” she said. Then her eyes opened wide, and she said, “Well, if that certainly isn’t the reason Mrs. Williams is in such a hurry to move away!”

“No, Mother,” Harriet said, but her mother was up from the table and moving toward the phone.

“I’m just going to call Mrs. Donald,” she said.

* * *

Mr. Desmond put his book down and looked across the living-room at his son with tolerant fatherly amusement. “Been a long time since I had a chance to talk to you,” he said.

Johnny looked up and smiled back. “We’ve both been pretty busy, I guess,” he said. Although they were legally father and son, John Junior had not, as so many adopted children do, grown to resemble his father in small subtle ways; he had taken none of his father’s mannerisms, none of his tricks of dressing, not even many of his father’s words. In some ways he was a sorrow to Mr. Desmond; who believed, and said often, that adoption was a two-way process. “The children should adopt the parents,” he would say soberly, “as surely as the parents adopt the children.” So that, sitting on opposite sides of the room, they were already two men — Johnny at nearly sixteen as large and broad-shouldered as his father — two men sitting of an evening talking. Mrs. Desmond stood in the doorway looking at them. She was proud of them both, and proud of small Caroline just put to bed for the night. When she thought of her family, beyond meals and clothes and table linen, she thought of them as a unit, the adopted son as permanent and beloved as the natural daughter, the father and mother kindly, loving parents.

She came almost silently into the room and sat down to take up her sewing. As she sat down, both her husband and her son looked up and smiled at her, and she smiled back, the smile still on her face as she bent over her needle-point, and they went back to their conversation.

“I could get my license this winter when I’m sixteen,” Johnny was saying.

Mr. Desmond still looked humorous and tolerant; it was an old argument and he had every intention of giving in eventually, but first he must prove Johnny in a number of vehement arguments over a period of months, must find the boy manly and proud and strong-willed. Mr. Desmond admired strength in any form, and finding it in his adopted son was a sort of bonus to him, as though, beside the qualities of health and bodily perfection he had originally specified in the child to be adopted, he had been rewarded for his generosity to the child by unexpected good qualities: this strength, a quiet humor, Johnny's undefinable self-possession which sometimes awed Mr. Desmond. Some day Johnny would play all-American football, or great golf, or championship tennis; Mr. Desmond saw him happily as beloved of women (perhaps even already; there were the letters that had caused such a fuss recently, and who knew what else?), admired of men, his hand on his father's shoulder, his friends, broad-shouldered champion young men all, toasting Johnny's father, his *adopted* father.

"I don't believe," Mr. Desmond said, following this train of thought, "that any young man should have a car unless he has proved himself adult."

"I can drive now," Johnny said mistakenly.

Mr. Desmond put his book on his knee (it was a mystery story, and Mr. Desmond read them lovingly; some day Johnny could read Homer and Chaucer for him; as Mr. Desmond said so often, "That's what we have children for"), and regarded his son cynically. "What about this girl who wrote you the letters?" he demanded. "You take her out riding all the time if you had a car?"

Johnny made a face, "*Not her*," he said.

Mr. Desmond smiled at Mrs. Desmond, who smiled back. "Listen to him," he said.

"Of course," Mrs. Desmond said fondly. "And all the boys will be crazy about Caroline."

"I wish you'd just let me get a car," Johnny said. His eyes became faraway. "Allen has the nicest little car," he said.

Mr. Desmond frowned. “I’ve heard about nothing else, it seems,” he said. “Remember, you’re not a rich man’s son yet. Allen’s father can afford nice little cars; if I ever let you drive, you will be using the family car for a good many years before you have a car of your own.”

“I could earn the money for a second-hand car,” Johnny said. “I don’t want anything but a car to go around in.”

Mr. Desmond was mildly annoyed. “I will probably be able to afford some sort of a respectable car for you some day,” he said, “without your going out and slaving for it. There is no need to think that at fifteen you can earn the money for a car which your father cannot afford at forty.”

Johnny was stopped. “At least let me get my license,” he said.

“We’ll see.” Mr. Desmond picked up his book. “What are you reading?”

Johnny tossed the comic book on to the couch beside him in sudden irritability. “Stuff,” he said. He got up and moved restlessly around the room. “I’m going over to Allen’s,” he said.

“So late?” Mrs. Desmond looked up anxiously, but her husband said, “You boys. Out all night and never think how your parents worry.”

“I’ll be back early,” Johnny said.

“Let us know if you’re going to be late,” his father said. He chuckled amiably. “Driving around in Allen’s car, whistling at girls,” he said.

* * *

Marilyn Perlman sat on her front porch, wearing slacks and drinking coke and reading *Pendennis*. Inside the house her mother was humming far away; she was in the kitchen making a cake for Mr. Perlman’s birthday dinner that night. Marilyn had turned the porch chair so that she could see through the vines off down the street — Helen Williams was moving away. That morning, without any previous knowledge of the Williams’s departure, Marilyn had come outside, and the moving van was there; incredulous, Marilyn checked it against the house — it was certainly the Williams house, the moving men were taking furniture *out*. There had been, for a minute, the bare possibility that the Williams family had bought new furniture, but the old furniture was definitely coming *out*, and after two hours it seemed beautifully certain that Helen Williams was leaving Pepper Street. Marilyn relayed the news to her mother, who came out on the porch for a minute, with flour on her hands, and nodded and said, “It’s a good thing.”

All the neighborhood children were gathered around the Williams house, and Helen Williams was holding her last court on the front lawn, sitting on one of her own living-room chairs while her grandmother sat indoors in her room holding Lotus and crying, and her mother moved nervously in and out, directing the movers, entreating them to be gentle with certain favored remnants. The Williams furniture was embarrassingly shabby, and Mrs. Williams was obviously conscious of the eyes of her neighbors and their children; they saw her seldom enough as it was, without getting their last look at her by daylight, surrounded by the pitiful implements she used to live and eat and dress and sleep and sit and hold and bring her children up with.

Mildred Williams, in authority for the first time in her life, was ordering people away from the furniture, bestowing favors on children she allowed to come near the moving van. Mrs. Desmond drove past with Caroline in the car, and stopped to say good-bye courteously to Mrs. Williams, and Mildred ran up and pressed a grimy rag doll into Caroline’s arms. “This is from my mommy and me,” she cried, and Mrs. Desmond was able to say good-bye again, and thank you, before her repugnance hurried her home, to take the doll by an arm and drop it into the garbage can before she took Caroline into the house to wash.

Marilyn watched, thinking of life without Helen Williams — maybe they were moving far away, far enough so that Helen would never be in school again — and realizing, as she saw the threadbare, unmatched furniture, that it had not been necessary to be so afraid of Helen. If Helen dressed every morning for school in front of that grimy dresser, ate breakfast at that slatternly table, then Marilyn had no need to run from her; no one whose life was bounded by things like that was invulnerable.

By noon the truck was full and ready to drive off. Helen's grandmother was brought out of the house with Lotus in her arms, Mildred was forced into a coat, and wearily, desolately, Mrs. Williams prepared to lead her family to the bus that would take them to their new home, a place darker, perhaps, and poorer, but where Mildred would grow up for another year or so, where the old grandmother would sit in her room and perhaps die, where Helen would continue as before, surrounded by new friends, frightening a new Marilyn, and where Mrs. Williams would be able to come home every night after a shorter journey, sitting alone every evening in a new living-room, planning so that they would not have to move into another home eventually, another home still darker. Miss Fielding, on her front porch, stood up to lean forward and say good-bye to Mrs. Williams and bow to the old grandmother, Mildred danced along the street, calling back to the other children, "I'll come and see you some day," and Hallie Martin, holding her arms around Helen and sobbing, cried out "Write to me, Willie, write to me, *please*." Mrs. Merriam waved from her kitchen window, and the neighborhood children, secure and firm on Pepper Street, stood in a body watching until the Williams family had turned the corner to Cortez Road and the highway, and mothers began calling them home for lunch.

"I'll be back in a minute," Marilyn called into the front door, and without waiting for an answer she ran down the front steps and out on to the sidewalk of Pepper Street. The street was empty. The moving van was gone, the children had evaporated into their houses, the sun was coming down on the sidewalk and the street and the lawns and the houses — the pink flowers were gone by now — and on the unmistakable debris left at the Williams house. Marilyn ran quickly down the street, driven by a compelling urge to see Helen's house from the inside, to be in there and out again before anyone saw her.

She went through the half-open door without hesitation; even in moving away the Williams family had been as ramshackle as their furniture — Mrs. Williams had neglected to lock the doors in her haste to get to her new home; one window still had curtains. ("Sloppiest tenants I ever had," the landlord confided to Miss Fielding that afternoon, when he came to see if Mrs. Williams had stolen the light bulbs.) Inside, Marilyn stood in the dim echoing air of a house still ringing with complaint; she looked into the living-room and saw that the sun never came there, she went down the long hall and knew that there had never been a carpet on the floor, she saw the still-dirty bathroom and the old grandmother's room, which she supposed had been Helen's, from the fifth on the floor, a calendar still hung in the kitchen, with the moving date circled. Marilyn looked into the refrigerator and found it warm and empty. On her way back down the hall she discovered a small memorandum book dropped into a corner, and she took it out into the sunlit doorway and opened it and found items like "call furnace man" and "black dress at cleaners thurs." At the back of the book was a list of figures, identified occasionally, as "Helen spring coat $17.95." That must be the red coat Helen has been wearing, Marilyn thought in surprise, so cheap. She had only seen it vaguely; it had been a warning sign of Helen's approach, but now she remembered it, and it had *looked* cheap. The figures in the book totaled fifty-one dollars; Helen's coat was the biggest item. Marilyn dropped the book back into the doorway, and thought, Mildred was a nice little girl, *she* was always nice.

She came down to the sidewalk, and Tod Donald, riding his bike past in the street, braked to a stop and said loudly, “What are *you* doing, in other people’s houses?”

“Oh, shut up, dopey,” Marilyn said, and walked on home.

* * *

The weather had to be very warm indeed before Mrs. Mack would venture outdoors. The children believed that she spent all day in her shack peering out at them through the boarded-up windows, putting spells on anyone who entered her yard or touched the battered apple trees. Mrs. Mack was allowed to continue on Pepper Street (although it would have been easy enough for Mr. Desmond or Mr. Roberts or even Mr. Perlman to get rid of her), because she had apparently always owned the little piece of land where she lived; and because she lived in a shack far back from the street, with the heavy apple trees in front and a hedge in front of these; and, finally, because she only ventured outdoors in the very warmest weather, and no one, as far as even rumor could discover, had ever been harmed by her spells, at least no one who lived on Pepper Street.

The children called her a witch, and the parents called her an unfortunate old woman, and she looked like either one, with her hair in strings and her shoulders bent, and her perpetual whimpering mutter. If anyone passed her house while she was outside and neglected to speak to her the mutter would rise to an audible criticism, but Mrs. Desmond had been known to observe, and the parents believed her, that Mrs. Mack actually loved the Pepper Street children, and was a harmless old woman, very unfortunate. The day after Helen Williams moved away, Mrs. Mack came out. Mary Byrne, out picking roses from the side of their house nearest Mrs. Mack's, came running into the kitchen to say to her mother that Mrs. Mack was on the front step of her shack in the sun, and Mrs. Byrne said absently, "Be nice to her, dear."

Peering through the line of rose bushed which were the boundary between the Byrne place and Mrs. Mack's, Mary called, tentatively, "Isn't it a lovely day, Mrs. Mack?" and the old woman, scowling around her, said, "Who's calling me?" before she saw Mary waving through the rose bushes. Then she waved back and said, "Sally, are you out in the sunshine too?"

It had been Helen Williams's great contribution to neighborhood lore, that a witch could not put spells on anyone if she didn't know their name, and Mary said, comfortable in the knowledge that some unfamiliar Sally would get her spell, "How are you feeling?"

"Better now," Mrs. Mack said. "Better now." No one knew any of Mrs. Mack's history except that a friend had given her her dog, and that she was always ailing in some way. "Where's your dog today?" Mary asked, to be as thorough and polite as she could, and Mrs. Mack nodded back, sage in the sunlight. "Indeed yes," Mrs. Mack said. "Not nice people at all."

"Of course not, Mrs. Mack," Mary said.

"Don't belong at all in a nice neighborhood," Mrs. Mack said. "Glad to see the last of them."

"You mean the Williamses?" Mary stopped in her rose-gathering to listen.

"This has always been a nice neighborhood," Mrs. Mack said. She lifted a stick from the ground beside the step and began to make figures in the dirt. "I always liked living here."

Mary crossed herself wildly, gasped, "I guess I've picked enough of these old roses," and fled indoors. "She was making charms in the dirt," she told her mother breathlessly, “I could see her writing names.” For a minute the comfort of Mrs. Mack’s not knowing anyone’s name deserted her, and she said in terror, “She was looking right at me.”

* * *

Tod Donald rarely did anything voluntarily, or with planning, or even with intent acknowledged to himself; he found himself doing one thing, and then he found himself doing another, and that, as he saw it, was the way one lived along, never deciding, never helping. When he found himself one afternoon walking down Pepper Street nearly at the Desmond driveway, and saw Mrs. Desmond backing the car out with Caroline beside her in the front seat, it never occurred to him to slip into the Desmond yard; and once there, when he saw the glass door from the Desmond terrace slightly open, his mind did not encompass the notion of stepping into the Desmond house, nor did it suggest to him, once in, that he had no right to be there.

The glass door took him directly into the Desmond dining-room, and, since he had never been inside the Desmond house before, he first regarded the walls, and the ceilings, and the floor, before going on to a more intimate investigation. With the glass doors at his back, he stood coolly surveying what he could see of the house, estimating it, weighing it in his hand. The walls, for instance, were painted, not papered as in the Donald house; the table in the dining-room was long and slim. Tod went to the painted wall and felt it with his finger, leaving an almost imperceptible touch on the light paint. He bent over the table and saw his face reflected dimly in the polished wood. He looked at the chairs; they had light leather seats and graceful rising backs; the rug on the floor, barely pressed by the legs of the chairs and the table, was pale and smooth. Tod took hold of one of the chairs; it was unexpectedly heavy, and he had to use both hands to tip it over backward and examine the under part. When he put the chair back into place he caught sight of his face reflected in the silver coffee service on a side table. As he came closer to the coffee-pot his face became more distorted, elastic in the long coffee-pot; he looked back into the table and found his face there, back to the coffee-pot and found his face again. He ran his hand caressingly down the side of the coffee-pot, his fingers lingering as he turned away, to the doorway beyond which lay the living-room.

Facing him as he entered the living-room was the wall of tall shrouded windows; because they were covered against the afternoon sunlight the great living-room was shadowy and cool. Far away, down the length of the room, the grand piano stood unvibrating, quiet. Tod, going past heavy armchairs and stiff embroidered chairs and small round tables with curved feet and large flat tables with lamps on them, stood finally next to the piano, where he saw his face reflected in the sleek blackness. He put one elbow on the piano and looked down on the piano bench, and said, barely aloud, "*She* plays this. It's their piano."

He thought of Mrs. Desmond, tall and pale in a long dress, sitting on the piano bench playing the piano, and he walked around and knelt one leg on the piano bench and pressed his fingers down on the keys, gently, but without sound. He kept his fingers down for a minute, looking at the way the keys slid smoothly together, the black keys fitting exactly into the white keys, each capable of independent movement, but tightly put together. Then he turned and went back down the living-room, stopping for a minute to look down at a chair which was dark red and big and comfortable, and had Mr. Desmond's pipe in the ashtray next to it.

He began to whistle softly and tonelessly as he went back through the dining-room into the kitchen, clean and breath-takingly white. He saw his face again in the toaster, but not on the kitchen table, although it was white and shone in the sunlight. Pretty dishes stood in a long row on a shelf along one side of the Desmond kitchen, yellow-trimmed dishtowels hung neatly on a rack. Tod took down one of the dishes, still whistling, and turned it over to see the back; the lettering there had been almost washed off, but he made out something that seemed to say “fine china.”

There was a yellow square in the linoleum floor for every green one, a green one for every white one, a white one for every brown one. Caroline’s high chair stood back against the wall; it was white like everything else, and lined with yellow oilcloth. Caroline eats here, too, Tod thought. He looked around and assigned the chair next to the toaster to Mrs. Desmond, the one across to Mr. Desmond, the third to Johnny Desmond. Mrs. Desmond has to make the toast, he thought, Mr. Desmond probably likes toast.

He came back again through the dining-room into the long hallway which ran through the whole house; he had realized vaguely that the Desmond house was all on one floor without any upstairs, but still it gave him a queer shock to open the first door past the dining-room and find it was Johnny Desmond’s bedroom; he knew it was Johnny’s because Johnny’s clothes were on the chair and in the closet, and a bookcase in the room held schoolbooks and adventure stories labeled “John Desmond Jr.” When he closed the door behind him he looked down at the doorway leading to the dining-room and said, “You can eat and then go to bed right next door.”

The door across the hall took him into a handsome study, where there were deep red leather chairs and a long clear desk. “Old man Desmond,” Tod said, and closed the door without going in. On his way down the hall he found two bathrooms; the Donalds had two bathrooms, but they were on different floors.

He was whistling again as he reached the last doors in the hall; his whistling was still very soft, but it had acquired a tune to which Tod knew the words: “There she goes, there she goes, all dressed up in her Sunday clothes.”

There were three doors still unopened at the end of the hall; Tod opened the first door and then stood wide-eyed, his whistling checked for a minute before it began again. The room inside was Mrs. Desmond’s bedroom, and it was so pretty that even the presence of Mrs. Desmond would have been superfluous. The pale green curtains were moving gently at the window, and the mirrors all over the room showed the movements over and over again, a faint green stirring, so that the stillness of the pale green bedspread was a surprise and the straight immaculate walls seemed all that held the room steady, as though without their firmness the room of movement and pale green would flow softly within itself, moving on to the sea, where it wanted to be. The floor here had a yellow rug, shadowed with the movement from the windows; on the pale dressing table stood bottles of perfume, many-colored and catching reflections which were in turn lost in the tenderly moving depths of the mirrors. Tod stood in the doorway watching, still whistling, until he found power to move across the room and look at himself in the mirror beyond the perfume bottles; there he was, tangled in the stirring mirror; he watched himself for a long time. Behind him, reflected in the mirror, he saw Mrs. Desmond’s soft green bed, and Caroline’s small bed beside it; there was a long soft yellow chair, and on the dressing table next to him Caroline’s face was framed in gold. When he looked at the picture he saw his own face again, reflected sharply against Caroline’s.

He picked up a perfume bottle and lifted out the top. The scent was overpoweringly sweet, and he poured some out into his hand before he stoppered the bottle and put it back. Then his hand smelled of the same overpowering sweetness, and with his hand up to his face he walked across the room and opened the door on one side of Mrs. Desmond's bed; rows of Mrs. Desmond's dresses hung there, pink and lavender and yellow and green and pale blue and grey; corresponding to them, on the other side of the closet, were Caroline's dresses, pink and blue and yellow, and shoes on the floor, Mrs. Desmond's narrow and arched, Caroline's tiny and white. The perfume was in the dresses, on his hand, and it made him blink his eyes. Half-shutting the closet door behind him, he wormed his way in through Mrs. Desmond's dresses and negligees until he reached the most hidden part of the closet, and he sat down on the floor, his perfumed hand over his face. There, far back in the closet in Mrs. Desmond's room, he said, quite loudly, all the dirtiest words he knew, all the words he had heard his brother James ever use, all the words George Martin taught the kids secretly and knowingly. Since there were only three or four words really bad enough, he said them over and over.

Finally, taking care not to disarrange the dresses, he came wearily out of the closet, smoothing the dresses down before he closed the door on them. The perfume still on his hand was beginning to make him sick, and he rubbed his hand against a dark coat of Caroline's, but the scent stayed. Holding his hand in back of him, he rapidly investigated the other doors; one was a third bathroom and the last was Caroline's playroom, with small clean toys put neatly around the walls; a tiny chair and table, a doll bed and doll dresser; the doll herself asleep in a doll carriage beneath a yellow coverlet. Mrs. Desmond's sewing-box was set prettily on a table in this room, next to a rocking chair, and Caroline's smaller sewing-box was set next to her mother's, with a smaller rocking chair alongside. Tod began to whistle again, and sat for a minute in the larger rocking chair.

He went out through the same dining-room door he had used to come in, carefully not touching it, but slipping out sideways. In the garden, with the high Desmond hedge all around him, he crossed the driveway and went down to the end of the garden, where the lawn ended against flowering bushes and carefully trained lines of flowers in different colors. He sat down on the lawn and looked back at the Desmond house. He could see the glass doors, see into the dining-room, but not the hallway, not into the bedrooms.

He sat there for a long time, and then lay down. The grass, close to his face, interested him, and he pulled up a blade of grass and held it close to his face, trying to look deep into the rich green, letting his eye move up to the pale green at the tip and down again, trying to see into the heart of its tightly curled length. Against the sky it was long and straight, but it moved a little because his hand was shaking; it was hard to hold it still enough to see into it. He twisted it around his finger, and it moved back to its straight stand; he tied it in a loose knot, and it eased back straight again. Tying it he had bruised it; it turned a darker green where it was hurt, and he dropped it back on to the lawn again, although he could still see it limp and dark against its living brothers. He reached over his head and pulled a yellow blossom off a bush; this, too, interested him, and he looked at it as closely as he had the grass. Its petals were precise and neat, so soft he could hardly feel them against his fingers; annoyed at its soft pliability, he crushed it flat with his fingers and rolled the petals cruelly, until the flower was a little damp ball and he dropped it.

He must have fallen asleep; he was painfully aware suddenly of the perfume on his hand, under his face, when the realization of his face reflected in all those mirrors, shining distorted in the silver coffee-pot, superimposed on Caroline’s picture, frightened him; and he sat up just as

Mrs. Desmond's car turned into the driveway. Moving quickly, he went behind the garage, waiting there until the car was safely inside, pulsing tiredly in the building for a minute before it stopped. Then Mrs. Desmond and Caroline got out, and Mrs. Desmond said, "Do you have your teddy bear, darling?"

Tod heard them walking toward the house; he began to edge around the side of the garage, but did not dare put his head out to watch them go into the house. When he heard a door close he looked tentatively around the corner of the garage, saw no one, and fled down the driveway to the street, turned toward his home, and began walking slowly.

CHAPTER THREE

MRS. ROBERTS PUT the toast down emphatically in front of her husband, not looking at him. She was still angry at him from the night before; she had sat up in bed, late, telling him how he looked to other men, how he disgusted other women, and had turned, finally, her hair over her eyes and her voice tired, ready to forgive him, and had found him asleep. Overnight (she had not slept, at last, but sat in the bedroom chair smoking all night and, watching the sky get lighter outside, had planned in detail how to pack the boys and their clothes and take them to New York, where she would find a job, anything, and Mike would never see them again), her anger had subsided into a cool watchfulness; as the sun came into the bedroom windows in the morning she realized for the hundredth time that she could never get the boys away, and if she did, could never get a job in New York or anywhere else, and if she did, would have to come back to Mike anyway. Mike could not be threatened, or frightened, but he could be driven somehow into a position so extreme that he must humiliate himself to get back. Mrs. Roberts was willing to wait.

A pounding upstairs indicated that the boys were up and quarreling. Mrs. Roberts went out to the foot of the stairs and called kindly (she was kinder to the boys at these times, waiting for her husband to enmesh himself, just as she was more impatient with them when she loved her husband best), “Listen, you silly kids, stop fighting and get dressed, or there won’t be any breakfast for you.”

There was a silence upstairs, and then Art said, “Well, he was kicking me.”

“I was *not*,” Jamie said with all the indignation of false innocence. “I never went near him.”

“He was *so*,” Art said. “I was lying here not doing anything....”

“Never mind,” Mrs. Roberts said. “Both of you get dressed.”

She went back to her husband and sat down across the table from him. “I’ll be glad,” she said conversationally — it was a neutral topic— “to have that new girl here today.”

“New girl?” Mr. Roberts was unable to read a paper at breakfast; until he had his coffee he existed in a sort of unpleasant stupor; it was the only thing, he maintained, which enabled him to shave and dress at all each day. Like anyone who possesses such a dubious gift, he was inordinately proud of it, and he delighted, later in the day, in anecdotes of how horrid he had been that morning, or, if he set off in the morning late without breakfast, driving with Mr. Desmond, how he had sat numbly in a corner of the car. Sometimes Mrs. Roberts felt in the morning that her husband was exaggerating his habits in order to make a better story at lunch. This morning seemed to be such a one; Mr. Roberts stared at her with glazed eyes, his hand shook when he lifted his coffee-cup, and when she spoke to him he turned his head slowly to look away from her. Mrs. Roberts, who was tired herself this morning, made her voice more sharp and her words more emphatic.

“We are,” she said bitingly, “hiring a new servant this morning. Servant!” She laughed shortly. “A high-school girl. She is coming to help with the housework and the kids. Her name is Hester Lucas. Are you able to hear me?”

Mr. Roberts lifted his head, and then let it slump again.

“She’s not a very pretty girl,” Mrs. Roberts went on in her vicious voice, “but you may be able to find some charm in her.”

Mr. Roberts closed his eyes once, briefly.

“But that is a subject,” Mrs. Roberts said, pouring herself a third cup of coffee, “which I do not want to discuss any more with you.”

She was not finished, and the arrival of Artie and Jamie in a wild shrieking chorus left her feeling cheated. Mr. Roberts stood up as the boys came in, put his napkin down, and went upstairs to finish dressing. With an effort Mrs. Roberts recalled her kindly feelings toward the children, and smiled down on them as they fought for the sugar.

“We’re going to have a new servant,” she said to the boys.

“Like Joan?” Jamie said.

“*Not* like Joan,” Mrs. Roberts said shortly. Her eyes wandered to the stairs; Mr. Roberts would be down in a minute.

“Not like Joan at all,” Mrs. Roberts repeated. “This girl is named Hester. She is going to help me with the house.”

“What will she do?” Artie was reading already; one hand brought cereal accurately to his mouth while the other hand held the book down on the table. Jamie ate slowly, babyishly, playing with his spoon and asking questions to keep his mother from seeing the untouched cereal. “What will she *do*?” he asked again.

Mrs. Roberts waved her hand vaguely. “All the things I don’t want to do,” she said. “Wash dishes, and keep an eye on you boys.”

“She can’t keep an eye on *me*,” Jamie said. “I’ll run away so fast.”

“She’s not much older than Artie,” Mrs. Roberts said. “I hope she’s a good worker.”

“Like Harriet Merriam?” Jamie asked.

Mrs. Roberts was surprised. “Why like Harriet?” she asked. “Harriet doesn’t have to work.”

“Harriet’s not much older than Artie,” Jamie said.

"Harriet's *younger* than Artie," Mrs. Roberts said. "She's just bigger."

"Much bigger," Jamie said.

"Not like Harriet at all," Mrs. Roberts said. "Not like anyone. No one else in the neighborhood has a servant living with them."

* * *

Although Marguerite Desmond rarely smiled, she had never spoken a harsh word to or about anyone in her life. She had lived with Mr. Desmond for nineteen years, and in all that time had never raised her voice to him, or acted in any manner that was not genteel; she never treated her adopted son with anything less than perfect courtesy, and her attitude toward her neighbors was such as to set her apart in a lovely aristocratic isolation; she had never, to her knowledge, had a friend. In the few crises of her life, Mrs. Desmond had been collected and thoughtful; during the long uneventful years, serene. She was ungenerous because her family had been poor before she married Mr. Desmond, she was unsympathetic because no one had ever required any sensitivity of her, she was gracious because her mother before her had been gracious and because her daughter Caroline must in her turn learn to be womanly and lady like. Mrs. Desmond was neither intelligent nor unintelligent, because thinking and all its allied attributes were completely outside her schedule for life; her values did not include mind, and nothing that she intended ever required more than money. It must not be concluded, however, that with all these aspects Mrs. Desmond did not sleep and eat, cook and clean, comb her hair and drive her car, like the other mothers on the block. The only thing that set Mrs. Desmond apart was that she never knowingly said, or did, or thought, an unkind thing. Like Mrs. Merriam, Mrs. Desmond slept in her private room, away from her husband, only Mrs. Desmond had Caroline by her bed. Like Mrs. Roberts, Mrs.

Desmond was fond of lobster; like Mrs. Byrne, she was excessively concerned about the cleanliness and general superiority of the food she served her family; like Mrs. Perlman, she did her own dusting and bedmaking, leaving the heavy scrubbing for a girl to do every morning; and, like Mrs. Ransom-Jones and Mrs. Merriam, Mrs. Desmond wore her long hair gathered in a knot at the back of her neck; Mrs. Merriam's hair was grey, Mrs. Ransom-Jones's hair was dark, but Mrs. Desmond's hair was pale yellow, almost white. Caroline's hair was the same color; together they made a pair of delicately shaded creatures, not quite colorful enough, without enough body, to mingle freely with the rest of the world.

It was a wrench to Mrs. Desmond, although not altogether a surprise, when, after four years of barrenness in his marriage, Mr. Desmond cautiously and tenderly approached the idea of adopting a son.

"You see," he told Mrs. Desmond gently, "this way we choose our own child — make sure he's healthy, and so on. It's not like—" Mr. Desmond stopped, and started again. "I mean," he said, "we'd take some poor unfortunate waif and give him a good home."

Mrs. Desmond felt that it was not her place to be lukewarm toward any of Mr. Desmond's enthusiasms, but she allowed herself to say, desolately, "I feel, somehow, that it's *my* fault."

Mr. Desmond took her hand and said very softly, "If you feel that way about it, Marguerite, we'll never mention the subject again." He dropped her hand and said, with a pathetic smile, "I would have called him John Desmond Junior."

The Desmonds did not entertain frequently, although the neighborhood ladies met at the Desmond house to sew as often as they met at the Merriams', or the Donalds'. When Mr. Desmond insisted that they invite people from the city for dinner, or for bridge, Mrs. Desmond, as cool and reserved as ever, sat at the head of her table speaking gently and competently, but the next morning she usually stayed in bed with a sick headache, allowing no one in to see her except Caroline.

With the neighborhood children, however, Mrs. Desmond was not shy, so that Mr. Desmond's plan for the children found her almost eager. "I've been thinking," he said one evening, abruptly setting aside his book. "I think these young hoodlums around here ought to be thinking of something else than roughhouse and foolishness." When his wife raised her eyebrows over her sewing to show that she was listening, Mr. Desmond went on, "What about all of them getting together and say, reading Shakespeare? Not *all* of the plays, of course," he added, before Mrs. Desmond could speak. "A few of the best, like *Romeo and Juliet,* and *Julius Caesar*. Then at the end of the summer, maybe, we could give a performance. Invite all the parents." He waited, beaming at Mrs. Desmond.

"I'm sure there's a good deal of talent in the children," Mrs. Desmond said, after thinking for a minute. "James Donald, for instance, is a very talented boy."

"James Donald," Mr. Desmond said, "and I think that older Roberts boy would do well with something like this to interest him. Get him into the spirit of working with a group." He stood up and walked over to the low bookcase beside the fireplace, ran his finger along the books until he came to a complete Shakespeare. "Here," he said, "now we can tell better." He sat down again in his chair, and began to turn the pages over quickly. *"Midsummer Night's Dream,"* he said, and smiled reminiscently. "Great stuff," he said affectionately to the book. "Here's *The Merchant of Venice*. The quality of mercy is not strained, and so on. Virginia Donald ought to do that one," he said to his wife, and consulted the book. "Portia. Virginia ought to do it very well."

“You’ll have to have all the children, of course,” Mrs. Desmond said.

“All of them,” Mr. Desmond said. He closed the book on his finger and said straightforwardly to his wife, “Now there’s something. It’s absolutely up to people like us to lead the way. A thing like this ought to include even —” He stopped, and then said, “After all, Shakespeare’s for *every*one.”

“Let me see,” Mrs. Desmond said. She was quite enthusiastic and put down her sewing. “We could make it once a week, all the children here, and as soon as you finish one play you could start another. And we could serve cookies and lemonade afterward.”

“Eighteen, nineteen,” Mr. Desmond said, counting characters. “And that doesn’t include all the servingmen and messengers and so on. Someone will have to read two or three parts,” he said. “How many children have we in the neighborhood?”

“Let me see,” Mrs. Desmond said again. “There’s Harriet Merriam, and our Johnny.”

“Like to hear old Johnny read Romeo,” Mr. Desmond said, and chuckled. “There’s a part for our son.” He took a pencil from his vest pocket and wrote, “Harriet Merriam, John Desmond Junior — Romeo,” in the back flyleaf of the book. “And the Byrne children,” he said, “Art and Jamie Roberts. I don’t know but what Jamie’s too young,” he said reflectively, looking at the names. “Might start a roughhouse.”

“He’s very well-behaved,” Mrs. Desmond said. “I was wondering,” she began tentatively.

“Wondering what?” Mr. Desmond said. He was writing down, “Virginia Donald — Juliet.”

“The Perlman girl,” Mrs. Desmond said. “Marilyn.”

“What about her?” Mr. Desmond asked. “We’re going to have everybody, you know.”

"I wouldn't want to see her left out," Mrs. Desmond said. "She seems to be a very sweet girl. But if you read something like *The Merchant of Venice*, isn't there... wouldn't it be apt to embarrass her?"

Mr. Desmond stared for a minute, and then he said with some discomfort, "I see what you mean, yes." He turned the pages of the book quickly, read a few lines, turned a page and read a few lines again. "You're absolutely right," he said. "I'm glad you thought of it in time. And I think there's one in *Romeo and Juliet,* too."

"Could you read some other writer?" Mrs. Desmond asked. "Marilyn is such a nice girl."

"No sense in it unless we read Shakespeare," Mr. Desmond said. "Parents would probably think we just asked her down to insult her. They're so touchy, you know." He looked at his list, and said, "I haven't put her down yet."

"Perhaps after things are going well, and the children are enjoying it," Mrs. Desmond suggested, "you might invite her down for an evening when you know they won't be reading anything — anything unkind."

"I'll put her in a special list," Mr. Desmond said. He drew a line and wrote "Special Reasons" over it, and under it he wrote Marilyn's name. "Suppose old Steve Donald would like to join in?" he asked cheerfully.

"He's such a pleasant person," Mrs. Desmond said. "I'm sure he'll be pleased to know his children are enjoying themselves."

"Desmond, Merriam, two Donald, two Byrne, two Roberts — eight," Mr. Desmond said. "Who else?"

"Well." Mrs. Desmond thought. "There are the Martin children," she suggested.

"Well, now — that little Martin girl," Mr. Desmond said.

"Hallie," Mrs. Desmond said.

"I don't know as I can quite see her reading Shakespeare," Mr. Desmond went on cautiously. "Most of these kids, you can tell that even though they're young, there's stuff in Shakespeare they can *get*. Mean something to them. But I can't see Hallie."

"She's quite young," Mrs. Desmond said.

"Really too young, I think." Mr. Desmond drew another line, wrote "Too young," over it and "Hallie Martin" underneath. "And her brother," he said. "I can't see inviting one and not the other of them, can you?"

"Perhaps their family wants them to be together," Mrs. Desmond said. "It would be rude to invite George and not Hallie."

"Special reasons," Mr. Desmond said. He wrote George's name under Special Reasons, and leaned back. "That's everyone, isn't it?" he asked.

"Unless you want to include that girl the Roberts got today," Mrs. Desmond said humorously.

"*She* doesn't live in the neighborhood," Mr. Desmond said. "This is just for the children around here. I won't ever put her down." He began to count.

"I can't think of anyone else," Mrs. Desmond said. "Caroline can sit here with me, and watch."

"Still eight," Mr. Desmond said, frowning, "I don't know if there's a play with only eight characters." He began to leaf through the book again.

"They could each read two parts," Mrs. Desmond said.

"They all need so many people," Mr. Desmond said. "I don't even know as there's a play with only eight *principal* characters, even."

"You could read some parts, too, you know," Mrs. Desmond said. "The children would probably feel much better if you did, anyway."

"I don't know," Mr. Desmond said. His enthusiasm was evaporating, and he held the book idly on his lap. "If we ever wanted to *give* a play—"

"Perhaps the parents?" Mrs. Desmond suggested.

“But this was for the kids,” Mr. Desmond said petulantly. Disappointed, he put the book down on the table next to him. “I’ll see what Johnny thinks,” he said.

* * *

“Well, for heaven’s sake,” Virginia said, “we can *walk* down the *street*, can’t we?”

“We might meet him or something,” Harriet said. “Please, Ginnie. Let’s go the long way around.”

“It’s too far,” Virginia said. “Listen, if you’re scared—”

“I’m not *scared*, exactly,” Harriet said.

“He can’t do anything to you,” Virginia said. “You’re silly, Harriet.”

She began to walk deliberately down Cortez Road toward the highway, and after a minute Harriet followed. “It’s just that my mother wouldn’t like it, either,” Harriet said.

Virginia stopped. “Listen, Harriet Merriam,” she said, “if you’re going to be scared all the time and always be wanting to go around the other way and afraid of your mother and everything I’ll just go on down to the store by myself and not talk to you any more.” She pulled her arm away from Harriet and stood, offended, looking away while Harriet hesitated.

“All *right*,” Harriet said, “but if we get into trouble it’s your fault.”

“You’re silly.” Virginia put her arm through Harriet’s again. “*Nothing* can happen.”

Once decided, Harriet was persuaded to find arguments for Virginia’s side. “After all, we’re right where we can call for help from anyone,” she said reasonably.

“And anyway my mother was as mad as yours was,” Virginia said. When they were in front of the apartment house she slowed her steps down deliberately, and Harriet's anxious haste was retarded.

"Come *on*," she kept saying, caught by panic. "Ginnie, come *on*."

"I'd just as soon go right in and see him," Virginia said teasingly. "I'm not afraid. I sort of liked him."

"I didn't." Harriet let go of Virginia's arm abruptly as the door of the apartment house opened. "It's him," she said, "let's run," in a whisper; but when Virginia stood still Harriet waited, perhaps from loyalty, perhaps from terror.

"Hello, young ladies," he said. He was smiling, and Harriet recalled that they were right where they could call for help.

"Hello," Virginia said.

"I was sorry you could not come to tea on Tuesday," he said. He was not in a hurry today, and he looked very gay and pleasant, standing with his hat in his hand, his head bent courteously toward Virginia.

"We were busy that day," Virginia said easily. "We were sorry too."

"I was hoping to show you the apartment house."

"Perhaps we can come another time," Virginia said. For a minute Harriet was admiring Virginia's facility, her good manners, and then a sudden thought came to her: she wants to go, Virginia wants to go see that Chinaman, she was mad when she couldn't go, she really wants to go.

"I'll see you later, Ginnie," Harriet said. She started to walk away, but Virginia said, "Harriet, don't be silly," and Harriet stopped and turned. The Chinese man was looking at her, and he said, "I imagine I'm delaying you. You're in a hurry."

"No, of course not," Harriet said foolishly. "We were just going for a walk."

"Perhaps," he said, turning again to Virginia, "perhaps you would like to come in for a few minutes now?"

Trapped, Harriet heard Virginia saying, “Thank you, we’d love to,” and realized that the Chinese man had turned back to the door and Virginia was following him. “Come on, Harriet,” Virginia said, “we’re going in.”

Harriet was thinking of two things at once: she couldn’t let Virginia go alone, not and ever be friends again afterward, but once inside they were no longer right where they could call for help. The two ideas merged stupidly. She ran after Virginia and whispered, while the man waited silently at the door, “We *can’t* go in, Ginnie. My *mother*.”

“You’re so silly,” Virginia said. “And you’re rude to whisper. Don’t come if you don’t want to.” She spoke out loud and Harriet was aware of the Chinese man looking at her quietly, aware of her bad manners. She followed Virginia miserably through the doorway and over to the elevator. The foyer of the apartment house was brightly muraled; tropical fish pursued one another insanely over and around doorways, gilt — still unchipped — lay lavishly on the ceilings and floors, and on the elevator doors two more orange fish, goggle-eyed, solemnly regarded the unwary passenger. Harriet followed mutely while Virginia and the Chinese man got into the elevator. Virginia was saying, “I don’t know why they paint fish all over everything.”

“I suppose they feel that a dark building needs to have cheerful decorations,” the Chinese man said. He pressed a button and the elevator began to move effortlessly upward; Harriet, crushed into a corner, watched the lines of floor slip by the little window in the elevator door; I can’t get out till it stops, she was thinking.

“What floor do you live on?” Virginia asked.

“Five,” he said. “The top.”

The elevator door opened and he led them out and down a long dark carpeted hall. Now we’re really far away, Harriet thought, probably there’s no one else home in the whole house. They stopped at the last door, and the Chinese man said, “By the way, my name is Lee,” and Virginia said, “I’m Virginia Donald and this is Harriet Merriam,” and he opened the door and they went in. For a minute Harriet lingered in the doorway, wondering if this were her last chance to get help, wondering what horrible thing this man and Virginia were conspiring against her.

Inside they found a living-room that might have been in the Merriams’ house, or the Donalds’ house. The furniture was the same, the pictures were similar and similarly placed, and the small kitchen just visible beyond might have housed the Donald flowered plates or the Desmond pressure cooker. Harriet sat down in an overstuffed chair that looked comfortably familiar, while Virginia went over to the window and said, “Look, how far down. Harriet, come look.”

The Chinese man disappeared into the kitchen, and Harriet whispered, “Ginnie, come here,” and when Virginia came over, Harriet whispered again, “Look, how do we get out of here?”

“Look,” Virginia said firmly, standing in front of Harriet with her hands on her hips, “look, this is lots of fun. You don’t have to go spoiling it all the time.”

She turned when the Chinese man came out of the kitchen carrying a tray. “I don’t know,” he said as he put the tray down on a coffee table in front of the couch and busied himself with glasses, “I don’t know if you young ladies are allowed to drink wine?” He looked up inquiringly, and Virginia said, “I’ve never had any.”

He gestured at the small bottle and the tiny thin glasses on the tray and said, “This is a very light wine, suitable for ladies.” He laughed comfortably and went on, “I know that ladies as young as you are not in the habit of drinking wine, but perhaps just a taste.” He poured a few drops into one of the tiny glasses and handed it to Virginia. When she took it she raised her eyes to him for a minute and then dropped them again, half-smiling. “I had tea ready for you on Tuesday,” he went on, “but today I had no time, of course, to get anything special.” He handed another small glass to Harriet, and she said, “Thank you,” in a very small voice. Then, in a minute, still talking, he passed her a dish of candy, and she took a piece of that and set it on the ashstand next to her, along with the little glass of wine. Her mind was not functioning, but her mouth, well-trained, said “Thank you,” automatically when someone handed her something.

Virginia tasted the wine and made a face, and Mr. Lee laughed and said, “This wine is made of rice; it is a Chinese wine.”

“It’s nice,” Virginia said. She looked at Harriet and said cruelly, “My friend was afraid to come up here.”

Mr. Lee was puzzled, and said, “I don’t know why. I very often have guests for tea.” He turned to Harriet and said very politely, “I hope you won’t be afraid to come any more. I hope you’ll come again.”

Harriet said, “Thank you,” again, almost inaudibly. After waiting for a minute Mr. Lee turned back to Virginia and said, “Do you go to school?”

Virginia made a gesture of distaste. “I don’t ever think about it in the summer,” she said.

“I had to go to a school to learn English when I first came to this country,” Mr. Lee said, as though he were beginning a story.

“You speak English *awfully* well,” Virginia said. She sipped at her wine again and finished the little bit he had given her. “May I have some more?” she asked. “It’s delicious.”

Mr. Lee hesitated before reaching out for her glass. “I’m not sure—” he said, and then stopped. When Virginia continued to hold out her glass, with a bright smile on her face, he took it finally and filled it with wine.

Virginia, sitting back with her full glass, said dreamily, “It must be wonderful to have a nice place like this, so high up over the street, and you just sit up here and drink wine and eat candy.”

Mr. Lee laughed and said, “I wish that were all I have to do.”

Virginia looked at the pictures on the walls and said, “Are you an artist?” and Mr. Lee laughed again and said, “No, if I had my choice I would be a writer, but as it is I do what I have to and make it as comfortable as possible.”

“What *do* you do?” Virginia asked.

Mr. Lee looked puzzled again. “I work here,” he said.

“What sort of work?”

“Why,” Mr. Lee turned his head to look at the kitchen. “I wash dishes, and mix drinks, and answer the door.”

“But is that all—” Virginia was saying, but Harriet cut in, saying abruptly, “Do you mean you’re the help here?” When Virginia looked sharply at her, Harriet said, “He’s the help, the maid. This isn’t his place at all.”

“Did you think it was?” Mr. Lee looked at Virginia and then at Harriet. “I couldn’t rent an apartment in this house,” he said. “Not in this neighborhood. They wouldn’t rent an apartment to me.”

Virginia stood up. “Thank you very much,” she said, “but we’d better be going.” She put her full wine glass down very carefully on the tray.

With the realization that no harm was going to come to her, Harriet remembered her conscious manners. “You were very nice to ask us to come,” she said. “I hope you won’t get into trouble for having guests up here.”

Perhaps Mr. Lee was angry with them, but he followed them politely to the door. “I am allowed to entertain my friends,” he told Harriet drily, and said to Virginia, “I’m sorry you have to leave.”

“Thank you very much,” Virginia said, and Harriet echoed, “Thank you very much.”

He closed the door after them as they went toward the elevator, and Harriet said, “I *told* you.”

“I didn’t know he *worked* there,” Virginia said. “How could I know? He never told us.”

“My mother will be furious,” Harriet said. “So will yours.” She thought for a minute and then said, “If they find out.”

“Don’t blame me,” Virginia said. “It’s not *my* fault.”

* * *

When Tod Donald came across the street after lunch to see if he could get Art Roberts to go to the movies that afternoon, there was a strange girl sitting on the Roberts’s front porch, and Tod stood for a minute at the foot of the walk before the girl looked up and saw him, and said, “Hi.” As Tod came slowly up the walk she watched him, and when, he came close enough she said, “You looking for someone?”

She had a big head, big like a movie close-up, because her mouth and eyes and nose were all big, and her hair fell down straightly around her face, and the hair itself was almost orange. She seemed to be small and thin, otherwise, and Tod was not so much confused by her when he came close, and she spoke to him with her large mouth, and her voice was pleasant. “I’m looking for Art,” he said. “Artie Roberts.”

She jerked her head at the Roberts house in back of her. “You mean one of *them*?” she asked. “They’ve all gone out.”

“Where did they go?” Whenever Tod had saved a little money from his allowance he would ask Pat Byrne or Art Roberts to go to the movies or down for a soda with him, his treat; that way, although they never asked him in return, he had at least their society for a while, and sometimes even overt friendly gestures from them. However, if Art and Pat were together, there was no use in Tod's asking either or both of them to go with him; he could have afforded, today, to take them both to the movies, but he could not bear being the lonely third, the butt of their laughter while he paid for their tickets.

"*He's* not home," the girl said, and after a minute Tod realized that she meant Mr. Roberts. "The boys have both gone out somewhere to play, and *she* went to the store. Would I be sitting out here," she demanded suddenly of the vacant air beside her, "if *she* was around? No, I would not. I would be inside working my ass off while I had to listen to her troubles." She looked fiercely at Tod and continued, "Do you know what happened to her fat little hand this morning? She burned it on the stove, that's what she did. It nearly ruined the rest of her life. So now she stands over me while *I* burn my damfool arms off and all the time she's talking about how there's so much work she just can't do it all herself and she's unhappy with her husband and I'm to be very careful about not offending him. Me *offend* him!"

It became somehow clear to Tod that this last sentiment was admirable to the girl, and he smiled reassuringly. "Of course not," he said feebly.

"I saw him down at school one night," the girl said. "One night he came down when his lousy son was in that lousy play they had. *I* saw him." She stopped meaningfully.

Her hair is dyed, Tod thought, appalled. Emphatically dyed. It was positively black close to her head, and then it became suddenly, dreadfully orange. Dyed. He wanted to touch it.

"Who are you?" the girl said suddenly.

Trying to remember, Tod could only think about her hair.

“You’re Jim Donald’s kid brother,” she decided. “*I* know Jim.”

“Why do you dye your hair?” Tod asked unexpectedly. He would never have asked if she had not identified him with Jim.

She frowned at him, bringing her big eyebrows together over her big eyes, and twisting her big mouth with contempt. “It’s not dyed,” she said. “That’s a hell of a thing to say. It’s natural.” She touched it affectionately and then stood up suddenly.

Tod felt an arm around his shoulders, an unfamiliar, possessive arm. It was tight and did not belong around him, and he turned around to find Mrs. Roberts’s head above him, her arm determinedly around him.

“Did you finish the dishes, Hester?” Mrs. Roberts asked icily. “Is the living-room dusted? If I neglected to give you enough work to keep you occupied—” Mrs. Roberts’s fury took her breath away, and she stopped.

Hester said meekly, “I didn’t quite finish. I came outside for a minute.”

“This little boy,” Mrs. Roberts said, “is the son of one of my friends. He is not one of your charges. I introduced you to my sons this morning.”

“Yes, Mrs. Roberts,” Hester said. She turned and went back into the house, and Mrs. Roberts took her arm away from Tod and followed, without speaking to him.

Tod moved back across the street disconsolately. He could still feel the taut pressure of Mrs. Roberts’s arm across his shoulders; it was the first time Mrs. Roberts had ever put her arm around him.

* * *

“Back at last, are you?” Mrs. Mack said. She held the door open wider and her dog Lady trotted in with a guilty sideways look at her; Lady was big and slow-moving, and his usually clean brown fur was, tonight, streaked and daubed with mud, the white spot at his throat almost hidden. “Back at last,” Mrs. Mack said. “Well, sit down, then, I’ve kept your dinner.”

The dog, still guilty, leaped as unostentatiously as possible into a chair by the table, and Mrs. Mack went on, as she put the plates down, “Nothing’s got cold, because I kept it warming for you, but if it’s dried out you’ve got yourself to blame.” She looked severely down at the dog for a minute, and the dog, not touching the food, only looked back at her until Mrs. Mack smiled involuntarily and said, “Well, then, I’m not angry. Go, eat your dinner.” She patted the dog on the head, and the dog, with signs of infinite relief, licked her hand, wagged his tail, and began to eat greedily from the plate. When the dog put a paw on the table Mrs. Mack slapped the paw and said, “Will you never remember?” and the dog took the paw down again hastily.

Although no one had been inside Mrs. Mack’s house in the years since her husband’s death, the two rooms in which she and the dog lived were kept clean and swept. The grey little house, so rotten and tottering outside, held, inside, a faded set of overstuffed chairs and sofa, a polished wood-burning stove, and, in the bedroom where Mrs. Mack and Lady slept, an old-fashioned mahogany bedroom set, with a glass of fresh dandelions in front of Mr. Mack’s picture on the dresser. Lady sat in a plain kitchen chair at the table, and while he ate his dinner Mrs. Mack resumed work on the crocheted rag rug of astronomic proportions which was to go on the bedroom floor.

“Look,” Mrs. Mack said to Lady, “not far to go now.” She spread the rag rug over her lap on to the floor, and Lady regarded it with interest.

“It *is* pretty,” Mrs. Mack said, as though agreeing with the dog’s opinion. “I’ll be glad when it’s finished and we have a warm floor.”

“Are you finished?” Mrs. Mack asked the dog, leaning over to look at the plate. “Aren’t you going to have your tomato? I picked it only this afternoon.” When the dog made no move, Mrs. Mack said, “Well, then, if you won’t there’s no making you,” and she rose and carried the plate over to a low shelf where her dishpan stood, next to the small cabinet in which were the flowered dishes she and Lady used. She poured hot water into the dishpan from the kettle on the stove, and washed and dried the dog’s plate while she said, conversationally, “I don’t know as there’s any use, really, in growing tomatoes if you won’t learn to like them. They don’t please me enough to eat them all alone, and even one tomato plant brings more than I can eat in a summer.” The dog slipped down from his chair to move to one of the upholstered chairs, where he curled up comfortably, watching Mrs. Mack while she worked. “I suppose there’s no use asking you where you’ve been?” Mrs. Mack said. She looked anxiously at the dog, but the dog turned his face away from her, and she said, “Well, when you’re ready you’ll tell me. I won’t be angry, I promise you.”

When the dish was washed and put away — all Mrs. Mack’s movements were slow and cautious, and it took her almost a minute to set the plate down correctly, so that it would not jar its fellows — Mrs. Mack picked up the kerosene lamp from the dinner table and brought it over to set it on a small table next to the sofa. The weak light from the lamp could be seen only dimly from the Desmond house or the Byrne house, on either side of Mrs. Mack’s house, because, although Mrs. Mack’s windows were neatly curtained on the inside, they were covered with newspaper outside. Mrs. Mack turned the lamp up a little higher, and settled down with a sigh in the corner of the sofa. “It’s a nice quiet night,” she said. “No wind.” Then she sighed again, and said, “Well.”

She took a book from the table where the lamp stood, and said, “I want to go to bed soon, so we’ll have an early lesson tonight.” She opened the book to the place where the bookmark lay, and, running her finger down the page as she read, she began, “‘Therefore is judgment far from us, neither doth justice overtake us; we wait for light, but behold obscurity; for brightness, but we walk in darkness. We grope for the wall like the blind, and we grope as if we had no eyes: we stumble at noonday as in the night; we are in desolate places as dead men. We roar all like bears, and mourn sore like doves: we look for judgment, but there is none; for salvation, but it is far off from us.’ That means,” she said to the watching dog, letting the book lie open in her lap, “that means, let me see. Obscurity, that’s when it gets dark. Desolate, that means there’s nothing there. You see,” she went on eagerly to the dog, “we are all evil blind people. Salvation means some way out. You see,” she said again, “the Lord is watching us all the time, and watching for every thing we do that is bad, because the Lord won’t stand for anything that’s bad.” With the book still open on her lap she fell into brooding thought, her fingers moving slowly up and down the edge of the book’s cover. The dog waited patiently for a little while and then dropped his head on his paws and closed his eyes.

* * *

Marguerite Desmond was tired by the end of an ordinary day, and she was shy and formal with guests at the best of times. Tonight, more than ever before, she felt that her husband was imposing on her, living happily far away in his distant softly colored world, while his wife labored and sometimes cried unnoticed. Tonight, with an appreciative smile on her face for Mrs. Montez, Mrs. Desmond was thinking darkly of her husband, who stood by the piano, his face rich with moving emotion while his hands moved softly in time to Mr. Montez’ playing. Mr. Montez at least spoke English; he even spoke English through his piano playing, but he was blind. Mrs. Montez could see, but she spoke only Spanish, which neither Mr. nor Mrs. Desmond understood.

When Mr. Desmond looked around to his wife with poignant emotion on his face, Mrs. Desmond managed a slight smile, which she turned to include Mrs. Montez, who sat unattractively in a great chair and smiled steadily back.

Mr. Desmond had invited them in from San Francisco, without introducing them first to his wife, because he obviously felt that a man who could play the piano and was blind did not need an introduction anywhere but carried his calling card in his hands and his value in his face. Johnny, who had been pressed into service for the evening, sat on the other side of the piano with his hands folded in his lap. Mrs. Desmond sat at the other end of the living-room with Mrs. Montez, smiling brightly occasionally, and now and then nodding enthusiastically. Mrs. Montez smiled back, nodded, and watched her husband helplessly as though soon, somehow, he would turn to her and explain, in a language she could understand, the meaning of the evening, the long trip out on the bus, this polite blank woman who sat with her.

Johnny moved suddenly with a sigh, and Mrs. Desmond and Mrs. Montez smiled again at one another. Then Mrs. Montez, still smiling, gestured at Johnny and looked inquiringly.

“Oh, yes,” Mrs. Desmond said, and nodded more forcefully.

Mrs. Montez nodded back, complacently. Then, as though she had only just thought of it, she pointed to herself, her ample bosom, and held up three fingers.

Mrs. Desmond put her head on one side and looked extravagantly surprised. “Three?” she said, holding up three fingers, and Mrs. Montez nodded.

Mrs. Desmond pointed to herself and held up two fingers, and Mrs. Montez, nodding, held out her hand, palm down, in three step gestures, each one lower than the last.

Mrs. Desmond pointed at Johnny and then held out her hand, very low, and Mrs. Montez laughed and then so did Mrs. Desmond. Mrs. Desmond waved toward the back of the house and said, very distinctly, “Caroline.”

“Caroline,” Mrs. Montez said, making it sound different. She held out her hand to indicate the smallest of her three steps, and then, watching to see if Mrs. Desmond was following, put her hand on her stomach and made a face of great pain.

“So did I,” Mrs. Desmond said. “Thirty hours, really, and the doctor said —” She stopped, and made her gesture for Caroline and a painful face such as Mrs. Montez has made. “Terrible,” she said. Mrs. Montez nodded, made her largest step gesture, put her hand on her stomach, smiled pleasantly, and then spread her hands in surprise.

Mrs. Desmond looked incredulous, and Mrs. Montez shrugged, made her second largest step gesture, another pleased expression and then surprise. Then she made her smallest step gesture, put her hand on her stomach again, and looked agonized.

Mrs. Desmond said, “Sometimes it just happens that way,” and when Mrs. Montez frowned, Mrs. Desmond shrugged and spread her hands. “I’m never going to have any more,” Mrs. Desmond said. Then she put her hand on her stomach, shook her head violently, and made a pushing-away gesture. Mrs. Montez laughed again, and nodded, repeating Mrs. Desmond’s steps as emphatically.

Mr. Montez was still playing the piano; he played very softly, with large movements of his hands, a great deal of going up and down the keyboard. He had, as far as Mrs. Desmond could see, an expression of rapture on his face. Mr. Desmond looked just the same. Mr. Montez was thin and ethereal, and Mrs. Desmond realized suddenly that his playing was very inferior. Johnny caught her eye across the room and winked, and Mr. Desmond looked around at his wife with a confused blend of two emotions, his eyes sharp with annoyance, his mouth still trembling with fervor over Mr. Montez.

Mrs. Desmond, looking around to see Mrs. Montez, saw that she was still laughing. "You know," Mrs. Desmond said without thinking, "sometimes it *does* get a little on my nerves."

Mrs. Montez answered her quickly in Spanish, words that sounded in agreement, and Mrs. Desmond said quickly, "Of course, I think the *world* of my husband," and Mrs. Montez nodded, and said something again in Spanish, and Mrs. Desmond smiled reluctantly, and said, "I suppose they all have their faults, but sometimes it *does* really seem..."

* * *

Harriet stopped in the living-room doorway, dumfounded, her mouth open and her great feet stilled. "What are you doing, Daddy?" she asked. "What are you doing here?"

Mr. Merriam looked up at her from his armchair and smiled. "Can't I come home early for a change?" he asked.

"But it's *so* early," Harriet said. "Not anywhere near dinner-time."

"Thought I'd like to see my family for a change," Mr. Merriam said. "Spend a little time at home."

“Mother’s not here,” Harriet said. She moved back against the doorway and said, “She went out quite a while ago. You should have told her or something.”

Mr. Merriam moved his newspaper against the arm of the chair. “Suppose you come sit down and talk to Daddy, Harriet. Been a long time since you and I spent a day together.”

Harriet looked helplessly over her shoulder. “I was going out,” she said. “I just came back for my paper dolls.” She looked over her shoulder again at the front door and said, again, “I thought I’d go out.”

Mr. Merriam’s smile faded, and he took up his newspaper. “You run along if you want to,” he said.

Harriet was embarrassed, and she said hastily, “I don’t *have* to go. I can stay here for a while.”

“That’s all right, you go ahead and play,” her father said.

“I’ll stay here for a while,” Harriet said. She moved her feet uneasily and said solicitously, “Can I get you a cup of tea, Daddy?”

“No, thank you,” Mr. Merriam said. “You go ahead and play,” he said insistently.

“I don’t want to now.” Harriet came over cautiously and sat down on a stool near her father’s chair. She was still embarrassed and uncertain what to say, but finally she remarked brightly, “Have a hard day at the office today?”

“No,” Mr. Merriam said solemnly, “as a matter of fact, I thought it was such a nice day I wouldn’t work at all, so I came on home.”

“You’re not sick, are you?” Harriet said suddenly, struck with suspicion.

“No,” Mr. Merriam said. He shook his head. “I’m not even sick,” he said.

"Mother should be back very soon," Harriet said. "She went to sew at Mrs. Donald's house. They sew every week at someone's house and this week it was Mrs. Donald's turn."

"What do they sew?" Mr. Merriam asked.

"They take their own sewing," Harriet explained. "They all sew. Next week they go to Mrs. Ransom-Jones's, I think."

"They do that *every* week?" Mr. Merriam said.

"Unless they're sick or busy or something," Harriet said. "They always go to a different house each week. They come here, even."

"Can you sew?" Mr. Merriam asked with interest.

"Not very well," Harriet said. "Mostly I'm a writer."

"I see," Mr. Merriam said. "What do you do with yourself all the time, Harriet?"

"I write," Harriet said, "and I play with the kids, and Mother is teaching me to cook."

"When are you going to make me a cake?" Mr. Merriam asked cheerfully.

"I can't make *cakes* yet," Harriet said. "Mostly Mother lets me help her with things like the sandwiches for tea, when the sewing ladies come here, you know, and I make the salad every day for lunch."

"I have a salad for lunch sometimes in town," Mr. Merriam said. "Isn't it a lot of bother to make?"

"We're on a diet," Harriet said, her face red. "I lost two pounds."

"Yes," Mr. Merriam said. He waited a minute and then said, "Be glad when school starts again?"

"No," Harriet said. She listened intently and then stood up. "Here's Mother coming," she said. "I guess I can go along now."

* * *

After the morning he had come peacefully across the street and found Hester Lucas sitting on the Roberts's front porch, Tod Donald began hanging around the Roberts house more and more; when Art was away, or busy, Tod cultivated Jamie. His most earnest desire was to be in the same house as Hester, to be where he might hear her voice, or find her suddenly, or talk about her to people who saw her constantly. Both the Roberts boys loathed her, and before long the neighborhood knew that she was leaving their house — after a bare two weeks, not quite so long as Mrs. Roberts's maids usually stayed — so that Tod was forced to do his investigating quickly. He had no idea what he was looking for, or why it seemed that he might find it through Hester, but she had come with a good omen, Mrs. Roberts's arm around him, and her larger-than-life eyes and mouth brought Tod back to her again and again with the conviction that here, somehow, he might gain back what he had lost by being born at all.

One evening, coming across the lawn to the Roberts's — he meant to borrow a book from Art, or ask if Jamie was home, or any idiot purpose that might bring him around Hester — he saw Hester sitting on the porch steps, almost the way he had found her first, and in the darkness he was able to distinguish only vaguely that it was his brother who sat with her. Sudden suspicion silenced his steps, and he went roundabout past the Byrne house and into the bushes by the porch, where they sat without ever having noticed him. From the bushes he could watch and hear everything, and see, most particularly, Hester's big head against the faint light from the doorway.

Hester was saying, "And so she tells me I have to go, as though I ever wanted to stay. That old goat."

Tod pressed closer behind the bushes, felt the cold rough stone of the porch against his shoulder. "*And* I didn't say a word," Hester went on. "The things I could of told her."

"No sense making trouble," James said. His voice sounded disturbed, reluctant. The night air, and the cold stone, and his brother's voice, made Tod shiver.

"I wouldn't make any trouble," Hester said. "I've had enough trouble, thanks." She snorted. "I know enough so's I can handle some old guy in the kitchen, thanks."

"Are you going to get back into high school?" James asked. Then, as though to cover up what must have been a private train of thought, he added quickly, "I mean, if you lost this job—"

"*I* don't care."

"I figure you must of gotten a bad deal," James said. "You didn't do anything."

Hester laughed. "I did so do something," she said. "I did plenty. *They* don't know what it's all about."

"I mean—" James seemed to be speaking very carefully; he sounded as though he were avid for detail and yet not anxious to ask directly, "I mean, they said they brought you right back and all."

"My father said he'd fix me if I didn't get an annulment," Hester said. "You see, an annulment, that means you didn't do anything, but a divorce — well." She laughed again. "If I got an annulment that meant I didn't do anything," she explained, and then added, significantly, "but we'd been *married* two *weeks* before my father even caught us."

James laughed too, falsely. "That must have been something," he said.

"I can get back in high school if I want to," Hester said. "They can't keep me out of high school if my father says I can go."

There was a long silence; Tod, craning his neck until the bushes rattled suspiciously, could only see Hester and his brother sitting far apart on the steps. Finally Hester said, softly, "I bet *you* wouldn't mind it either."

“What?” James said, startled.

“Being married to me for maybe two weeks,” Hester said insinuatingly. “It was fun.”

“I don’t know,” James said deprecatingly. “I mean, I never thought much about it.”

“I *bet* you didn’t,” Hester said. She leaned toward James; Tod could see her. “It’s *fun*,” she repeated.

“I’m not ever going to get married,” James said. “Not till I’m thirty-five, at least, and earning a lot of money; a wife wants a man who can take care of her.” He moved uneasily, and then stood up. “Ought to be in bed,” he said. “Training.”

“Training?” Hester said.

“Football,” James said, surprised. “Good night, Hester.” He started across the street, and Hester watched him go from the steps and Tod watched him go from the bushes. Tod had no idea what his brother should have done, but he knew it was wrong for Hester to be sitting there alone right now. Forgetting that he revealed his eavesdropping, Tod pushed out of the bushes and came up onto the steps.

Hester watched him without curiosity. “What are *you* doing?” she asked.

Tod walked manfully up the steps and sat down next to her, where his brother had been sitting, and she looked at him tolerantly.

“I was listening to what you said,” he told her.

“I saw you come out of the bushes,” Hester said. “Your brother and his football.”

“He really does play football,” Tod said earnestly. “I’m going to play football too when I’m in high school.”

Hester was quiet, looking at the Donald house across the street. “That his room?” she asked, gesturing at the upstairs window where a light had been turned on.

"His and mine," Tod said. "It's funny, he goes to bed earlier than I do sometimes and he's older."

"That's because of the football," Hester said.

Tod waited for a minute and then said, "Was that really true about you? About being married?"

"Sure," Hester said. She touched her dyed hair lightly with one hand. "I ran away from school and got married. *Everyone* knew about it."

"What did you do?" Tod asked, and knew suddenly that the question was a mistake; Hester was looking at him oddly, he had been too blunt, had pushed his need for information too far.

"You run along," Hester said. "You go on home to bed."

Desperately, trying to make it up, Tod said, "*I'd* like to be married to you."

"For God's sakes," Hester said. "The very idea." She stood up and went to the door of the Roberts house and said over her shoulder, "What do you think I am, anyway?"

* * *

Harriet Merriam sat by herself on the curb in front of the house-for-rent. All day the painters had been there, and apparently plumbers, and strange heavy men in dark business suits, and the children had pressed around them, saying, "Is someone going to move in here?" and, "Mister, are you fixing it up for someone to live in?" One of the painters said genially to Virginia Donald that he thought "there wouldn't be all this work going on if they was going to tear it down," and so, finally, it was confirmed: there were to be new people on Pepper Street, perhaps new children.

Everyone else was down at the vacant lot playing baseball, but Harriet seldom joined in, at baseball or tag or hide-and-seek, actually because she was fat and the other children made fun of her, ostensibly because her mother had forbidden her to play. “I have a sort of weak heart,” Harriet confided once to Virginia and Virginia told everyone else, “my mother thinks and the doctor thinks I shouldn’t do much running around like the other kids.”

Harriet was wondering if there would be any girls moving into the house-for-rent, and if so, if one of them might not be a good kind of friend for her; since the affair at the apartment house she had been suspicious of Virginia, afraid that some silly word from Virginia might lead Mrs. Merriam to the traces which would bring her inevitably, and inexorably, to Harriet’s part in the affair. Perhaps one of the new girls who would live in the house — they would be like in *Little Women*, and Harriet’s friend would be Jo (or just possibly Beth, and they could die together, patiently) — would love and esteem Harriet, and some day their friendship would be a literary legend, and their letters —

Marilyn Perlman walked past, slowly, and then stopped and turned back. “Hello,” she said.

“Hello,” Harriet said. Marilyn came over and stood beside Harriet, looking back at the house-for-rent.

“I guess someone’s going to move in,” she said.

“Sure,” Harriet said. She was bewildered; she had never spoken particularly to Marilyn; why should Marilyn stop and speak to her? She had no idea what to say or where to look; whenever she saw Marilyn she was embarrassed about remembering the ugly look on Marilyn’s face that day in school when Helen Williams had made some sort of a meaningless fuss about Christmas. Marilyn sat down, suddenly, next to Harriet on the curb.

"Listen," she said in an honest voice, "I wanted to talk to you for a long time."

"What about?" Harriet said.

Marilyn put her chin on her hands and stared straight ahead. "Just about everything," she said. "You like to read, don't you?" When Harriet moved her head solemnly Marilyn said, "So do I," and then stopped to think. "Do you get library books?" she asked.

"No," Harriet said. "I've never been to the library yet."

"Me neither," Marilyn said. "We could get library cards, you know."

"Have you read *Little Women*?" Harriet asked.

Marilyn shook her head and asked, "Have you read *Vanity Fair*?"

"I haven't read that yet," Harriet said. "I liked *Little Women*, though."

"Is it at the library?" Marilyn asked. "I want to get books at the library. They give you a card and you go in and take any books you want and then you bring them back when you've read them. Of course you've got to take very good care of them."

"I liked *Jo's Boys* too," Harriet said.

"You want to go down to the library sometime?" Marilyn asked.

"I could probably go some day," Harriet said.

"Tomorrow," Marilyn said. "It opens at two in the afternoon, I'm pretty sure. And I know where it is."

"All right," Harriet said; it was settled, and they sat quietly together in a silence now companionable. "I was just thinking," Harriet said finally, "what kind of people are going to live in this house."

Marilyn looked over her shoulder at the house. "Couldn't be any worse than Helen Williams," she said.

Sitting easily beside Marilyn, Harriet said, "I hear she's in San Francisco now and she goes around with any man." It was not true, and Marilyn knew that as well as Harriet, but it seemed to both of them a completely justifiable (although almost meaningless) assumption.

"I didn't like her much," Marilyn said. She added carefully, "You know who else I don't like much?"

"Who?" Harriet said, becoming at that moment an accomplice.

"Virginia Donald," Marilyn said with finality. "I don't like her at all."

"She's not much," Harriet admitted. As a final recognition of bond with Marilyn she said, "I know something about *her*."

"What?" Marilyn said.

"Promise?" Harriet asked, and Marilyn nodded expectantly. "She goes around with Chinks," Harriet said.

Marilyn opened her mouth in horror, and for a minute Harriet was frightened. "You promised not to tell," she said.

"I won't," Marilyn said. "I promise *again*."

* * *

It was the night before Hester was to leave; she was to get breakfast in the morning and then pack and go home and because there seemed to be no possible harm she could do, Mrs. Roberts let her come outdoors and join the neighborhood children at their nightly games. After strenuous prisoner's base and wild tap-the-finger, they had settled down on the Donalds' lawn to play some quieter game. When they saw Hester coming across the street to them, Pat Byrne said, "Let's make Hester play," and they all laughed, and someone — probably Tod Donald — shouted, "Come on over and play, Hester."

"That's just what I'm doing," Hester said. With the children she was usually good-natured and amiable; it was only when she met adults, those mysterious creatures whose world she had invaded too soon, that Hester became menacing and ugly, as though it were necessary to her to establish, immediately, her status as an invader by right of superior ability. “What you kids playing?” she asked as she came on the lawn.

“You know how to play Tin-Tin?” Virginia, as hostess, asked her, and when Hester shook her head they explained raucously. Tin-Tin is probably as old as children; Hester recognized it as a game she had played under another name. Wherever children congregate they will probably have their own version of Tin-Tin, its elaborate ritual determined by the children and their fathers and their grandfathers operating individually on an immutable theme. Pepper Street’s Tin-Tin was as nonsensical as most; the entire introductory ritual had lost its meaning and probably its accompanying dance:

It: (starting at the head of a line of children sitting on the curb) Tin-Tin.

Victim: Come in.

It: How much tin do you want today? (In a sing-song pattern, as fast as possible.)

Victim: Ten pounds (or) As much as will fit on the head of a pin (or) A hundred-and-fifty tons (or any idiot sum coming to mind).

After questioning every person in the line, and receiving an answer, “It” began again at the head, whispered some familiar word or name or nonsense syllable into the victim’s ear, and began the new ritual:

It: Tin-Tin.

Victim: Come in.

It: Where will I get the money for my tin?

To which the victim must answer with his secret name, and “It” might then continue questioning, asking any personal or outrageous or hilarious question, to all of which the victim must answer with his idiot name. The object was, of course, to make the victim laugh; as soon as he did, he yielded a forfeit, and the whole procedure filled some deep undefined need in neighborhood life never exactly equaled by prisoner's base or tag.

If "It" spent a reasonable length of time on one victim, with the rest clamoring for service, he abandoned the persecution, and the first resisting victim in each game became the next "It." Virginia Donald was "It" at the moment, by virtue of an almost impregnable solemnity under the name of "Clark Gable." When Hester came over and sat down at the end of the line Virginia had already begun with Harriet, who was first, and Hester said quietly to Tod, who sat next to her, "Where's your brother tonight?"

Tod had turned eagerly to Hester when she sat down, had waited shyly for her to speak to him, and now he said miserably, "He's out somewhere."

"With some girl?" Hester asked. "He ever go out with girls much?"

"I guess so," Tod said. He turned away from Hester to watch Virginia moving down the line to him, and Hester said kindly, "He's pretty lucky to have a kid brother like you."

"Tin-Tin," Virginia said indifferently to her brother.

"Come in," Tod said, and Virginia said, "How much tin you want?"

"Four-hundred-million-billion-quadrillion pounds," Tod said, and no one heard him.

"Tin-Tin," Virginia was saying to Hester.

"Come in," Hester said.

"How much tin do you want today?" Virginia asked, giving the words her fullest singsong.

Hester hesitated, and Tod began "Million-billion..."

"Shut *up*," Virginia said to Tod, and Hester said, "Enough to make a hat."

Everyone laughed, and Virginia went back to the head of the line. She named Harriet "Crazy Cat," and Harriet laughed on her first question. She named Art Roberts “Popeye,” and Art survived so long on “Popeye” that Virginia gave him up and went on, establishing him as “It” for the next game. She went along down the line, whispering, laughing herself to make others laugh, making desperately funny questions. There was a debate as to whether a grimace Mary Byrne was unable to control constituted a laugh. When Virginia came to Tod she named him perfunctorily “Hallie Martin,” and when Tod did not laugh, but only repeated his frightful name in a whisper, she gave him up after two or three questions and went on to Hester; everyone was waiting for this, and Virginia had been puzzling all down the line for a good name, excruciating questions. Perhaps the fact that Art Roberts’s mother was on her front steps across the street, listening, and had heard Art win on “Popeye,” suggested the final name to Virginia; at any rate, she named Hester, secretly and with malice, “Art Roberts.”

Hester drew back and stared. She knew, as well as everyone in the neighborhood, that Art detested her, that he had begged his mother to send her away, that he called her, killingly, “Filthy Lucas.” Virginia knew, too, what Hester probably did not, Art Roberts’s neighborhood boast that he had told his mother the story of Hester’s runaway marriage, gleaned and enlarged from neighborhood gossip, was thus immediately instrumental in her dismissal.

“Where will I get the money for my tin?” Virginia asked slowly.

Hester was silent. Somehow, as she sat on the curb with the children around her and Mr. Desmond sauntering up the block on his evening walk and Mrs. Roberts on her front porch, it came to Hester that the evening was focusing on her; tomorrow night she would not be here, last night she had not been allowed to play, and in ten years, wherever she was, whatever she was doing to keep alive, these children would still be quietly growing, protected and sheltered with the strong houses of their parents and the quiet assumption that streets were made for them to sit on. It occurred, certainly, to Hester for the first time, that regardless of what she and Mrs. Roberts thought of one another, and whatever cruel vengeance operated between the Hesters and the Mrs. Robertses, Virginia Donald definitely and automatically thought of herself as superior. Mr. Desmond might be diplomatic and tolerant, Mrs. Ransom-Jones indifferent, James Donald awed and reluctant, although somehow accessible, but Virginia Donald stood calmly looking down on Hester, as she always had and always could.

Hester put her head back and said to Virginia Donald, and loud enough so Mrs. Roberts — who, after all, lived on Pepper Street with the rest of them — could hear, “Mike Roberts.”

It was against the rules of the game for “It” or anyone else to remind the victim of his true name; by changing her name Hester was definitely out, but Virginia knew that everyone in the game, and Mrs. Roberts, who was staring across the street, thought that she had given Hester that name. “*That’s* not the name I gave you,” Virginia said emphatically.

“Mike Roberts,” Hester said.

“I didn’t give her that name,” Virginia said to the other children in the quiet line, “I gave her another name than that.”

“Mike Roberts,” Hester said.

“Listen,” Virginia said, and Hester said, “Mike Roberts,” and began to laugh.

“Arthur. James,” Mrs. Roberts said clearly across the street. “Come home at once.”

There was no need for her to speak again. Art and Jamie were halfway across the street already, and as the other children rose and started quietly up or down the block, across the street, into their houses, anywhere away from Hester and the unmentionable thing she had said, the only voice was

Tod Donald’s, chanting insistently, “You lost, Hester, you laughed. Hey, everyone, she laughed.”

CHAPTER FOUR

IT WAS DREADFUL; they moved in during a hot morning and everyone was there. Harriet Merriam and Marilyn Perlman walked arm in arm up and down the block, pretending not to watch; Virginia Donald, who associated pointedly with Mary Byrne of late, sat with Mary on the Byrnes' front lawn, and they giggled; most of the boys played a haphazard baseball game in the street, far enough away to be out of the way of the moving van — if you could call it that — close enough to see everything. Tod, alone, came near in order to say "Hello" to the driver, and got a glare and a "Get away from there, kid," for his pains. Everyone was careful to seem unaware of the whole thing; until it had been assimilated and talked over with parents and finally decided upon in neighborhood grapevine conclave, no one dared say anything definite, even smile too broadly. It *might* be acceptable, after all.

The moving van was a truck, with open slatted sides and furniture heaped on it, not stowed carefully inside, as Pepper Street furniture tended to be in transit, but piled, as though careless people had gone through a previous home room by room, carrying out the furniture as they came to it, throwing it into the truck, and going back for more. Besides the driver, who sat sullenly in the front of the truck without moving, there was only a thin uneasy young man to help the girl who was carrying in most of the furniture. She was perhaps no older than Harriet or Virginia or Marilyn or Mary, she was certainly no taller than Art Roberts, she was busy and worried and seemed not to know that she was being watched by eyes her own age.

"*Please* try to hurry," she said once to the thin young man. "They'll be here soon."

The young man growled something, and the girl stopped for a minute and looked at him and then shrugged and went on tugging a table up the steps. She was not strong, apparently, but she was nearly as strong as the young man, and the furniture seemed to be mostly lightweight wicker chairs and tables; the beds were cots which came up in one folded piece, and such things as lamps and dressers and desks and bookcases seemed not to be there at all. All the furniture that went into the house-for-rent came out of the small truck, and most of it the girl carried in alone. Much of it was in bundles, apparently of clothes or tablecloths or curtains or tapestries, tied roughly together, which the girl hauled along the sidewalk, dragging dirt with them.

When all the furniture was out of the truck and inside the house, the driver got heavily down from the cab of the truck, and he and the young man stood on the sidewalk talking with the girl. They argued, the driver waved his big arms, and the young man stamped his foot, and the girl looked from one of them to the other, and finally, her shoulders tired, counted her money out to them. They went back together and got into the truck while the girl stood on the sidewalk looking from the truck to the house. As the truck started away, the young man leaned out and yelled something at the girl, which no one but her was able to hear, although she blushed darkly and turned away. Then, as the truck pulled off down the street, she looked up and for the first time seemed to realize that Harriet and Marilyn were close to her on the sidewalk, Virginia and Mary across the street, the boys quiet for a minute in their ball game, and Tod Donald at the curb. She looked at Harriet and Marilyn, who were closest, and ran her tongue over her lips nervously.

"They made me pay them nearly twice what they said they would," she said. Harriet was embarrassed and looked away, but Marilyn said immediately, "That's a real dirty trick."

"It certainly is," the girl said. "It was too much in the first place." She was, seen close up, definitely not a pretty girl; she wore heavy glasses and balancing heavy bands on her teeth, and her hair was cut across her forehead in an uneven overgrown bang. She was wearing a man's shirt and a pair of blue dungarees, and she looked very much as though she had been working hard all morning, at dusty, unrewarded work. When she spoke to Marilyn she blinked earnestly through her glasses.

"Is that *all* your furniture?" Tod said from the curb, and the girl turned around and looked at him for a minute; it was, everyone discovered eventually, one of her many nervous habits. She looked for a long time at everyone who spoke to her, recognizing and estimating the words and their source before daring to reply.

"What do you mean by that?" she asked finally, and Tod said insistently, "Do you live all by yourself?" — the question everyone wanted answered.

"My mother," she said, "and my sister. They're coming in a little while."

"Like Helen Williams," Tod said, but Marilyn was asking, "Why did you have to move in all alone, then?"

"My mother had to bring my sister," the girl said. "I always do all these things." She stopped for a minute and looked at Marilyn, and then at the other children, one by one. "I never moved before, though," she said. "I don't remember what happened the last time we moved."

"I stayed with my aunt when we moved," Marilyn said.

"I don't have any aunt," the girl said.

Virginia Donald was coming across the street, with Mary following timidly. Gradually the whole group of children was drawing in, the boys abandoning any pretense of a game and coming slowly closer, and the girl standing in the center with Marilyn and Harriet next to her.

"What's your name?" asked Virginia from the middle of the street.

"Frederica Helena Terrel," the girl said. "Frederica Helena Terrel," she said it again, and then a third time, "Frederica Helena Terrel."

"Frederica Helena Terrel," Virginia said. She came close to the girl and looked her up and down insolently. "Fred-er-ic-a Hel-en-a Ter-rel."

The girl began to blush again, as she had when the truck driver yelled at her, and Virginia said, "What's your sister's name?"

"Beverley Jean Terrel," Frederica said. She looked at Marilyn, and Marilyn started to say something and then closed her mouth when Virginia went on, "And what's your mother's name?"

"*Mrs*. Terrel," Frederica said.

Virginia laughed shortly; it was because she had nothing else to say, but it sounded menacing and unkind.

Suddenly, appallingly, Marilyn said what she had to say. She had never spoken to Virginia before, or to either Roberts boy, or to the Byrne children. Since she and Harriet had been friends they had talked to each other, but suddenly Marilyn, in the group of children for the first time in her life, found herself outside of a familiar situation; she was one of a group of spectators, watching and participating tacitly in the torment of an outsider by a Virginia Donald or a Helen Williams.

"You shut your fat mouth," Marilyn said to Virginia. "You just shut up for once in your life and try to act decent."

Pat Byrne made motions of fainting on the sidewalk, but the look on his face was pleased. Virginia opened her mouth and then obviously could not remember the words she wanted to use, looked at Mary Byrne, who looked away, and then at Harriet, who said weakly, "Marilyn, don't start a fight."

“You can go ahead and fight if you want to,” Frederica said unexpectedly. “I’ve got to go indoors and get the furniture arranged before they come.”

She went in through the door of her house before anyone could speak. Then Virginia gave Marilyn a cold look that swept up and down, gestured to Mary Byrne, and walked back across the street. The boys melted away, and Tod chased after one or another of them, calling frantically, “Hey, wait.”

Harriet and Marilyn, arm in arm, started off toward Marilyn’s house.

“I’m glad,” Marilyn said as they walked.

“That Virginia’s a *terribly* mean girl,” Harriet said. “Did I tell you what she does?”

* * *

When Harriet and Marilyn went to the creek they went to a different spot than the one the boys favored; instead of climbing down to the old creek bed and sitting in the faintly damp grass at the bottom they went a few hundred feet past the fallen log to a place on the bank where the trees lining the creek circled out to make a little clearing. Here the grass was always dry, and mossy, and, since they were across the creek from the golf course, and far away from any houses on the Pepper Street side, Marilyn and Harriet could sit quietly and secretly, safe even from their friends. They had dug a hole in the center of this clearing, marked by a small stone at each corner, and lined it with rocks, spending a pleasant co-operative afternoon doing it, reverting to the completely informal mud-pie state of mind. Neither had been thinking particularly as they dug and grimied themselves, neither had worried about what she said or how she looked, and finally the hole in the ground was so special a symbol of their new and enduring friendship that they could not decide what to put in it. When one has created a thing exactly necessary; when a hiding place so accurate exists, the difficulty which arises is that the thing, containing itself, has room for nothing else. Even in a new friendship between maidens, there may be nothing worth hiding in a secret place.

Harriet wanted to make the hole a time-capsule site. “A tin box,” she said, “and we each of us put in whatever we like best, that is, of just what *we* think and write and all that. Not even other people’s poems we like,” Harriet added, thinking of what her mother would say if she knew about the secret hiding place. “We don’t *have* to put stuff in, of course,” she went on, “but maybe things like—” she stopped helplessly.

“We could put in things like pictures of people,” Marilyn said dreamily, “and souvenirs, and... like memories, and things.”

“I don’t have any pictures of people,” Harriet said reluctantly. “Except my family, that is.”

“I don’t really have many pictures either,” Marilyn said.

The hole in the ground stayed empty for nearly a week, a long time in a fast-moving summer. Several times Harriet and Marilyn came to their secret place, with their library books and the notebook each had taken to carrying, and their candy bars and ice cream cones, and they sat for long afternoons on the grass, talking deeply, and opening the grass cover of the secret hiding place to make sure that no one had disturbed it, and that the sides hadn’t fallen in. Hidden by the trees, and certain they had not been followed, they told one another about their pasts, their futures, and their talents. One afternoon Marilyn said, lying with her head on her arms, looking off into the grass by her face, “Do you believe in reincarnation?” and Harriet said, looking up from *The Girl Scouts at Rocky Ledge*, “You mean, like turning into wolves?” and when Marilyn said scornfully, “Wolves!” Harriet fumbled with her book and then said pettishly, “You and your big ideas!”

“Honest,” Marilyn said after a short silence. “You know, reincarnation is where you used to be someone else once, before you were born this time.”

Harriet listened, interested. “Like what?” she asked.

Marilyn had something she wanted to say, something burning in her mind to be told; perhaps the only reason she needed Harriet, or any friend, was to get this said, finally. “Lots of people,” she began, “think that maybe once they were like Julius Caesar or Jo March before they were... well, born, this time. And then when those people died they turned into the ones they are now. Like for instance you might have been—” Looking at Harriet, Marilyn sought for a word. “ — Becky Sharp, before you were Harriet Merriam.”

“Or Jo March,” Harriet supplied, fascinated.

“Maybe we both knew each other once before,” Marilyn said. “See? That’s why we’re friends now.”

“Maybe you were Amy,” Harriet said.

Marilyn frowned slightly. “I *know* who I was,” she announced dramatically. Then, suddenly shy, as though Harriet were after all not the person to tell, as though she had come, unwilling and driven, too close to what she wanted to say, she turned quiet and sat looking down at the grass again, her wide ugly face pressed close against the fresh green.

“You mean,” Harriet said slowly, considering, “you mean, I could be *any*thing?” The sound of the wind moving through the trees, a distant shout from the golf course, seemed to bring her an echo of barbaric rites, clashing temple bells, perhaps from the distant, only-just-remembered past; “I bet I was Egyptian,” she said, carried away, “I *always* wanted to go to Egypt.”

“I know,” Marilyn whispered softly to the grass, “I remembered a long time ago.”

Harriet was silent, smiling faintly, lost in her dim pagan temple. “I think about it all the time now,” Marilyn said, “I remember lots.” Uneasy and reluctant, she stopped again, and then said, “I remember all the time, I lie in bed and think about it.”

“Well, *what*, for heaven’s sake?” Harriet said. “I told *you*.”

“I *remember*,” Marilyn said emphatically. “I really do.” Her voice became softer, as though she were describing a scene familiar and lovely. “There’s a very very *very* blue sky, and the hills and grass are so green they almost hurt your eyes and the road is white and it curves around the hill and there are flowers and trees and everything is so *soft-looking*, and far away beyond the hill you can see where the road leads into a little town.... I can see the town, too,” she added, never looking at Harriet. “It has little houses with low roofs and a bridge over a little river and all the houses are white and they have brown wood trimmings and there’s a village green in the center of the town....” She was quiet, and Harriet waited breathlessly. “Then,” Marilyn said, her voice stronger and filled with longing, “there’s a little covered wagon that comes down the road and inside they’re all talking and laughing and singing.... There’s Pantaloon, and Rhodomont, and Scaramouche, and Pierrot, and—” She stopped again. “And Harlequin,” she said into the grass, and then began to speak very fast. “And I’m standing on top of the hill waiting for them and when I see them coming and he is standing in front beside the man who is driving — I forgot to tell you, they have an old white donkey pulling the wagon — and he is waving and calling me, and I run down the hill as fast as anything, I can feel how fast I’m running and my feet just touching the ground and the wind in my face blowing my hair back and I’m running....” She stopped again; her words patently had no more power to carry her meaning.

When Harriet saw that Marilyn was tearful she was embarrassed. “Where *is* all this?” she said harshly. “It doesn’t make any sense to *me*.”

“No place,” Marilyn said. “Forget it.” She sat up, her ugly face angry. “It’s silly,” she said. “I’ll tell you all about it sometime.”

“I think,” Harriet said, trying to look inspired, “that I was one of those people who had to take care of an idol or something. In a long white dress with jewels in my hair. And chanting.”

“I know what let’s put in the box,” Marilyn said suddenly.

“What we remember?”

“That’s all over with,” Marilyn said. “Let’s put down what we think we’ll be this time. I mean, like in this reincarnation. See, in maybe ten years we’ll be grown-up and then we’ll know. What we’re going to be this time, I mean.”

“No,” said Harriet, meaning she could not understand.

“What I mean is,” Marilyn said carefully, “let’s both write down what we’re going to be like in maybe ten years from now.”

“What we’ll be in ten years,” Harriet said reflectively. “I’ll be twenty-four.”

“We’ll write it down, and we won’t look at each other’s,” Marilyn said, “and then in ten years when we meet here again we can look at it.”

“We have to promise, though,” Harriet said; they were building it together now. “We have to promise never to look at them until ten years.”

“Let’s write it now,” Marilyn said.

A mystic raptness seized them. Solemnly they tore identical pages out of their notebooks, and, taking their pencils, sat down to write. Harriet wrote half a page, Marilyn only a few lines, but it took them both a long time. Then, as solemnly, each folded her own, and they opened the secret hiding place and put the papers in.

“Rest here, all my hopes and dreams,” Marilyn said, and Harriet, a little embarrassed, said, “A curse be on whoever touches these papers.”

Then the hiding place was covered and all traces of it effaced. Marilyn held her hand out over the hiding place and Harriet took it, and Marilyn said, “Now you’re my closest and dearest friend, Harriet.”

“We’ll always be true friends,” Harriet said. “We’ll never separate. We will always be able to communicate in our thoughts.”

“I’ll always know where you are and what you’re doing,” Marilyn said.

“And each other’s most secret thoughts,” Harriet said.

There seemed to be no way to end it. Finally Marilyn drew her hand back and Harriet dropped her hand to pick up her book. They were quiet for a while, and then Marilyn said in her normal voice,

“Golly, if Virginia Donald ever finds this place.”

“She wouldn’t know it was us,” Harriet said. *“Probably.”*

* * *

Frederica Terrel’s family came so quietly that no one knew they were there; perhaps they stole in through a back door, or walked quickly up the street unobserved; at any rate, they came softly and invisibly, and the first anyone knew they were there was when Frederica came hesitantly down the front steps, looked up and down the street and, after standing on the sidewalk for a minute, noticed Miss Fielding sitting on her front porch and came to the foot of Miss Fielding’s walk.

“Excuse me,” Frederica said. She blinked nervously through her glasses. “Where would I find a grocery store near here? I want to get some food and things.”

Miss Fielding leaned forward to look over the stone railing of her porch. “A grocery store?” she asked. She went to the nearby grocery almost daily, had done so ever since moving to Pepper Street, but the fact of someone's asking her a direct question frightened her. She thought deeply, and Frederica fidgeted nervously, blinking through her glasses. "I guess," Miss Fielding said, "at least — do you want just plain things? Like potatoes, for instance, and bread?"

"And canned goods," Frederica said. "And my sister has to have milk."

"Well," Miss Fielding said. She thought again. Perhaps Frederica would not be favorably impressed with Miss Fielding's regular grocery, and then Miss Fielding would be blamed; worse still, the man in the grocery (Mr. Jowett, that would be) might find Frederica, coming with Miss Fielding's recommendation, insolent, or demanding, or extravagant, or even, just possibly, someone who wanted to open a charge account — to buy, in other words, without paying — and the thought, in Miss Fielding's mind, of herself facing Mr. Jowett tomorrow after having sent him such an unreliable customer.... "Well," Miss Fielding said. Her face brightened and she looked beyond Frederica. "There comes Mrs. Ransom-Jones," she said with relief. "I'm very sure she knows the *best* place to go."

Frederica turned around slowly, planting her feet one beside the other in little steps so as to pivot without losing her balance. She regarded Mrs. Ransom-Jones heavily as Mrs. Ransom-Jones came down the street, and Miss Fielding, leaning even farther forward, called out delicately, in her shrill old woman's voice, "Mrs. Ransom-Jones? *Will* you come here for a moment, please?"

Mrs. Ransom-Jones, just passing the house-for-rent, brought her eyes back guiltily from the frank stare with which she was watching the lower windows; she had, most patently, been trying to see inside, and her tone was sharp as she said, "Miss Fielding! Good afternoon." Miss Fielding waved her hand to bring Mrs. Ransom-Jones closer and said, "This is our new neighbor, I believe. She is in trouble, and I think you can help her better than I."

"I want a store," Frederica said abruptly. "I want to buy some groceries."

Mrs. Ransom-Jones considered prettily, trying with over-courtesy and every conceivable air of good breeding to persuade Miss Fielding and this lumpy girl that the Ransom-Joneses did not peer in windows. "There's Delamar's, of course," she said. "But of *course*." She laughed lightly, good breeding and all. "It's a little *expensive*," she went on. "He has things like *paté de fois gras* and all sorts of elaborate things like that. I really only shop there when I want something special. For dinner parties or something."

"I want to get some baloney," Frederica said. "And some milk and some bread and a can of peas and a dozen eggs and probably a bag of potato chips."

"There's Mr. Jowett," Miss Fielding said. Mrs. Ransom-Jones's recommendation would be above reproach.

"Mr. Jowett," Mrs. Ransom-Jones said. "Yes, Mr. Jowett would do."

"And I ought to get light bulbs," Frederica said. She turned around again to Miss Fielding, quickly, with the first emotion she had shown; it seemed to be anger. "You know those damn people they took away every single light bulb?" she demanded.

"Isn't that nice," Miss Fielding said, flustered, and Frederica turned back to Mrs. Ransom-Jones. "*That's* cheap, isn't it?" she said. "We'll be in the dark."

Mrs. Ransom-Jones, whose good face depended on a complete lack of interest in Frederica's family, said, "If you turn right at this corner and then left at the highway and go straight down for about three blocks you'll find Mr. Jowett's. In a little block of stores."

Frederica opened her mouth slightly to listen better, and when Mrs. Ransom-Jones had finished Frederica repeated the directions in her usual dull voice, and turned in response to Mrs. Ransom-Jones's daintily pointing finger and trudged off down the street.

"Not even 'Thank you,'" Miss Fielding said in the tone of one who was not at all surprised.

"Well...." Mrs. Ransom-Jones said, in the tone of one who was used to it. She and Miss Fielding smiled at each other, and then Miss Fielding said, "You've got a nice day for your walk, Mrs. Ransom-Jones."

"I thought I'd get some air," Mrs. Ransom-Jones said. "Lillian was asleep, so I thought I'd run out for a few minutes."

"How *is* your sister?" Miss Fielding asked immediately.

Mrs. Ransom-Jones smiled sadly, and waved one hand. "Not very much better," she said.

"I *am* sorry," Miss Fielding said.

"But of course...." Mrs. Ransom-Jones said.

"You never can tell," Miss Fielding said. "I've known people, people who were just like that...."

"Nothing seems to help much, one way or the other," Mrs. Ransom-Jones said. She put one foot forward, and nodded brightly. "Such an *odd* girl," she said.

Miss Fielding stayed leaning forward for a minute and then sat back, resigned. "I imagine the whole family must be odd," she said.

"Indeed, yes." Mrs. Ransom-Jones, her walk apparently over, turned to go back up the street. She waved good-bye to Miss Fielding, and, keeping her face carefully averted, started past the house-for-rent. Because Mrs. Ransom-Jones was looking steadfastly across the street at the Byrne house, and because the girl, apparently Frederica's sister, was tiptoeing down the walk looking backward at her own house, they collided square in front of the house-for-rent, and Mrs. Ransom-Jones said, “Good heavens!” and tried to recover her balance, while the girl, with a solidness and lumpy stolidity reminiscent of Frederica, stood gaping.

“Don’t you know how to apologize?” Mrs. Ransom-Jones said with annoyance. “Do you just stand there like an ape?”

The girl grinned; unlike Frederica, she had strong white teeth and a great heavy unthinking face; when she grinned at Mrs. Ransom-Jones it seemed to be partly apologetic, partly complete uncomprehending bewilderment; perhaps she was dazzled by Mrs. Ransom-Jones’s smooth hair, her smartly planned linen dress, the clean white shoes. Mrs. Ransom-Jones, thinking of this in order to recover her poise, noticed that the girl was barefoot. She was a tall stout girl, taller perhaps than Frederica, and certainly barefoot. Mrs. Ransom-Jones said, “Barefoot? A girl your age?”

The girl grinned again, but Mrs. Ransom-Jones seemed to have communicated with her, because she looked down at her feet and then back at Mrs. Ransom-Jones. It seemed to be an effort of mental enthusiasm for her to move; in order for her to hold out her hand to Mrs. Ransom-Jones she first had to think of it, then think of the hand, then send some kind of slow deliberate message down the arm to the hand, all the time regarding her hand with rapt concentration. When the hand moved and went out to Mrs. Ransom-Jones the girl was pleased; she smiled again, and Mrs. Ransom-Jones, moving back a step, said, “What —?”

“Money,” the girl said slowly. Her voice was thick and again reminiscent of Frederica’s dull tones. “I’ve money.” Speaking seemed to be less of an effort than anything else except smiling; perhaps the girl was accustomed to sitting quietly while people took care of her when she voiced her wants. “Plenty of money.”

“Really,” Mrs. Ransom-Jones said helplessly. She was acutely conscious that Miss Fielding, somewhere behind her, was leaning forward again — leaning forward and perhaps even standing up — and that what Miss Fielding was seeing did not lend any appreciable dignity to Mrs. Ransom-Jones’s poise and graciousness. For Miss Fielding’s benefit Mrs. Ransom-Jones straightened her back, put her shoulders steady, and said carefully and emphatically, “I don’t think you ought to be out with all that money, my dear. Your mother should be with you. Now you turn right around and go back inside your house and tell your mother I—” Mrs. Ransom-Jones emphasized the “I” slightly— “said that you should not be out alone. Do you understand me?” Mrs. Ransom-Jones rested and then added, for Miss Fielding, “My dear.”

The girl stared blankly, looking from Mrs. Ransom-Jones to the money in her hand, and, once, down at her feet again. Mrs. Ransom-Jones took a breath and said, sharpening her voice a little, “You *must* turn right around and go back into the house. I’m *sure* your mother doesn’t know you’re out here.” Finally Mrs. Ransom-Jones said, “How *old* are you?”

The girl smiled again. “Twelve-and-a-half,” she said.

Mrs. Ransom-Jones gasped. Certainly the girl was *big* enough.... “Twelve-and-a-half,” she said, without any change in her voice, which she imagined was soothing and yet forceful. “Now you turn right around and go back in—”

“How old are you?” the girl said. “I’m twelve-and-a-half.”

Certainly the girl had no trouble talking; Mrs. Ransom-Jones estimated anxiously that the real problem seemed to be elsewhere, perhaps *very* slow reactions, Mrs. Ransom-Jones thought; it was difficult to imagine, on Pepper Street, in broad daylight, that a new tenant, and unfortunate girl, could be —

“Dear,” Mrs. Ransom-Jones said, “suppose we go in together and see your nice mother. I’ll just go up to the door with you and we can tell your nice mother that you met me outside and I made you come home again. I’m sure she’ll be happier to know that you’re back in the house, and safe.” For one swift minute Mrs. Ransom-Jones allowed herself to look down at the money again. She retained in her mind, from the first glimpse, a vision of (was it possible?) a twenty-dollar bill, among others. Her second glance confirmed this. A twenty, and several ones. “A girl twelve years old!” Mrs. Ransom-Jones said involuntarily. She took the girl’s arm with determination and faced toward the house. For a minute the girl resisted, and Mrs. Ransom-Jones, with a renewal of the feeling of how she must look to Miss Fielding, had the sensation of tugging against a battleship heavily moored, which gives slightly to a tug, but ultimately remains where it is. Then the girl, leaning against Mrs. Ransom-Jones, began to move along beside her, and Mrs. Ransom-Jones guided her up the walk to the front door. She rang the doorbell and the girl chuckled affectionately. After waiting for a few minutes Mrs. Ransom-Jones said excusingly to the girl, “Just so you’re safe inside,” and tried the door-handle gently. The door opened, and Mrs. Ransom-Jones put her head inside and said, “Hello?” There was no answer, and Mrs. Ransom-Jones said, her voice a little anxious, “Where *is* your nice mother, dear?”

“Asleep,” the girl said.

Mrs. Ransom-Jones put her head inside again. The furniture was still pushed roughly against the walls, but someone had been trying to arrange it. The table had chairs around it, the chairs were all facing correctly — that is, none of them were facing the walls — and there was a path between them and around the room. “Hello?” Mrs. Ransom-Jones said. Then she took the girl by the arm and swung her inside. “You just go in and stay there,” she said, with an irritation that deepened when she again noticed the money in the girl's hand. Must be thirty dollars there, Mrs. Ransom-Jones thought; she saw the girl well inside the door and closed her in. Then, coming down the walk, Mrs. Ransom-Jones refused to look at Miss Fielding, but turned doggedly up the street to her own house.

Miss Fielding, relaxing into her chair again, watched indifferently while Mrs. Ransom-Jones tripped up the street. Miss Fielding was old and sensed constantly, rather than knew sometimes with sharp clarity, the decay of her body around her, the gradual easing of tensions that had once been vital. Miss Fielding was interested in anything for a little while, would rise from her chair to watch a cat crossing the road, but after the little while was over, Miss Fielding, in her chair, went back to searching the face of death.

Consequently Miss Fielding watched unregarding the back of Mrs. Ransom-Jones going rigidly up the street, the face of the odd girl's sister looking out the front door. When the heavy girl Mrs. Ransom-Jones had put so firmly inside her own house came out of the house again, no more warily than before — like an animal that persistently and dumbly walks against the bars of its cage expecting each time around that they will have ceased to restrict it — Miss Fielding raised her eyes and let them follow the girl down the street. Miss Fielding's eyes were not good any more; she had not seen the money in the girl's hand while the girl was talking to Mrs. Ransom-Jones, but when the girl passed Miss Fielding's porch Miss Fielding's dim eyes registered vaguely that there was money about the girl: some spot of unmistakable green. It was past Miss Fielding's usual hour for retiring indoors; she rose uncomfortably and went inside.

In her neat little house she was able to move comfortably with the steady pull of her body toward death; for more years than she could remember Miss Fielding had been following herself along a well-defined path, around the circle of hours that made a day, around the circle of days that made a year, around the circle of years that made Miss Fielding older and nearer to lying down for good. When she was forty-odd and had finally resigned any thoughts of new ways of life (perhaps at one time Miss Fielding had regarded marriage as she now regarded death, perhaps she had thought of a somewhat larger, more involved life), Miss Fielding had set out to make her world as clean and uneventful as a convalescent room; sometimes it seemed, even, that Miss Fielding's long convalescence from birth would culminate in sufficient strength for her to die without effort. The tiny house on Pepper Street was Miss Fielding's only home; there was no other room on earth where she could go and be recognized. She had no relatives, no friends except those people who passed her front door. A slight reliable flow of money, from a bank Miss Fielding had never seen, fed her and clothed her and kept her housed. Her little home was dark and well-fitted; Miss Fielding had gradually sold (not given away; there was no one she knew well enough to give things to) most of the furniture she had been encumbered with at the death of whoever had preceded Miss Fielding in this quiet life; and now, with her chair by a neat table, her narrow bed, her dresser where her clothes lay, her two-burner stove, and her brush and comb, Miss Fielding waited for her time to be up. "Passing on," she called it.

When she died her things would dissolve neatly; the little money from the bank would stop automatically when its purpose was ended, her small residue of furniture would be sold and the money neatly applied to Miss Fielding's passing, the Pepper Street house would snap back to its original purpose as a dwelling for the living, and the pinpoint of consciousness of Miss Fielding which would be left would be in the minds of children and busy people, and would grow tinier and vanish in a reasonably short time.

Some lives, ending as Miss Fielding's would, leave a grain of memory, like a grain of sand, in the depths of another mind, a grain of sand which is like the constant irritation under an oyster's shell, eventually to grow with coating after coating of disguising beauty into a pearl. Sometime this memory would be pried loose, in its rounded beauty, to stand by itself as an object of delight. Miss Fielding had no fears of ultimate survival, even in beauty. When she passed on, she would draw after her every trailing mist of herself, effacing herself so completely that even after her death, even after her bones, which she could not help, were gone, she would be a bother to no one, would intrude on no mind.

She rocked slowly in her familiar chair while her supper eggs were boiling; the toast was made and the teapot steeping. When the doorbell rang she was frightened; she ran first to cover the toast, and then had to come back from across the room to lift the pan of eggs from the stove — they could coddle in the hot water — and hover apprehensively over the teapot. She had never been interrupted making her tea before; the wise thing was to plan to throw it out, but that would be wasteful. Unreasonably Miss Fielding took the lid off the pot and set it aside — perhaps the rising fumes....

When she answered the door Frederica Terrel was standing solidly outside. "Yes?" Miss Fielding said, the door open an inch.

"My sister?" Frederica said. "Have you seen my sister, please?"

"Your sister?" Miss Fielding wondered. If she entered into explanations of Mrs. Ransom-Jones and Frederica's sister, she would have to be here, standing, and with her tea growing too strong. The girl had no right. "Ask Mrs. Ransom-Jones," Miss Fielding said, and started to close the door.

"Why?" Frederica frowned and put her hand out to stop the door. "Did you see my sister? What does Mrs. Ransom-Jones know about her?"

Miss Fielding sighed. “I don’t know,” she said. “Please go away.”

“But I’ve got to find my sister,” Frederica said. She made her heavy voice begging. “You see, she runs away sometimes, and it isn’t safe. So I’ve got to find her.”

Miss Fielding was in panic. By refusing to discuss the events of the afternoon she had tangled herself in a worse problem. She felt time running away behind her, the tea spending itself, the eggs solidifying. “I really don’t *know*,” she said.

“Please,” Frederica said. “Where does Mrs. Ransom-Jones live?”

“Up the street, up the street,” Miss Fielding said. She waved her hand toward up-the-street.

“Don’t you even know which way she went?” Frederica was urgent, hoping that some question might provoke an answer with information.

A horrible thought found Miss Fielding. Her eggs would be too hard, she would have to do them over, she would be late finishing her dinner, it would be dark by the time she got to her porch, with nothing to watch she would be bored and go in before she had had enough air, and then sleep badly and wake up with a headache tomorrow. “I don’t *know*,” she said. “Go and ask Mrs. Ransom-Jones, won’t you?”

This time she closed the door. She heard Frederica breathing noisily outside for a minute or two and then the sound of the heavy shoes going down the steps. Miss Fielding flew back to her teapot.

* * *

“If you’re not going to pay attention,” Mrs. Mack said severely to her dog, looking at him over the top of the book, “we won’t have any lesson tonight at all.” When the dog pulled his gaze hastily back to her, Mrs. Mack looked down at the book and began to read: “‘So will I break down the wall that ye have daubed with untempered mortar, and bring it down to the ground, so that the foundation thereof shall be discovered, and it shall fall and ye shall be consumed in the midst thereof: and ye shall know that I am the Lord. Thus will I accomplish my wrath upon the wall, and upon them that have daubed it with untempered mortar, and will say unto you, The wall is no more, neither they that daubed it.'" She let the book fall to her lap, and said to the dog, "You remember about how the Lord destroys evil people?"

* * *

The ladies were sewing at the Roberts house; there was a bowl of salted nuts between Mrs. Merriam and Mrs. Donald, a dish of chocolates between Mrs. Ransom-Jones, who was making herself a blouse, and her sister, who did not sew, but sat with her hands folded, turning her eager eyes from one lady to another. A bowl of fruit stood on the round table in the center of the room, and Mrs. Roberts, with frequent mysterious trips to the kitchen, and numerous secret smiles and hints, had managed to convey the fact that there was to be something exceedingly special for tea.

"How well you do that, dear," Miss Tyler said to Mrs. Donald, leaning forward to look at the sweater Mrs. Donald was knitting. "Your fingers go so fast, it makes me dizzy." She looked at her sister and laughed apologetically. "We never learned to knit, did we, sweetie?"

"I never learned any useful arts at all," Mrs. Ransom-Jones said cheerfully.

"I'm trying to teach poor Harriet to sew," Mrs. Merriam confided, "but she's actually *clumsy* at it."

"You know," Mrs. Donald said, "it seems funny not to see little Caroline Desmond sitting there so quiet, sewing away on her little embroidery."

"I missed her today," Mrs. Ransom-Jones said. "I like to watch little Caroline, always so busy."

"Harriet just won't *apply* herself," Mrs. Merriam said. "She's intelligent, of course, but she will *not* apply herself."

"Oh, Lord," Mrs. Roberts said, from the midst of the complicated business of sitting down after one of her trips to the kitchen. "Don't try to make the child work, Josephine. This is summer — vacation."

"Anyway," Miss Tyler said, leaning toward Mrs. Merriam, her eyes wide, "your little girl will have servants to do everything for her when she grows up." She looked around at her sister. "Servants still do all those things?" she asked hopefully.

"Not *my* daughter," Mrs. Merriam said, and tightened her lips. "Harriet will be a lady, I hope, but I don't want her growing up to expect service from others. Not *my* daughter."

"I could use a little service from others," Mrs. Donald said, and sighed. "I don't know why the men don't have to do the housework for a change."

Mrs. Roberts giggled. "I can see Mike," she said, and Mrs. Ransom-Jones said, "Or Brad," and they both laughed, looking at each other.

"Brad would do it, Dinah," Miss Tyler said. "You shouldn't say things like that. Brad would do anything *you* asked him."

"Mike Roberts," Mrs. Roberts said. She spread her hands wide in a gesture of hopelessness. "He can't even boil water," she said.

Mrs. Merriam said casually, "Your Hester is gone now, isn't she, Dorothy?"

Mrs. Roberts hesitated, looking down at her sewing, and Mrs. Ransom-Jones said smoothly, "None of those high-school girls can really do housework."

"They are *terribly* inefficient," Mrs. Donald said, nodding profoundly.

"*I* had a high-school girl once, for about two weeks," Mrs. Ransom-Jones said. "It was awful."

"It was *awful*," Miss Tyler said to Mrs. Donald, in a loud whisper. "She was always making eyes at Brad — Mr. Ransom-Jones."

"Hester seemed like a nice quiet girl," Mrs. Merriam said.

"I smell something burning," Mrs. Ransom-Jones said emphatically, and Mrs. Roberts, still clutching the sock she was mending, rose and fled to the kitchen, scattering spools of thread as she went. "I think," Mrs. Ransom-Jones went on, addressing herself to the sewing on her lap, "I really think, girls, about Hester, you know, that we only make matters worse talking about it. *You* know."

"Let bygones be bygones," Mrs. Donald said earnestly.

"I'll *never* forget this girl of ours," Miss Tyler said to Mrs. Donald.

"Please let's talk about something else, Lillian," Mrs. Ransom-Jones said, and Miss Tyler turned around to stare at her sister for a minute. Then she said, her lip trembling. "Of *course*, Dinah, if you'd rather I went on home...."

Mrs. Roberts came back into the room, and Mrs. Ransom-Jones said loudly, "Everything all right?"

"Fine," Mrs. Roberts said. She looked archly around the room. "I nearly ate it *myself*," she said.

"I'd never *forgive* you," Mrs. Donald declared.

"I realize," Miss Tyler said softly to her sister, "that you think I disgrace you whenever you take me out."

"You know," Mrs. Donald said to Mrs. Ransom-Jones, across Miss Tyler, "Virginia is driving me crazy to get her a yellow print evening dress like that one of yours — she's *wild* about it."

“It’s much too old,” Mrs. Ransom-Jones said, shocked. “She’d be *lost* in a style like that.”

“She thinks she may be asked to some college dance or other this fall,” Mrs. Donald said, “and she wants to look older.”

All the ladies laughed, and Miss Tyler said softly to Mrs. Ransom-Jones, “I can get across the street by myself, all right.”

“Tell her to keep on looking fifteen while she can,” Mrs. Roberts said jovially. “They never realize.”

“Having a pretty daughter,” Mrs. Donald said despairingly.

“I *do* think you’re wise,” Mrs. Merriam said smilingly to Mrs. Donald, “not to try to *teach* Virginia anything. Anything useful, that is,” she added, turning her smile on Mrs. Ransom-Jones.

* * *

Tod Donald, seated at his family dinner table, knew already that he hated every part of it more than anything else in the world. He had time, every night at dinner, to hate things individually: the blue-patterned plates, always seemingly set the same, although the chipped one was not always Tod’s, but sometimes went to James or Mr. Donald; the cup by his mother’s plate and the cup by his father’s plate, and the straight glasses with daisies on them that sat by Tod and James and Virginia, full of milk. Tod even hated milk, when it was served in those glasses.

He hated the blue platter his mother served from, and the salt and pepper shakers, which were glass with red tops, and he hated the silverware designed in flowers, some pieces scratched almost beyond recognition. He even hated the round table and the succession of tablecloths, one pale blue with yellow leaves, one white with red and orange squares. He hated the uncomfortable chairs, particularly his own, where he sat squirming, and he hated his family and the way they talked.

Mrs. Donald, who was gracious and youthful at almost forty, and regarded herself as something more than a housewife, chose, like her daughter, to save her ingratiating side for worthy adherents; at home she was vague and discontented, although she never forgot to dress prettily for her family and herself and to put on fresh lipstick before sitting down at table. She looked irresistibly like Virginia; a little older, her hair short and curly instead of long and straight, her whole naïve childishness a deliberate denial of the years of experience she had had and Virginia was still entitled to; they might, under some circumstances, be taken for sisters.

James and Virginia, with their mother, did most of the talking at dinner; Mr. Donald dined doggedly, as though compelled to sit down with his jailors but not to be courteous to them; Tod moved softly and constantly, eating quickly, trying not to be noticed. Virginia and James spoke boldly in their own house, soothingly to their mother, and James, who was in unceasing training, permitted himself a delicacy of appetite lovingly administered to by his mother and sister.

It was one of Tod's duties to appear regularly at the dinner table, since a place was set for him and a potato cooked in his name. He was expected to receive food, participate in Christmas, sleep, and keep his clothes under his family roof; his mother's bright head at the top of the table would turn inquiringly to either side before she started carving, counting her family in a small gesture of grace which assured her that the food so energetically cooked would be used. If Tod were absent he would be punished.

The night that Hester Lucas left, the Donalds dined on baked beans and brown bread; the night that Frederica Terrel was out begging her sister from Miss Fielding and Mrs. Ransom-Jones, the Donalds ate ham and sweet potatoes. It was one of Mrs. Donald's housekeeping shortcuts to plan solely in terms of foods traditionally associated: she never served bacon without eggs, corned beef without cabbage, pork chops without applesauce; if she had had occasion to serve ambrosia she would have made a point of getting nectar to go with it. Consequently, meals at the Donald house occurred with a sort of unerring accuracy, and inevitably the family conversation followed in the same vein, helped out by the fact that Mrs. Donald carried over her singleness of association into one adjective constant for one person ("poor Miss Fielding, dreadful Mrs. Byrne") and one state of mind for one situation. Mrs. Merriam's phone call about the horrid letters Virginia was writing to boys had caught Mrs. Donald in a mood of weary boredom, and dull stuff the letters had seemed ever since; the Williamses had moved while Mrs. Donald was washing her hair, and her recollection of that family remained in a state of wet, off-balance agitation, not unmixed with a hint of grey.

James inherited this sober single-mindedness, but in him it was transformed into a vast restriction of his life to two or three plain ideas, the principal one being his position as a football player and his consequent value, one of the lesser his future as an architect or just possibly a great dramatic actor. And Virginia, who might have inherited something from her father, sat nightly at the dinner table estimating the balance of power as it shifted back and forth between her mother and her older brother, flattering herself secretly with the thought that she was the cleverest person in the house.

As the summer drew on, roast lamb and mint sauce had come up again on the Donald menu. Mr. Donald, who stared at the blue plates in front of him because they were as familiar as the faces of his family, but more serene, was lost somewhere in thought, and Mrs. Donald was in a condition of unusual suspense.

"I declare," she said insistently, "I don't know what they're *thinking* about, those people."

"Not up to us," James said. "None of our business."

"It will positively ruin the neighborhood," Mrs. Donald said. She craned her neck to see down the table, and then said to Virginia beside her, "Get Father's plate, dear. He needs more lamb."

Virginia rose and walked to the other end of the table, giving Tod a spiteful poke as she walked by. He raised his head to look at her, his mouth full, and followed her with his eyes as she went to her mother again.

"I *wish* you'd make Toddie eat like a human being," she said.

"Toddie," Mrs. Donald said automatically, without turning her head.

"If you don't eat nicely you can leave the table." Virginia returned her father's full plate, circled wide around Tod to avoid the kick he had waiting for her, and sat down at her own place again, smoothing her skirt complacently.

"We won't be here forever anyway," James said. He looked at his father significantly and added, "I *hope*."

"Father does the best he can, dear." Mrs. Donald's adjective for her husband was "helpless." "If he can do anything about it we'll be able to move soon enough."

"I'd like to live past the gates," Virginia said.

"Past the gates," James mimicked in a falsetto. "Listen to the movie actress with a million dollars."

"What's the matter?" Virginia said viciously. "Would it hurt your training to live decently?"

“Children,” Mrs. Donald said. She rested her chin gracefully on her hand and smiled at Virginia. “I wouldn’t mind a big house with a couple of maids to do all the work.”

“And a swimming pool and a tennis court,” Virginia said.

“Anyway,” James said positively, “about the wall, it’s only a rumor, and they’re probably not going to do anything at all.”

“Toddie,” Virginia said.

“What?” Toddie spoke defensively, without looking up.

“*Must* you smear your food all over your face?” Virginia made an elaborate display of disgust and said urgently, to her mother, “I just can’t *eat* with him, honestly.”

“I don’t see how they could do it, anyway,” James went on reasonably, “it would cost too much, for one thing, without making the neighborhood any better.”

“It would certainly ruin the neighborhood,” Mrs. Donald said. She raised her voice slightly with the inflection that meant she was talking to her husband, and said, “We’re wondering about the new road they say they’re putting in.”

Mr. Donald looked at her and then down at his plate again, and Mrs. Donald said to Virginia, “We’ve got to think about clothes for you before school starts.”

“I want a suit,” Virginia said. “I want a perfectly plain suit with a couple of ruffled blouses.”

“And you really ought to have shoes,” Mrs. Donald said.

“Toddie,” James said sternly across the table, “if you don’t stop playing with your food you can just leave the table.”

* * *

Life on Pepper Street was peaceful and easy because its responsibilities lay elsewhere; its very paving had been laid down by men now far away, planned by someone in an office building even Mr. Desmond had not seen. Like those who live directly in contact with the ground, like the people who had, more or less long ago, been ancestors to everyone on Pepper Street, their lives were quietly governed for them by a mysterious faraway force. The sky, which was close but uncontrollable, had been an immediate power to the forefathers of Mr. Desmond or Mr. Byrne, as had the wind or the earthworm, which might or might not belong to them, and then, finally, the other unseen governors: the prices in a distant town, regulated by minds and hungers in a town even farther away, all the possessions which depended on someone in another place, someone who controlled words and paper and ink, who could by the changing of a word on paper influence the very texture of the ground.

On Pepper Street, inhabitated by descendants of farmers, people were accustomed to thinking of themselves as owners, but even the very chair on which Mr. Desmond sat in the evenings belonged to him only on sufferance; it had belonged first to someone who made it, in turn governed by someone who planned it, and Mr. Desmond, although he did not know it, had chosen it because it had been presented to him as completely choosable. He might have taken one of several others, differing in style or color, he might have done without a chair, but ultimately the one chair he bought was completely controlled because Mr. Desmond wanted a chair, and if he wanted a chair, had to buy one, and if he were going to buy one, had to buy one that existed, and if it existed at all... and so on.

It was on the same principle that Mr. Desmond had a house, that he had a street in front of his house. Mr. Desmond would not have bought or built a house in a site where it was impossible to have electricity, but then someone he did not know had declared that electricity was possible in the first place. Mr. Desmond lived on the patience of all the people who did not kill him. He ate what foods he was allowed to buy. He regarded himself as an owner, as a taxpayer, as a responsible citizen, and so did Mr. Byrne and Mr. Roberts and Mr. Perlman and Mr. Ransom-Jones, and they sent their children to schools dictated and run by people they had never seen, and they slept at night between sheets made by hands they would never shake. They had nothing to say about how soon their houses would begin to rot, when the sheets might tear.

When they could do so without embarrassment they called themselves upright American citizens, and they looked around Pepper Street with its neatness and the highway beyond and the gates and the wall, and they possessed it with statements like “good place to live,” and “when I decide to move.” Consequently any change made on Pepper Street was beyond their control, and it was not even thought necessary to notify them in advance, although such a change might affect them more intimately than anyone else in the world. One morning a severely thoughtful man, a business man like Mr. Desmond, and a cross old lady in a paneled living-room, from the depths of their own private unowned lives, made a decision with the words and paper so necessary for momentous decisions, and never consulted Mr. Desmond or Mr. Ransom-Jones, never thought of asking Tod Donald, who was the one most terribly changed by it all.

Part of the wall was to come down. A breach was to be made in the northern boundary of the world. Barbarian hordes were to be unleashed on Pepper Street. A change was going to come about without anyone’s consent. In ten years the people now living on Pepper Street could come back and not know the old place, it would be so changed. The plans of the man, whoever he was, were to extend Pepper Street through the estate hidden behind the wall, and run it directly across to meet the corresponding street on the other side of the estate. The old lady who owned the estate, who sat in the paneled living-room, chose to sell the little pocket of land thus excluded to another man, unknown to the first, for a new apartment building. Thus, instead of the wall running from the gates to the highway, there would be a wall running to Pepper Street and then along the new street on the estate side to meet the wall which ran down the other side, a smaller square than before, and, in the end so cut off, new houses. And the people who lived on the corresponding street, who saw their own familiar wall going down? Probably they felt the same way, and were apprehensive of the barbarian hordes from Pepper Street. The really comfortable people would be the ones who moved into the new apartment house which was to go up in the empty space; to them nothing was different.

Eventually a third man broadened Pepper Street by taking down the locust trees, and a fourth man changed its name to Something Avenue, but this was much later, late enough to astound the people in the new apartment house, who came back in their turn and found it hard to recognize the old neighborhood. Eventually, of course, it was more and more degraded, and the Desmond house became an old home, cut up into apartments and then into rooms, with the garden overgrown or built up; but by then the apartment house was out of date and not fashionable, and Pepper Street or Something Avenue had gone down in the world, too far to be revisited.

At any rate, one morning Pepper Street was stupefied into submission, as though it had a choice, by the arrival of a tractor, a gang of men in blue workshirts, and the sudden sound of physical work on the wall. The children were there, of course, standing as close as possible around the inviting tractor, asking questions, estimating among themselves the probable aim of the workmen, the age of the tractor, what they would find inside the wall. Mrs. Merriam on her front porch, which offered the best view of the work, paused in her aimless housework to wonder at the men’s broad shoulders; Mrs. Desmond drew the shades on that side of the house and kept Caroline indoors that afternoon.

It was the destruction of the wall which put the first wedge into the Pepper Street security, and that security was so fragile that, once jarred, it shivered into fragments in a matter of weeks. That night for the first time Mr. Desmond thought practically of moving; careful examination of his bank account assured him that he was not ready to go beyond the gates at present without a cautious economy of home and life that would almost nullify the good effects of moving. Borrowing money was an aversion of Mr. Desmond’s, but any removal not beyond the gates would be a step backwards.

Mr. and Mrs. Ransom-Jones discussed the advisability of a high and firm hedge around their garden, and Mr. Byrne found serious fault with the planning of the unknown man whom he might criticize although he would never influence or meet him. The most outrageous estimates in the neighborhood would have the road finished by the end of summer.

It may be a matter of some importance to note that on the other side, the corresponding street, a Mr. Honeywell was driven by seeing his side of the wall come down into committing himself on paper to the purchase of a modest estate beyond the gates; he had been debating for so long that his wife and children had begun to despair. His children subsequently met Johnny Desmond at a country-club dance and discovered that for years they had been near neighbors. Also on that other street a new family, recently moved in, complained to the family which had sold them the house that they had not been warned of the new road coming; the son of this new family later on walked to high school every morning with Mary Byrne. Mrs.

Mack’s old dog was generally supposed to be the father of eventual puppies on the other street. The workmen, who made all this possible, were family men and earned their money by their work just as Mr. Desmond did.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE SOUNDS OF the wall coming down stayed on Pepper Street for almost a week, and it seemed that dust from the old bricks filled every living-room on the block, even as far as the Ransom-Joneses. Mrs. Desmond and Mrs. Merriam were the principal sufferers, since Pepper Street ended between their two houses; after two days of changing Caroline into clean clothes three or four times a day and brushing visible dust off the toys, Mrs. Desmond admitted defeat and went with her daughter to a nearby summer resort to stay a week. The Merriams endured the dust but not the noise; Mrs. Merriam twice called the construction company whose name was on the "Men Working" sign, and was twice politely told to mind her own business. Mrs. Merriam's temper was tarter than usual until the bricks were down and neatly stacked at the curb, and Mr. Merriam was kept posted by a nightly bulletin on the state of Mrs. Merriam's headache. Farther down the block, toward the Donald and Byrne and Roberts houses, the complaints were less physical and more aesthetic; the idea that placid Pepper Street was being deformed by workmen and dirt and great foul machines was almost as bad as the prospect of being shortly on a direct road with the rest of the world.

The children, of course, knew little of the discomfort of strange men and big machines; every morning while the bricks were coming down, they crowded together on the corner by the Merriam house — none of them allowed to cross Cortez Road for fear of falling bricks — and watched and commented eagerly on the process of the work; at one point it seemed that the wall itself was tottering all up and down Cortez Road, and Tod Donald called out across the street approximately at a man in tight corduroy pants, "Hey, looka that, the whole wall's going to fall on you," and the man turned and looked at the children and laughed.

In the Martin house there was dismal foreboding. It seemed likely that tearing down the wall might mean disaster for old Mr. Martin. First of all, perhaps the dust would reach as far as his flowers, penetrate the sealed greenhouses, dirty the roses. Secondly, once the wall was broken into, the fields of the estate, the sacred enclosed place which harbored the main house, the garages, the tennis court and the terraced gardens as well as Mr. Martin's greenhouses, would be exposed to intrusions from the outside world, perhaps small boys with stones, perhaps curious trespassers gathering flowers, perhaps all those people with large feet who trample down tiny growing things. More than that, even, came into Mr. Martin's old mind. Now, with this madness of destruction — the disregarding abandoned battering tearing-apart of things permanent because they had been standing so long — what with tearing down walls and selling land, who could tell what would follow? The tennis court might go to make room for an apartment house, perhaps the terraced gardens might be cut into front yards, perhaps even the greenhouses might vanish. Mr. Martin sat apprehensively, in the evenings, thinking on flowers, the blossoms of which were not his preoccupation, seeing in his dreams the broken glass, the crushed roots. Mrs. Martin shook her head and kept the children away; her daughter-in-law, mother of George and Hallie, was more silent than usual, and avoided the room where the old man sat. George and Hallie went quietly around the old house, washing when they had to, coming to table when they were called; and the old people knew brick by brick as the wall was going.

The wall began to bore the children after a few days. There was not much fun in standing across the street by the hour, daring an occasional comment, guessing which way the bricks were going to fall, knowing the watchful eyes from windows above to prevent their putting one foot off the legal curb. By about the third day they were back at their games, always ready for news of the wall but tired of bricks.

Late one afternoon when all the children were playing in front of their usual place, the Donald house, Hallie Martin came softly out of her house and stood in front of it for a minute looking across the street. She had on her best dress — it was velveteen plaid, and too small for her — and she had put on her mother's lipstick. She looked at the men working across the street and then back at her house. Her mother and grandfather were out, working at their respective jobs, and her grandmother was taking a nap; her brother George was with the other children. Daintily, Hallie put one foot into the street, and ran across. There were four or five men working on the wall; they were hot and irritable and covered with dust, and Hallie approached cautiously.

One of the men grunted; none of them looked up.

"Hello," Hallie said. "It's hot, isn't it?"

One of the men, brushing past Hallie, said with annoyance, "Get away from there, kid. Dangerous."

"I'm all right," Hallie said. She smoothed her hair with her hand and said, looking with great nonchalance off into the distance, "Bet you sure wish you were having a nice cold soda right now."

One of the men, the one with the tight corduroy pants, looked at another and laughed. "Glass of beer," he said.

"Or a glass of beer," Hallie said. "Bet you sure wish you had a nice cold glass of beer right now."

"You drink beer, kid?" the man in the tight corduroy pants asked Hallie.

"Sometimes," Hallie said carelessly. "I never touch much of it, though."

“Run along now,” another of the men commanded. “You’re going to be in the way.”

Hallie tossed her head as Helen Williams used to. “You can’t tell *me* what to do,” she said.

“*Run* along,” the man said.

Hallie moved a step or so and said defiantly, “I’m going to the city, and I’m going to go in a store and get a nice big cold glass of beer.”

“Go on,” the man said, “get along.” The man in the tight corduroy pants called to Hallie, “You better get over there across the street, kid.” Hallie came nearer to him instead and said, “You come from the city?”

“Nope,” the man said.

“I got lots of nice boy friends in the city,” Hallie said.

The man said, “Out of the way there,” and pushed past her to go with the heavy tool he had been using down to the place where the bricks were being stacked. “*He* doesn’t know much,” Hallie said to the man who had been working next to him.

“He knows you’re gonna get killed if you don’t get out of the way,” was all the satisfaction she got.

Defeated, Hallie retired to the curb, where she stood for a few minutes, and then she said loudly, “Any one who wants a nice cold glass of beer can come along,” and started down the street. When she had gone a little way she stopped and looked back at the men still working, yelled “Dirty bums!” and ran off toward the highway.

* * *

That evening Harriet was just putting away the last of the dinner dishes, and her mother was scouring the sink, when the doorbell rang. Mr. Merriam got up tiredly from his chair in the living-room and went to the door, opened it, and then called, “Harriet?”

When Harriet ran to the door she was first afraid and then embarrassed. “What are you doing *here*?” she said roughly, and then she saw Mrs. Perlman behind Marilyn, and at the same moment heard her mother’s voice behind her. “Good evening,” Mrs. Merriam said.

Marilyn was standing on the outside of the door as helplessly as Harriet on the inside. Mrs. Perlman said, over her daughter’s head, “Mrs. Merriam? I’m Mrs. Perlman, Marilyn’s mother. Marilyn wanted to see Harriet for a minute, and so we just stopped by.”

Mrs. Merriam said, “Won’t you come in?” and held the door open wider for Mrs. Perlman and Marilyn. Marilyn grabbed Harriet’s arm and said, “Listen, wait’ll I *tell* you,” and Harriet said, “What’d you *come* for?” and Mrs. Merriam called from the living-room, “No secrets, girls. Come in.”

“I’ve been anxious to meet you and Mr. Merriam,” Mrs. Perlman was saying when Harriet and Marilyn came in. “Marilyn has told me so much about Harriet.”

“I don’t think I’ve met Marilyn before,” Mrs. Merriam said, looking Marilyn up and down. “Tell me, are you in Harriet’s class at school?”

“She’s a grade ahead of me, Mother,” Harriet said, running her words together in her haste, “and we’ve been reading *Vanity Fair* together and I see her all the time in school.”

“Harriet has been down to see us several times,” Mrs. Perlman said.

“Indeed,” Mrs. Merriam said. She waited, and there was a long silence.

“The girls do have such a good time together,” Mrs. Perlman went on at last. She touched her lips with her tongue, and said, “I suppose you must know how much Marilyn has enjoyed being with Harriet. Such a charming girl. Although," she added with a false little laugh, "I shouldn't say it in front of her."

"Harriet tries to behave herself as well as possible," Mrs. Merriam said. There was another silence. Mrs. Merriam seemed to be content with it; she sat with her hands folded quietly, looking at the ashtray on the table next to the chair where Mrs. Perlman was sitting. There was a polite small smile on her face.

Mrs. Perlman was sitting on the edge of her chair, and she smiled widely whenever she met Mrs. Merriam's eye, or Harriet's, smiled blindly even at Marilyn, who sat next to Harriet on the couch and watched her mother eagerly.

"We were just passing by," Mrs. Perlman said. She seemed to have got back on the track of her planned remarks; her voice eased a little, and she said, "We took the little Martin girl home; she ran away, you know."

Mrs. Merriam lifted her eyes. She looked at Harriet and Marilyn, and hesitated. Finally she said, "What happened?"

Mrs. Perlman shook her head sadly. "I have no idea, really. My husband found her about a mile out of town, on the road to San Francisco. She was —" Mrs. Perlman looked at Harriet and Marilyn " — trying to beg a ride."

"Really?" Mrs. Merriam leaned forward a little. "All alone?"

"All alone," Mrs. Perlman said, and nodded. "All alone. She was just standing there with her — with her thumb, you know, and she was all dressed up, and she was wearing lipstick."

"Imagine," Mrs. Merriam said.

"Imagine," Mrs. Perlman agreed. "My husband stopped right away, of *course*. He was coming the other way, back home, you know, but he recognized her and made her get in the car and come home with him. A child like that."

“It’s dreadful,” Mrs. Merriam said. “Where was she going, did she say?”

“Just to San Francisco. She had begged rides from strangers that far, and she intended to go right into the city. Heaven only *knows* what she wanted to do there,” Mrs. Perlman said.

“Did she have any money?” Mrs. Merriam asked. “I imagine her mother was frightened.”

“Her mother isn’t home yet,” Mrs. Perlman said gently.

“Of course,” Mrs. Merriam said. “She works until late at night.” She gave the words an inexplicable emphasis, smiling a little.

Marilyn broke in eagerly: “Her grandmother said she was going to give Hallie the beating of her life, and I don’t blame Hallie for not wanting to go home because they were sure mad at *her*.”

Mrs. Merriam turned her head slightly to look at Harriet and Marilyn on the couch. “It was very lucky that Mr. Perlman came by at that moment.”

“She might’ve been there all night,” Marilyn said.

Mrs. Merriam was silent, and after a minute Mrs. Perlman said “Marilyn?” and started to get up. Mrs. Merriam stood up immediately, and when Harriet came over to her she moved a step away.

“I *am* happy to have met you at last,” Mrs. Perlman said on her way to the door. “Marilyn, you can see Harriet tomorrow. It’s late. I hope I’ll see you again,” she said to Mrs. Merriam.

“Thank you,” Mrs. Merriam said. She stood with Harriet by the door while Marilyn and her mother went down the walk. “Good night, Harriet,” Marilyn called back, and Harriet heard her own voice answer strangely, “Good night.”

When Mrs. Merriam shut the door she would not look at Harriet. She said quietly, “It’s bedtime, Harriet. Go upstairs.”

Harriet started upstairs without a word. Halfway up, she heard her mother's level voice saying, "I'll speak to you in the morning," and when she reached her own room she shut the door and thought, I could kill her for coming here tonight, why did she think she had any right to come?

Downstairs, after a minute, she heard her mother's steps going toward the phone.

* * *

Mrs. Roberts was restless; dinner was long over and yet it was too early to go to bed; Mrs. Roberts was quietly reading a mystery story in her chair by the fireplace, and the open windows on either side of the fireplace brought in the scent of flowers and the heavy hot night air. Mr. Roberts paced the living-room, went into the kitchen for a drink of water, debated having a highball but refrained when he thought about Mrs. Roberts, and came back into the living-room to wander aimlessly about.

"What on earth is the matter with you?" Mrs. Roberts asked amiably, looking up from her book; the Robertses were on good terms tonight, and she smiled when she spoke. "You got the jitters or something?"

"Just don't know what to do with myself," Mr. Roberts said. He struck an aimless note on the piano; he would have liked to sit down and play soft soothing music, long rippling chords that would blend with the night air and his mood, but the only tune that he could play was "Yankee Doodle," and he turned irritably away from the piano.

"Turn on the radio," Mrs. Roberts said. "Or go to bed or something." She went back to her book.

Mr. Roberts went to the window and stood looking out. The street outside was partially visible between the bushes on the lawn, but there was nothing there except the sidewalk and the trees sleeping quietly in the moonlight.

“Don’t know what to do with myself,” Mr. Roberts said.

“Um-hm,” Mrs. Roberts said into her book. Mr. Roberts frowned down at her, changed his mind about the highball, and went out to the kitchen; but then he thought again of Mrs. Roberts and changed his mind back. He went quickly down the hall, said at the front door, “Going out for a walk,” and had closed the door by the time Mrs. Roberts looked up, surprised.

Outside on the porch he breathed deeply of the night air, so gentle, so tender in its touch, and then the thought of Mrs. Roberts leaning forward in her chair to look out of the window drove him down the steps and along the sidewalk. By the time he reached the Desmond house he was carrying on a conversation in his mind with an imaginary companion. “Just living on the same, day after day,” he was saying with infinite weariness, “a man gets tired of it all. What’s it *worth*?”

He shook his head sadly, and his imaginary companion, touching his arm lightly, big eyes turned up to him worshipfully, said, “But *you* — *you’re* more important than that, really you are.”

“Perhaps I am, little girl,” Mr. Roberts told her pityingly, “but perhaps you only think so, *now*.”

Turning his head to look down on her, he tripped over the curb and nearly fell into Cortez Road. Recovering himself, he looked quickly back over his shoulder to see if anyone had been watching from the Desmond house. “Think I was drunk,” he muttered, and crossed the road hurriedly. He stopped by the piles of bricks and looked at them; they were almost blue in the moonlight. The heavy machinery used for obscure purposes by the workmen at the wall — something Mr. Roberts recognized as a tractor, another thing he thought might be a cement mixer — stood, silent and sleeping, like everything else on the block. In a few hours this spot would again be the busiest in the neighborhood, enveloped in noise and dust and the swift conversation of men who knew what they were doing. Now, the machinery and the wall and even the bricks were unco-operative and still, as though recognizing that Mr. Roberts was unauthorized to call them into activity. Irritated anew to find that nothing moved, Mr. Roberts was about to start back across Cortez Road when the sound of quick footsteps held him. Someone was coming up from the highway, along his side of Cortez, and Mr. Roberts lingered by the pile of bricks, trying not to seem too obviously watching.

After a minute or so he recognized young Mrs. Martin, mother of George and Hallie; at the same minute she saw him, but did not appear to recognize him, since her footsteps slowed and she slanted her path toward the street, as though intending to cross. Mr. Roberts hurried down to meet her, saying, as he went, although softly, "Good evening, Mrs. Martin. You out for a walk, too?"

"Who is it?" Mrs. Martin said, but she hesitated in her walk.

"Roberts," Mr. Roberts said. "Mike Roberts." By this time he had reached her, and she stared at him for a minute and then smiled.

"Of course," she said. "I didn't recognize you, Mr. Roberts." She started to walk again, and Mr. Roberts walked along beside her.

"You out for a walk, too?" he asked again.

"I'm just coming home from work," she said, and laughed. She wore her hair long and fastened back at the nape of her neck; although her face was inclined to be rabbitty, like Hallie's, with a sharp nose and pulled-back chin, in the moonlight she looked soft and fragile, her black sports coat more expensive, her legs longer. "I always get home this time," she said. "You just out walking?"

“Couldn’t stay indoors, night like this,” Mr. Roberts said. For a minute it crossed his mind that Mrs. Roberts might have finished her book, might be standing, even, on the front porch looking for him, and he said, almost harshly, “I thought for a minute I scared you, standing there like that.”

“You did,” she admitted. “I never expect to see anyone up around here when I come home.” She waved at the Merriams’ house, across the street, dark and brooding under its overhigh roof. Next to it the Martin house was dark except for one light on the porch. “That’s for me,” Mrs. Martin said unnecessarily. She paused on the sidewalk across the street from the Martin house. “Well, good night,” she said.

Mr. Roberts cleared his throat. “Stay out for a while,” he said. “Night like this.”

Mrs. Martin put her head on one side and considered. “I shouldn’t,” she said, and laughed again.

Mr. Roberts took her arm, and they began to walk lingeringly down the sidewalk again.

“Such a beautiful night,” Mrs. Martin said, as though starting the conversation on a new basis.

“Beautiful night,” Mr. Roberts said. He squeezed her arm gently, looking down at her. “Nice night,” he said.

Mrs. Martin looked up at him, her eyebrows raised. “It certainly is,” she said, and laughed.

Mr. Roberts squeezed her arm again, a little harder, and said, “Sure glad I met you. Needed someone to talk to.”

“I’m glad I met *you*, too,” Mrs. Martin said. “Too nice a night to go in.” They stopped by the pile of bricks, and Mrs. Martin said, “I wonder if they’ll ever get this thing finished.”

"Sure," Mr. Roberts said. He waved knowingly at the machine he thought was a tractor. "Won't take them long now," he said.

"I certainly wish they'd finish it," Mrs. Martin said. They began to walk again up toward the Martin house.

"Doesn't take them long once they get started," Mr. Roberts said.

"The wall's been here so long," Mrs. Martin said. "I suppose it was built long before any of the homes around here."

Mr. Roberts squeezed her arm again. "Guess it was," he said.

Mrs. Martin stopped again, across the street from the Martin house. "Well," she said.

"You don't want to go in," Mr. Roberts said. "Stay out awhile longer."

Mrs. Martin laughed again. "I really shouldn't," she said.

They began to walk again. "Beautiful night," Mr. Roberts said.

"Have you lived here long, Mr. Roberts?" Mrs. Martin said.

"Quite a while," Mr. Roberts said.

"I know I've seen you sometimes out in front of your house. And Mrs. Roberts." She dropped her voice to an affectionate, longing tone. "I know you've got two pretty nice boys," she said.

"You know my boys?" Mr. Roberts sounded surprised.

"They play with my George sometimes," Mrs. Martin said.

"Yes?" Mr. Roberts said. They were back beside the pile of bricks, and Mr. Roberts kicked aimlessly at the top brick. It fell and rolled down to the ground. "All this stuff," Mr. Roberts said. He let go of Mrs. Martin's arm, and leaned over to pick up the brick and put it back. "All this junk," he said. He moved casually around the pile of bricks and past it to where the break in the wall ended and the wall was clear of rubbish.

From the inside of the wall Mr. Roberts said softly, "Not so bad in here," and Mrs. Martin, after one quick look over her shoulder at the Martin house, gathered her skirt tightly against her legs and edged around the pile of bricks to join him.

* * *

Frederica Terrel sat at a round table in the room where Mrs. Williams had at one time sat night after night in the darkness, the room which was now the Terrels' "big room." It was in this room — Frederica had found that with such an arrangement it was necessary to use and furnish only four rooms in a house — that the Terrels mainly occupied themselves; it was inadequately furnished even so, with the table, four straight kitchen chairs, a wicker couch and two matching rockers, and a rug which was actually an excellent affair of some value belonging to Mrs. Terrel; there were occasional pieces of this sort scattered among the Terrel furniture, pieces such as the great translucent blue bowl Frederica kept fruit in, and some of the tiny lovely jewels mixed in with the rhinestones kept in a shoebox on Frederica's closet shelf. The other three rooms Frederica used were the kitchen, where she kept the food; the bedroom where Mrs. Terrel slept; and the bedroom which Frederica and Beverley shared. In the big room, while Frederica worked at the round table, Beverley sat in one of the wicker chairs, rocking and crooning over a book which she was coloring with crayon.

Frederica was rereading an advertisement she had clipped from a magazine the Williamses had left behind in the garage. "Art Fotos," it began. "Six alluring fotos for only a dollar," and as she studied it Frederica chewed her finger and frowned. The art fotos lay beside her; they had come in a determinedly plain wrapper, and Frederica had them spread out on the table while she considered them. The one nearest her hand was a sepia print of a young lady lying in a field of leaves; her face was in shadow but her naked body lay most chastely in the sunlight. "I don't know," Frederica said as she took it up, and Beverley paused in her song to say, “Don’t know what?”

“Look at this,” Frederica said, holding it out at arm’s length. “I just don’t know about it.”

Beverley put her head on one side and said tentatively, “Is it Mommy?”

“Don’t be silly.” Frederica put the picture back on the table and fell to considering it from that angle. “I wanted *some*thing to go on the walls, it looks so bare here. But I thought they would be pictures of trees and dogs and things.”

Beverley looked around the room as though she had never seen it before, and Frederica held up another picture and said, “What do you think of this?” This one was a similar print of a young lady lying, in the same professional nudity, on the edge of a swimming pool. Beverley looked at it and shook her head.

“The other one looked like Mommy,” she said.

Frederica took up the first picture and regarded it again. “I’ll put this in Mommy’s room, then,” she decided.

“In the bathroom,” Beverly said. “One in the bathroom.”

Frederica giggled. “Silly,” she said. “*No* one puts pictures in bathrooms. One in Mommy’s room and one in our room and the rest in here.”

“Can I have one?” Beverley asked pleadingly. “Just to color?”

Frederica looked at her sister affectionately. “I suppose you can,” she said. “If you promise.”

“Promise?” Beverley said innocently.

Frederica got up and went over to stand in front of her sister. “I’m going in the kitchen to hunt for thumbtacks,” she said. “I won’t be gone more than a minute. Now *promise*.” She put one finger under Beverley’s chin and turned Beverley’s face up. “Promise,” she said again.

Beverley grinned and said, “Promise.”

“Then you can have this one.” Frederica selected a young lady leaning against a marble pillar and gave it to Beverley. “Color it all over, but stay inside the lines.”

Beverley nodded, intent on the picture, and Frederica went to the doorway and stopped to say once more over her shoulder, “Remember now, you *promised*.”

“Anyway I don’t have any money at all,” Beverley said, and began to rock and croon again as her sister left the room.

* * *

In the quiet late evening, the sun long gone and the stars shining correctly outside the window, Miss Fielding rocked slowly back and forth in her chair. She was inclined to be cold in her hands and feet these evenings of late summer, and so she had lighted the little oil stove which sat cleanly in the corner of the room, and the slight red glow from the holes in the sides and top of the stove, combined with the soft light from the lamp on the table beside Miss Fielding, made the little room seem homely and snug. When Mr. Donald knocked on the door Miss Fielding got up and walked over with her short old woman’s steps to open the door and smile and say, “Come in, it’s nice and warm.”

When he was sitting down on the other side of the table, in a pleasant colorless old chair with a lace antimacassar on the back, Miss Fielding said, “Will you have a cup of tea?” and Mr. Donald said, as he always did, “No, thank you. Just thought I’d step in for a few minutes.”

It was probable that everyone on Pepper Street knew that Miss Fielding and Mr. Donald were, oddly, friends, but it is certain that no one was particularly interested in it. Both Miss Fielding and Mr. Donald were so exactly the sort of people who want to hide, that the neighborhood was only thankful to have them hiding together, instead of intruding their modesty on busier people. Every so often one or another of the Pepper Street inhabitants, glancing out of a window in the late evening, or a child coming home later than usual, would notice Mr. Donald walking toward Miss Fielding's little house, and possibly even, see him, a half-hour or so later, coming back home, the lights in Miss Fielding's house out behind him, his own house completely incurious about his absence.

Miss Fielding and Mr. Donald were obviously two of a kind. When they sat in Miss Fielding's little room Miss Fielding sat with her hands on the arms of her rocking chair, rocking back and forth, as though she were alone; Mr. Donald sat back in the old-fashioned chair with his head against the antimacassar, his eyes closed as though he were asleep. When they talked it was because both of them were given to talking to themselves.

Tonight Miss Fielding said almost immediately, in her gentle careful voice, "I don't call those Terrel girls really highbred." The subject had been troubling her since Frederica had spoiled her pot of tea, and there was almost a harsh tone in her voice. "Those girls are not of the best breeding. I don't know the mother."

"I haven't seen them," Mr. Donald said. He sighed deeply.

"Not of the very best," Miss Fielding went on. "I can't say that they are the best-bred girls around here."

"There seem to be a lot of new people all the time," Mr. Donald said. "First the Williams people and then these."

"Take Harriet Merriam, for instance," Miss Fielding went on. "Or Virginia Donald. Even Mary Byrne, I can't say I hold religion against anybody. Take any of them."

"The Desmonds were first," Mr. Donald said. "Or the Merriams. I think the Merriams. After all, that house has been in his family. Yes, first the Merriams and then the Desmonds."

They were both quiet for a while. Miss Fielding rocked peacefully, as though in a cradle, and Mr. Donald, his eyes shut, let his fingers unclench and lie easily against the arms of his chair.

"You never can tell," Mr. Donald said finally, barely making words from the murmur of his voice. "You never can tell, never know, father knows best."

"There's a lot to be said for religion in any case," Miss Fielding said. "Not that I was ever very much of a religious. It's cruel not to give a child a chance."

"Spare the rod and spoil the church," Mr. Donald said suddenly. They frequently interrupted one another, or talked both at once, as though all that were necessary was to make a companionable noise. "Everybody worrying, everybody moving so fast, all going to church, all hitting each other, all worrying."

Perhaps Miss Fielding thought she had been talking right along since her last statement, for she went on, "and never asked him again. Not that he would have allowed it, of course."

"They ask me to watch," Mr. Donald said. "They just sit there and expect people to watch them and be interested. They expect people to think everything is important and necessary. That's the word, necessary. Necessary is the word."

"You take young people today," Miss Fielding said. "They're not as high-bred as they used to be. The Terrel girls, for instance. I don't know the mother, but the girls are really not first-class."

“Necessary is really the word.” The light on Mr. Donald’s face made him seem much younger, and he smiled shyly. “It’s hard to remember sometimes,” he confessed, “but sometimes I can think without trying. I remember the way the sun shone on my sister and me. She had a doll named Julia.”

“You can always tell about people,” Miss Fielding said.

“It used to be much warmer then,” Mr. Donald went on. “Sometimes it’s so cold now in the summer I wonder about it. Even in the summer.”

“I expect to be very cool to them,” Miss Fielding said. “I haven’t met the mother yet, but when I do I shall be very cool indeed.”

“I wish I knew why it happens,” Mr. Donald said. He leaned forward, preparatory to standing up. “Why it’s so much colder now in the summer.” He looked directly at Miss Fielding, who turned her wrinkled old eyes to look at him.

“Why yes,” Miss Fielding said. “I expect we’re all older than we were.”

When he stood up she rose and followed him to the door. “I’m very glad you came,” she said formally. “Come again.”

“Thank you,” Mr. Donald said as formally. “Thank you for letting me come.”

He went down the narrow flight of steps outside, and Miss Fielding held the door open to give him light until he reached the sidewalk. Then he called “Good night,” and she said, “Good night,” and closed her door and turned the key.

Back in her little room she turned out the oil stove and straightened the antimacassar on Mr. Donald’s chair. “Not really first-class,” she was saying tunefully as she worked. “We’re all *much* older now.”

* * *

Mrs. Merriam was sitting on the foot of Harriet's bed, leaning forward eagerly, and her eyes were light and earnest. While she talked she continually stretched her long hands out to her daughter, as though to grasp Harriet's mind and force it to accept her intent, as though to hold Harriet from running away. "I know you are the most generous and tolerant girl around here," she was saying, "but remember, what is *most* important is not to let yourself get carried *away*."

Harriet sat dully on her desk chair. She had been writing when her mother came in to talk to her; it was her regular writing time her mother had assigned, the two hours after lunch, and Harriet had been dutifully forcing metrical rhymed lines down on paper. The greater part of her writing time had been lost in her mother's talking; mostly Harriet was wondering if the lost time might still be required of her or if she would be allowed to go outdoors at her usual time.

"We must expect to set a standard," her mother said. It was perhaps the third time she had said it, and it registered muddily on Harriet's mind. "We must expect to set a standard. Actually, however much we may want to find new friends whom we may value, people who are exciting to us because of new ideas, or because they are *different*, we have to do what is expected of us."

"What is expected of me?" Harriet said suddenly, without intention.

"To do what you're told," her mother said sharply.

"But what am I supposed to do?"

"You may," her mother said, "in fact, I *insist*," she added with relish, "that you see her once more, in order to tell her *exactly* why you are not to be friends any longer. After all," Mrs. Merriam went on dreamily, "she ought to know why she can't hope to be your friend any longer."

“Yes, Mother,” Harriet said. “I’d have to give her back her books anyway.” She waited for a minute and then, when her mother showed signs of leaving, she said, “May I go out now?”

“Of course, dear,” her mother said. She looked back at Harriet as she was leaving the room. “I can trust you, of course?”

“Yes, Mother,” Harriet said.

“You remember, dear,” her mother said lightly, “that little matter of those dirty letters. After all, I trusted you *then*.”

“But I didn’t—” Harriet began, and her mother went on quickly, “I have never been *so* disappointed in my girl. It will take a long time, Harriet, before I forget the *filth* that went into those letters. The filthy words, the filthy thoughts.”

“I won’t do it again,” Harriet said helplessly.

“Of course you won’t,” her mother said gently. “We won’t bring the subject up any more.”

* * *

Mary Byrne was standing lonesomely on the sidewalk in front of her house, shredding a leaf she had pulled off the bushes and looking at it trying to think of what to do, when she heard someone saying, “Hello, lady.” She looked up. She had, along with the rest of the neighborhood, encountered Beverley Terrel, had seen Frederica taking her up and down the block for careful walks; and she had, with the other children, laughed at her when Frederica was not around, imitating her clumsy walk and her thick speech. No one was afraid of Beverley, because she was always smiling, so Mary looked up and smiled back and said, “Hello, Beverley.” She was mildly surprised for a minute because Frederica did not seem to be around, but she forgot to be surprised immediately when Beverley held out a hand full of money.

"I've money," Beverley said.

Mary leaned forward and touched it and then looked up at Beverley. "Where'd you get it all?" she asked, awed.

"Let's spend it," Beverley said. She gestured back and forth rapidly with her hand, so that a dollar bill dropped to the ground. Mary picked it up respectfully and tried to hand it back, but Beverley clenched her hand so tight around the money that after a minute Mary gave up trying to force in the dollar bill and put it instead into her own pocket. She kept her hand on it ready to give back to Frederica when she came.

"Come on," Beverley said. She gave Mary a push. "Come on, let's spend it," she said.

Mary looked up and down the street quickly. No one was in sight, and yet by taking the dollar bill into her own pocket, even knowing she would not keep it, she had become an accessory, a participant with Beverley in something exciting and dishonest. "What'll we do with it?" Mary asked, dropping her voice to a whisper.

"Candy," Beverley said immediately, "candy and hot butterscotch sundaes, and we can go to the movies if we want to, and we can buy lots of candy."

Mary's mind dwelt on a chocolate bar with almonds, and then she realized that even the dollar bill in her pocket would buy many of them, and Beverley had so much money in her hand that it was impossible to count it.

"I'd have a marshmallow sundae too," Beverley said. "And a butterscotch sundae and lots of candy."

"We better run," Mary said, as Beverley started toward Cortez Road. "My mother might not like it if she saw me." Beverley began obediently to move faster and Mary followed, frightened already at the prospect of going all the way down the street without being seen. She had a feeling of warm friendship with Beverley which overwhelmed and disgusted the faint nausea she felt at the thought of doing anything or going anywhere with this great awkward girl who talked like a six-year-old child.

"We better not go to any of the usual places," she said to Beverley. "We wouldn't want anyone to tell on us."

"Take a taxi," Beverley said. "We'll go far away. I've money." She gestured forward with the money-filled hand.

"Do you want me to carry it for you?" Mary asked considerately. She wanted to know how it felt to hold that much money, instead of the paltry dollar bill in her pocket, but Beverley snatched her hand away and glared suspiciously. *"Mine,"* she said.

"You don't have to be mean," Mary said. "*I* don't want your old money." She drew away from Beverley, indignant that Beverley should think she wanted to steal. "I won't even go with you," she said crossly.

"We'll have a marshmallow sundae," Beverley said appealingly, "and lots of candy."

"All right." No one saw them, after all. They hurried down the street side by side, almost the same height. Beverley had a handful of money and Mary had a dollar bill in her pocket, which she had already resolved not to spend, since Beverley had so much more, but to save and return virtuously when they came back.

* * *

"We wouldn't turn you out," old Mrs. Martin said down through the living-room filled with big vases and glassed-in flowers. She looked at her husband and he nodded heavily, his frightened old eyes blinking back at his wife. It was not the first time in his life, by any means, that old Mr. Martin had been frightened of his wife: there was the day they were married, young Mrs. Martin, as she was then, looking him over after the ceremony with narrow critical eyes, estimating accurately her future life with him; there was their son, storming out of the house against his mother's will, to go dancing with the girl he had set his heart on, and Mrs. Martin tight-lipped and threatening in the doorway; there was the night Hallie came home with Mr. Perlman. Mr. Martin, afraid of speaking for fear he should say something wrong, longing to be back in his greenhouses where things were steadily, quietly growing, looked at his wife and nodded, and then at his daughter-in-law with her bright pretty face, and nodded again.

"We wouldn't ever turn anybody out of our house, no one ever gets turned out of our house ever. Papa would never forgive me," old Mrs. Martin said, "if I tried to turn his own son's wife out of our house."

In the Martins' living-room there were great pink and blue pots holding plants Mr. Martin had brought home from the greenhouses, there were dark undistinguishable pieces of furniture, lined up soberly against the walls; the carpet was unfaded by the sun, because old Mrs. Martin drew the shades every afternoon to keep out the light. The family only sat here all together on Sundays, because then young Mrs. Martin did not work, but when they sat all together in the big echoing room it still seemed empty, because the ferns and the great furniture and the straight hanging curtains were made for an empty room, had sustained their purpose even against the voices, or the laughter and shouting of George and Hallie.

"But you've got to leave," old Mrs. Martin said. "You must leave here."

"I won't go," young Mrs. Martin said. She sat daintily in a chair much too large, George and Hallie on either side of her, looking back and forth with wide incurious eyes. "I just simply will not go."

"These changes," old Mrs. Martin said, "all these changes in the estate, are not good for Papa. They are making all kinds of changes in the estate, perhaps soon in the greenhouses even."

"May I point out just once more," young Mrs. Martin said precisely, "that I am your own son's wife? When my George died—" She hesitated for a minute, and allowed her lip to tremble. " — when my *dear* George died, he promised me that I would always find a home for my children with his parents. And now.... Your own son's wife." Young Mrs. Martin allowed her voice to catch and shake.

Mrs. Martin nodded this time, and her husband, looking at her, nodded afterward. "We would not turn out our own son's wife," old Mrs. Martin said. "But you must leave."

"And your grandchildren?" young Mrs. Martin said. "Your own son's own children. Who's going to take care of them?"

Old Mrs. Martin looked at George and then at Hallie, and for a minute her eye was cynical. "My own son's children," she said, and they looked back stolidly at her. "But the little one runs away, to beg from strangers, and the great one does nothing. And when the little one runs away," old Mrs. Martin said, with tremendous deliberation, "she is doing like her mother."

For a minute old Mrs. Martin met young Mrs. Martin's eyes, and then the younger said with anger, "You don't need to talk nasty like that. I never did anything I'm ashamed of."

"You must take my son's children and leave," old Mrs. Martin said. "Papa and I are old and now we are worried about the changes in the estate. You must not live here any more."

She looked at her husband, and this time he looked up and said, "Yes, yes, what Mama says." Then she looked triumphantly at her daughter-in-law and said, "You hear?"

From her position in the largest chair she could look down the length of the room at her daughter-in-law perched inconsistently in a leather armchair, and when a minute or two had passed and young Mrs. Martin still did not answer, old Mrs. Martin was satisfied and said, “So now that’s settled.” She smiled at George and Hallie and said, “Sometimes you will come and visit your old grandmother, no?” Young Mrs. Martin smiled too.

* * *

“‘ — And the fowls of the heaven,’” Mrs. Mack was reading, “‘and the beasts of the field, and all creeping things that creep upon the earth, and all the men that are upon the face of the earth, shall shake at my presence, and the mountains shall be thrown down, and the steep places shall fall, and every wall shall fall to the ground. And I will call for a sword against him throughout all my mountains, saith the Lord God: every man’s sword shall be against his brother.’” She smiled eagerly on the dog, and said, “You know what that makes me think of? You remember Micah?”

* * *

“Well, of course, dear,” Lillian Tyler said to her sister, “of *course* it’s your house, but I do think you’re making a very serious mistake.”

“What possible harm is there in being kind to an unfortunate girl?” Mrs. Ransom-Jones demanded, although kindly. “What’s wrong with showing her some affection when the poor girl’s probably never had an ounce of attention in her life?”

“She should be in an institution,” Miss Tyler said emphatically. “The kindest thing you could do is get her locked up.”

Mrs. Ransom-Jones stared open-mouthed. “What an *awful* thing to say!”

“It’s true,” Miss Tyler said doggedly. “A great big animal like that ought to be in a cage. And you bring her here!” She made a pushing gesture with both hands, her mouth turning in disgust. “You bring her into this house, that great big dirty animal, right in here with me.”

“But, sweetie,” Mrs. Ransom-Jones said soothingly, “I didn’t know you were going to mind.”

“And Brad,” Miss Tyler cried, “didn’t you see how Brad looked at her? It made him sick, just to think of having her in this house with me.”

“Brad didn’t mind,” Mrs. Ransom-Jones began reasonably, but her sister interrupted her:

“Don’t tell *me* what Brad minds,” she screamed. “I know all about Brad, and you and I know what he minds, and he was *sick* to think of you bringing that *thing* in here with me, and I just wish you could see how he looked at *you*.”

She stopped, breathing wildly, and Mrs. Ransom-Jones dropped her eyes and put on an air of quiet patience and looked steadily at the carpet.

After a minute Miss Tyler’s breathing quieted, and she said softly, “After all, dear, Brad’s *your* husband and this is *your* house.” When Mrs. Ransom-Jones still did not look up, she went on, “I wouldn’t have said anything for the world, except that I thought you ought to know what Brad was thinking when that girl was here.”

“Don’t tell *me* what Brad was thinking,” Mrs. Ransom-Jones said, in a desperately calm voice. “After all, he’s *my* husband.”

“Of *course* he is, dear,” Miss Tyler said. “He’s your husband.” She closed her mouth firmly on a little smile and sat back with gracious resignation. Her eyes wandered to the window, and she sat up for a minute and then relaxed. “Here’s Frederica,” she said.

Mrs. Ransom-Jones got up without looking at her sister and went to the door. She talked to Frederica for a minute and then came back to her sister, Frederica moving uneasily behind her. “She says Beverley’s lost again,” Mrs. Ransom-Jones said accusingly to her sister. “She’s gone off somewhere.”

“Come in, dear,” Miss Tyler said to Frederica, leaning forward again to watch the girl. “Come in and tell us about it.”

Frederica stood solemnly in the exact center of the room, facing Miss Tyler. After a minute she said in her slow voice, “She’s just gone. Like always.”

“Did she have any money?” Miss Tyler asked.

“I guess so,” Frederica said. She looked at Mrs. Ransom-Jones for confirmation. “She never goes unless she has money.”

“You shouldn’t let her have money, then,” Miss Tyler said gently.

“I *don’t* let her have it.” Frederica almost wailed. “I can’t watch her every *minute*.”

“And your mother?” Miss Tyler asked.

“She was asleep,” Frederica said. She moved uncomfortably. “Please,” she said, “if you know anything about her...?”

“Does your mother always sleep?” Miss Tyler asked. With her quiet voice, and the soft touch she gave the words, they sounded sympathetic.

“She sleeps a lot,” Frederica said. “I don’t know what she does.”

“Where does the money come from?” Miss Tyler asked. “Where does your sister get it?”

“I guess she takes it,” Frederica said.

“Takes it?”

“From Mommy’s pocketbook.”

“I see,” Miss Tyler said. She looked Frederica up and down steadily. Mrs. Ransom-Jones moved forward abruptly, but Miss Tyler stopped her with a motion of one hand. “Do a lot of... men... come to see your mother?” she asked delicately.

“No,” Frederica said, surprised. “No one ever comes to see us.”

“Are you *sure*?” Miss Tyler said even more delicately. “Perhaps after you’re asleep at night?”

Frederica shook her head, staring at Miss Tyler dumbly, and after giving her a minute Miss Tyler said, letting the words almost drift away from her, as though they were being spoken for her, “Then where does the money come from?”

“I don’t know,” Frederica said. “I don’t *know*. From Mommy’s pocketbook.”

Miss Tyler leaned back again, and Mrs. Ransom-Jones came up to Frederica and said, “Maybe she’s just at that same place, having a soda.” She tried to speak lightly, as though it were a friendly joke, but Miss Tyler cut in sharply, “She ought to be locked up, you know.”

“Who?” Frederica demanded, startled.

“Your sister, dear,” Miss Tyler said. “She ought to be put in a home for feeble-minded people.”

“That’s not true,” Frederica said. It took a minute for her slow-moving mind to bring forth the emotion to go with the words, but finally an expression of anger came on to her face.

“She’s apt to become dangerous,” Miss Tyler said, accenting the last word just enough to make it terrifying. “I was in a home for a while, you know,” she went on idly, “my sister has probably told you.”

“Lillian!” Mrs. Ransom-Jones said urgently.

“I was ill, of course,” Miss Tyler said. “Not feeble-minded, like your sister.”

“There’s nothing wrong with my sister,” Frederica said.

“You know, I think sometimes they’d like to put me *back*,” Miss Tyler said, and laughed lightly. “Three’s a crowd,” she said.

“Frederica,” Mrs. Ransom-Jones said levelly, “we don’t know where your sister is, we haven’t seen her. Run along, please, dear.”

Taking Frederica by the arm, she led her to the door and put her outside. When she came back to her sister, Miss Tyler was lying back with her eyes shut.

“Do you mind if I lie down for a while?” Miss Tyler said. “I feel quite worn out.”

“I just want you to know,” Mrs. Ransom-Jones said, her voice weak with indignation, “I just want you to know that I’m going to tell Brad every word of this when he comes home.”

* * *

Walking up the street, Harriet was acutely conscious of the workmen at the wall; she was mortally afraid that they were looking at her, and that perhaps her skirt was caught up in back or torn, or that there was a hole in her stocking. She was so horribly frightened of the men that she walked more quickly, to be a few steps ahead of Marilyn, so that Marilyn would shield her from the staring eyes of the men, but Marilyn walked quickly too, so that they were together, and Harriet said irritably, “What on earth are you running for?”

“*You* were running,” Marilyn said amiably.

Harriet thought she could hear the men laughing behind her; for the first time she had dared to walk with Marilyn past the Merriam house, to the short-cut beyond the Martins’ to the creek, and she was oppressed with the dreadful thought that perhaps her mother would hear the men laughing at her, look out of the window, perhaps come down into the street. She was sure she could hear loud shouting laughter behind her, and she thought hotly that they had no right to laugh at her, they were *hoi polloi*; then she thought that perhaps all the truth about Marilyn was obvious, maybe anyone who looked at her could tell, as Mrs. Merriam had been able to tell, maybe everyone but Harriet knew right away, and *that* was what the men were laughing at, Harriet walking along with Marilyn as though it were perfectly all right. Maybe the men were laughing, Harriet thought madly, because she was so fat, and Marilyn looked so small beside her.

Looking at Marilyn walking along placidly, Harriet realized how absolutely atrociously ugly Marilyn was, neither more or less safe from the laughter of the *hoi polloi* than Harriet; they were both ugly.

“Come *on*,” Harriet said. “Do you have to be so *slow*?”

Marilyn hurried obediently. She was eating an apple, and the sight of it offended Harriet; it was difficult for Marilyn to hurry and eat the apple at the same time, and she stumbled.

“Clumsy,” Harriet said, and Marilyn looked up at her over the apple, frowning. “What’s eating you?” she asked around the apple, and Harriet shrugged impatiently and hurried on ahead. With Marilyn almost running along behind her, Harriet reached the creek and sat down with determination in their special secret place. By the time Marilyn had dropped down breathlessly beside her, Harriet had her first words ready.

“I can’t play with you any more, is all,” she said.

“Why not?” Marilyn was puzzled, and she screwed her face up so that Harriet could not bear to look at her, but looked instead loftily into space.

"My mother says it's not suitable," Harriet said. "My mother says to tell you that people of my class are always nice to everybody in spite of their religion or their background but that we have to set standards. Standards," Harriet repeated; it was a solid word in the midst of confusion. "So," Harriet went on rapidly, "I can't talk to you any more or play with you or come up here or go to the library. My mother says so."

Marilyn still had the apple, and looking at it in her hand, Harriet said, "And *furthermore* my mother hopes you won't ever try to tell anyone I was your *friend*."

"I see," Marilyn said. She swallowed the bite of apple in her mouth and asked meekly, "Is that all your mother said?"

Suddenly Harriet realized that she had no words to use to go any further, whatever she tried to say now would only be the same words over again. She had used up, so quickly, all that her mother had spread over so long a time, so Harriet finished icily, "Isn't that enough?"

"Sure," Marilyn said. She put the apple down on the ground and began pulling out handfuls of grass to drop on it.

When the apple was covered Harriet thought miserably that she had not done any of it right. She would have liked to start over again from the beginning, make it mean more. "Listen," she said.

"I don't want to listen any more," Marilyn said wearily. "You big fat slob." She got up suddenly and ran as fast as she could toward the road that led to her home. Harriet sat dumbfounded for a minute, thinking: she didn't need to get so mad, I was going to say all of it again, right. Then she remembered what Marilyn had said, and she wanted to cry. That's mean, she thought, that was a mean thing to say, and she shouldn't have said that. After a little while she stood up and began to walk home slowly. I'll tell my mother, she was thinking.

* * *

Virginia Donald and Mary Byrne walked lazily up Cortez Road with Beverley Terrel between them. Virginia had a wrapped box of candy under her arm, and she was chewing gum. Mary was chewing gum, too, and she had, in the big pockets of her linen beerjacket, three or four bags of candy stuffed in one on top of another. Occasionally she stopped walking to take out a bag and offer it to Virginia and Beverley before taking a piece herself. Beverley, walking happily in the middle, was carrying a pint package of ice cream. “I wanted to ride all the way home in the taxi,” she said for about the twentieth time.

“We never take taxis *all* the way home,” Virginia said. “Do we, Mary?”

“We *never* do,” Mary said. “We always get them to leave us off at the highway.”

“I *like* to ride all the way home,” Beverley said obstinately.

“Look.” Virginia poked Beverley’s shoulder. “You want us to go with you again tomorrow?”

“Yes,” Mary echoed. “You want us to go again tomorrow?”

Beverley nodded, looking from one to the other.

“Then you let us do what we want to,” Virginia said. “If you don’t let us do it the way we want to we won’t go with you.”

“I just wanted to ride all the way home in the taxi,” Beverley said.

“Well, you *can’t*.” Virginia tossed her head emphatically. She reached into her pocket and took out a paper bag, handling it tenderly, and leaned back to say to Mary behind Beverley, “I’m so pleased I got my pretty pearls.”

“I should of gotten pearls too,” Mary said. She held out her hand. “Let me look.”

Virginia shook her head. She reached into the bag and took her hand out with the pearls dramatically draped around her fingers, entwined in what seemed to both Virginia and Mary to be the pose of a beautiful hand in an advertisement, holding priceless jewelry.

“They *look* real,” Mary said admiringly. “From here you really couldn’t tell.”

“They’re almost real,” Virginia said with the patronizing air of an owner. “They’re not bad pearls at all, for the price.”

“What do you want that stuff for?” Beverley asked suddenly. She held her pint of ice cream tighter and said, “That stuff’s no good.”

“I don’t like five-and-ten jewelry as a rule,” Virginia said to Mary behind Beverley’s back, “but sometimes you can find something really good.”

“There’s Frederica,” Beverley said. They had turned the corner into Pepper Street, and Beverley pointed ahead. “Frederica,” she said.

Frederica saw them from in front of her own house, where she had been standing looking anxiously up and down the street, and she started to run toward them.

“If you want us to go again tomorrow,” Virginia said roughly to Beverley, “don’t you tell her we bought anything.”

She slipped the bag with the pearls hurriedly into her pocket and tried to slide the candy box behind her arm inconspicuously.

“Frederica,” Beverley called. “Here I am.” She stood smiling and pleased as her sister ran up to her, and when Frederica came close enough Beverley held out the box of ice cream and said, “This is for you and Mommy.”

“Where have you been?” Frederica demanded. She spent one glance up and down on Virginia and Mary, and then said to her sister, “Where’s all that money? Tell me where you’ve been.”

Beverley's face began to twist unhappily. "Ice cream," she said.

"We just met her on the corner," Virginia cut in brightly, "and we were bringing her home."

"We knew you'd be looking for her," Mary chimed in, "so we told her she had to come right home with us."

Frederica took her sister's arm and said, "You come with me. You've been very bad."

Beverley began to cry quietly, her face contorted like a baby's, and Frederica shook her and said again, "You're a bad, bad girl."

"I'm sorry we didn't find her sooner," Virginia said insistently. "We could of brought her right home for you."

Frederica looked at Virginia and Mary again. Her eyes stopped briefly at the candy box under Virginia's arm and Mary's bulging pockets, and she said, "Come *on*, Bev." Pulling her crying sister along beside her, she started down the block.

When she was out of hearing, Virginia nudged Mary and they both began to giggle, covering their mouths with their hands. Once, almost in front of her own house, Frederica looked back again, and they were both sober instantly, faces dead and straight, and then when she looked away they began to giggle again.

* * *

James Donald honored the games with his presence that night. They were all playing prisoner's base, and after standing for a little while on the sidewalk he said suddenly to Pat Byrne, who was near him, "Think I could join in?"

"No one's stopping you," Pat said, but Mary Byrne heard and began shouting that James was going to play, demanding that new sides be chosen and the game started again. Very conscious of his own dignity, James allowed himself to be disputed over; Pat Byrne declared ostentatiously that he was too tired to play again; and the game got under way shortly before it was time for Mr. Desmond to start his evening walk. Mr. Roberts, standing on his own sidewalk, observed to Pat, who was lying on the grass, "There's a fine fellow, that Donald boy," and Pat said, "You mean Tod?"

Mr. Roberts looked at him and said genially, "Nose a little bit out of joint, old man?" Pat rolled over in disgust, burying his face in the grass, and Mr. Roberts laughed shortly and walked down the street a ways. He stood there for a few minutes before Mr. Desmond came out of his house and, when he saw Mr. Desmond, turned in a leisurely manner and walked to meet him. Johnny Desmond was with his father, and he was saying earnestly as they came up to Mr. Roberts, his face turned toward his father, and his voice pleading, "I'll *never* be able to do anything without a car, all the fellows—"

Mr. Roberts held out a hand and said loudly, "Glad to see you again there, Johnny. Been away?"

"Pretty busy," Johnny said, turning his face reluctantly away from his father.

"Quite a fellow, your son," Mr. Roberts said to Mr. Desmond, and Mr. Desmond said proudly, "Quite a fellow."

"You know," Mr. Roberts said, dropping his voice as they began to walk up the street, "that's a funny fellow, that Byrne boy. Seems very envious and bitter."

"Well...." Mr. Desmond said consideringly.

"Frankly," Mr. Roberts said, "I don't altogether like seeing him with my boy so much of the time."

"Can't say I blame you," Mr. Desmond said. Johnny had stopped to watch the game in the street, and the two men stopped a few steps farther on. "They usually grow up all right, though," Mr. Desmond said, looking fondly at Johnny.

"Oh, well," Mr. Roberts said. "You've got a fine fellow there."

Johnny walked down to the curb and was watching the game when Virginia Donald came up to him. "Want to play?" she said daringly.

"Not for *me*." Johnny laughed loudly, so his father could hear him. "That sort of stuff is for babies," he said, and looking at James Donald, added sourly, "and football players."

Mr. Desmond and Mr. Roberts had begun to walk on again slowly. Mr. Desmond was saying, "You want to treat them like *men*, not children; give them responsibility."

Virginia looked over her shoulder at her brother in the middle of the game and called jeeringly, "Did you hear that, James?"

James stopped running and looked around wonderingly. "Who's that?" he asked. He came over slowly and said, "Johnny Desmond? What's going on?"

"He was just admiring your running," Virginia said. She looked up at Johnny for approval, and said, "He thinks only a football player could run like that."

"Listen," James said, hurt.

"Don't let it bother you," Johnny said wearily. He started to move along after his father and was stopped when Tod Donald ran furiously against him, yelling, "Don't you talk to my brother like that!"

"Get out of here," Johnny said, shoving him away, and James said crossly, "Oh, Toddie, leave him alone."

"But the way he was talking," Toddie insisted tearfully. "He can't go talking like that."

"Mind your own business, Toddie," Virginia said sharply. She smiled brightly at Johnny, and said to James, "He was only kidding."

"I just wondered," Johnny said to James, "how you could spend your time on kid stuff like these games."

"What's wrong with football?" James demanded, perplexed. "You trying to say something about our football team?"

Johnny laughed weakly and started off again after his father, but James said commandingly, "You just tell me what you mean," and Johnny shrugged his shoulders despairingly and stood still. The children, without James, had stopped their game and were standing silently about in the street, faces all turned to the spot under the street light where James and Johnny were standing, with Virginia nearby wearing a self-conscious smile.

"I'm on that football team, you know that?" James said, his ferocity only modified by a faint anxiety. "You *know* that?"

"What's going on?" Mr. Roberts said. "Artie?"

"Yes?" Artie's voice came thinly from among the crowd of children. Mr. Roberts snorted, and came up to Johnny and James, putting one hand on each. "Break it up, fellows," he said. "What's going on?"

"Johnny?" Mr. Desmond said anxiously from where he had turned and was hurrying back. "What's wrong, Johnny?"

"Nothing, nothing," Johnny said.

"This is disgraceful," Mr. Roberts said. "Artie, what are you doing out there?"

"Nothing," Artie said.

James Donald's face was working angrily and he shoved against Mr. Roberts's hand. "Let me *alone*," he said.

“You better apologize,” Mr. Roberts said to James.

“I didn’t do anything,” James said weakly.

“That’s right,” Johnny said. He shook off Mr. Roberts’s hand. “I don’t want anyone apologizing to me.”

Mr. Desmond, now beside his son, said severely, “*Naturally* you would be satisfied with an apology, Johnny. James?”

There was a long silence, and then James said miserably, “I’m sorry.”

“There,” Mr. Desmond said. “You boys don’t really want to fight. You two just shake hands.”

“For *God’s* sake, Dad,” Johnny said violently. He looked at James. “Listen,” he began.

“You all go to hell,” James said, with vast adolescent contempt, and turned and walked away through the silent group of children.

* * *

Text of two manuscripts found at the creek, late in the summer, by Tod Donald:

In ten years I will be a beautiful charming lovely lady writer without any husband or children but lots of lovers and everyone will read the books I write and want to marry me but I will never marry any of them. I will have lots of money and jewels too.

I will be a famous actress or maybe a painter and everyone will be afraid of me and do what I say.

CHAPTER SIX

MRS. RANSOM-JONES WAS wearing pale blue linen, with her dark hair piled up on top of her head. She looked exactly like a finely trained hostess receiving her garden-party guests. "How *nice* to see you," she was saying in her high sweet voice, and, "So *glad* you could come."

Miss Tyler, somewhat in back of her sister, but wearing pale pink and a wide hat, bowed and fluttered and murmured little incoherent emphases while her sister spoke, and then, in her turn, said to each guest, "It's been so *long*," and handed them one by one on to Brad Ransom-Jones, who was far too small for two wives, but red-faced and genial.

"Indeed, indeed," he shouted at each new guest, "imagine living here all this time and not meeting *you*!" And he shook hands enthusiastically and led guests out to the Ransom-Jones garden, which many of the guests had not seen before, and which all of them admired extravagantly.

"It's a neighborhood party," Mrs. Ransom-Jones said beautifully to Mrs. Desmond. "We thought it was a shame that all of us had never gotten together in a really *neighborhood* party before." Johnny, tall and white-jacketed behind his mother and father, got an especially warm handclasp from Mrs. Ransom-Jones and a "But you're so *big!*" with a little laugh over her shoulder at his mother. "And little Caroline!" without words to express her delight at seeing even little Caroline. Mrs. Desmond smiled maternally down at Caroline and started to speak to Mrs. Ransom-Jones, but Mrs. Ransom-Jones was already saying, "Mrs. Roberts! How nice to see *you*."

Out in the garden the neighbors gathered uneasily, standing for the most part with the people who lived next door to them, whose faces they knew best. Miss Fielding, who had come first, taking a long time to walk the long block to the Ransom-Jones house, had been given a wicker chair in the center of things, and sat, withdrawn and polite, smiling pleasantly on acquaintances. “It’s very nice to see you so well, dear,” she told Johnny Desmond. “I heard you had been ill?”

“No, ma’am,” Johnny said uncomfortably. “I hope you are well, too,” and slid away, imploring his mother with his eyes.

“Well, *well*,” Mr. Roberts said heartily to Miss Fielding, “still the prettiest girl on the block?” and Miss Fielding looked politely astonished, but said, “I hope you keep well, Mr. Roberts?”

The children were still too awed to move freely; they gathered in a whispering, gently pushing group near the house, the Roberts boys and Johnny Desmond, and Harriet Merriam, whose mother was talking to Mrs. Desmond about the wall. Across the street, although none of them knew it, Marilyn Perlman was watching the garden from her front porch, and Mrs. Perlman was watching Marilyn anxiously through the living-room window.

The children were joined gradually by the Donalds, James Donald eyeing Johnny Desmond with uneasy dignity, and then the Byrne children, escaping politely from their parents and the parents of their friends, running the gamut of “How big you are, how tall, what grade are you in, guess you’re glad that school’s starting soon....” into the comparative safety of the children’s group and its nervous giggling.

Mr. Ransom-Jones had laboriously erected, and Mrs. Ransom-Jones and her sister tenderly adorned, a long table garlanded with branches from the garden; it held two punch bowls and trays of food, and the group of children, moving imperceptibly nearer, ascertained through grapevine and passionate speculation that one bowl was intoxicating, one harmless, that on the trays and platters were chicken sandwiches, ham sandwiches, unidentified sandwiches which a vote supported as peanut butter— “For *us*, probably,” Virginia Donald said disgustedly; there were also plates of cookies and a wealth of celery and olives— “I bet I could eat a *million* olives, I *love* them,” Mary Byrne said; and, finally, the undeniable word went round that later ice cream would be dispensed, in unguessable quantities.

Marilyn Perlman had not been invited; neither had Mrs. Mack, nor George and Hallie Martin; Miss Tyler had entered the plans for the party with the statement, “*Naturally* we will not include the Terrels.” It was a very successful neighborhood affair; Mrs. Ransom-Jones had planned on twenty-one guests and had twenty, Mr. Byrne being unfortunately detained on business at the last minute. Mrs. Byrne and Pat and Mary were the last to come; by that time the adult guests, led by Mrs. Roberts, were permitting themselves to be escorted to the long table and were there praising the food and decorations, and renewing their dutiful homage to the garden, before accepting the cup, either intoxicating or non-intoxicating, held out by Mr. Ransom-Jones.

The children, restrained by the eyes of parents, held back until the last, and were then allowed to line up for a non-intoxicating cup apiece, and three sandwiches, and the ice cream, which was strawberry. “Go down to the *very* end of the garden,” Mrs. Ransom-Jones said amiably to the children. “All of you children just go down there and play all you want to. The perennials are down there,” she explained to her near guests, “and they can’t do *any* harm.”

“Be careful of the flowers, kids,” Mrs. Roberts said immediately, at the same time that Mrs. Merriam was saying, “Harriet, we’re courteous with other people’s gardens, aren’t we?” and Mrs. Byrne warned, “Pat, Mary, don’t step on anything.”

The children moved off, carrying their plates. They went as far as they thought they should, turned and were waved farther on by Mrs. Ransom-Jones. They proceeded to the end of the garden near the hedge, where, finding that they were where they belonged, they sat down and began to eat, relaxing gradually with distance and food into a completely natural, jostling state, which brought them eventually into a game of tag strictly within the limits of their prescribed area.

"They *are* good children," Mrs. Ransom-Jones observed to Mrs. Merriam as the children moved away. "I don't know *when* I've seen a better group of children."

"Of course they're well brought up," Mrs. Merriam said. "Harriet and Virginia are very close, and I think Virginia is a very well-mannered child."

"We were just complimenting your daughter," Mrs. Ransom-Jones said to Mr. Donald, passing by. "What a lovely girl Virginia is."

"Charming party," Mr. Donald said, and went on to Miss Fielding. "Good afternoon," He said. "I hope you are well."

"Good afternoon," Miss Fielding said. She had a non-intoxicating cup, which she thought was intoxicating, held in her lap in her best teacup manner, and a cookie in her other hand. "I *am* well," Miss Fielding said. "And you?"

"How *are* you, Mister," Mr. Roberts said enthusiastically from behind Mr. Donald's back. He put his hand affectionately on Mr. Donald's shoulder and said, "Miss Fielding, how are *you*?"

"Very well, thank you," Miss Fielding said, and tasted her cookie cautiously.

"I suppose it's to celebrate the wall coming down, too," Mrs. Ransom-Jones was saying to Mrs. Merriam and Mrs. Desmond. "After all, the old neighborhood will never be the same again."

"You live so far away from it," Mrs. Merriam said. "We've had all that dust, and the *noise*...."

"Caroline and I just came home yesterday," Mrs. Desmond said. She looked down at Caroline, sitting quietly next to her mother, and smoothed the child's hair. Caroline was wearing a stiff yellow frock, with yellow socks and a yellow satin ribbon on her hair; both Mrs. Merriam and Mrs. Ransom-Jones looked down at her and smiled tenderly. "It was very bad for Caroline to be around all that dust," Mrs. Desmond added, and looked appealingly at Mrs. Merriam and Mrs. Ransom-Jones. "She *coughed* so," Mrs. Desmond said.

"I tell Bill they could step right in and stop it if they wanted to," Mrs. Byrne said firmly to Mrs. Donald. "Any time Bill and Mr. Desmond and Mike Roberts and the rest wanted to they could stop it right away."

"It's going to *ruin* the neighborhood," Mrs. Donald said.

"It's too late now, of course," Mrs. Byrne said. "I told Bill."

Mrs. Roberts had got Mr. Ransom-Jones to talking about the ingredients of the intoxicating punch, and Mr. Ransom-Jones said finally, "*This* sort of thing is for old ladies, you know." He looked at Mrs. Roberts and laughed, and Mrs. Roberts said jovially, "Why do you serve it to *me,* then?" and they both laughed, and finally, unnoticed except by Miss Fielding and Mrs. Donald and Mrs. Ransom-Jones and most of the children, Mrs. Roberts and Mr. Ransom-Jones went indoors to the kitchen to find something better to drink. In the kitchen they found Mr. Donald, who had crept there to eat his chicken sandwiches, and drove him outside where he was captured by Mrs. Byrne and given a lecture on not acting in time to save Pepper Street. Mrs. Donald, escorted by Mr. Roberts, presently strolled into the kitchen, where they partook of the refreshments being served there, soon in almost frank rivalry with the table outside.

Mr. Desmond was down among the children, circulating with the plate of cookies and much hilarity, and he observed with pleasure his son and James Donald eating together in silent companionability. "*That's* the boy, Johnny," he said as he went by, and both boys looked up at him and then down again. While Mr. Desmond was walking around among the children Virginia Donald stood up, brushed off her skirt, and began to saunter down the garden toward the grown-ups. After hesitating a minute Harriet got up and followed. Virginia waved cheerfully to her father where he sat with Mrs. Byrne, and went unostentatiously into the house. Harriet, following, was caught by the shoulder, and looked around to see her father, hot and uncomfortable. "Having a nice time?" he asked. "I'll be inside."

Harriet watched her father going toward the house and then went over to her mother. "Dad's gone inside," she said when her mother looked up. Mrs. Merriam smiled and nodded and went on talking to Mrs. Desmond, and Harriet caught Mrs. Ransom-Jones's eye and whispered, "May I please find out where the bathroom is?"

Mrs. Ransom-Jones said, "Lillian, dear, will you show Harriet the bathroom?"

Mrs. Merriam looked up sharply, and Harriet, agonized at the loudness of Mrs. Ransom-Jones's voice, followed Miss Tyler into the house. They passed the kitchen and heard loud voices, and Miss Tyler, going ahead in her pale dress, turned her head away. After the bright sunlight of the garden, Harriet found it difficult to find her way through the dark rooms inside, and at last nearly ran into Miss Tyler, standing waiting. "It's a lovely party, isn't it?" Miss Tyler said, so softly that she was almost whispering. "The garden looks so pretty."

"It's a *lovely* party," Harriet said.

Miss Tyler leaned forward and put her hand on Harriet's arm. "I knew it was a mistake to have the Roberts people, though," she said. "*She's* very coarse." She shook her head sadly and went on, "I can't imagine why Brad is so polite to her. It's not his nature to be polite to coarse people."

"He's very polite," Harriet said.

"*Always* be polite," Miss Tyler said. She looked at Harriet and said, "You'll never be pretty, of *course*, but you can practice great fascination. The pretty ones always fade, always." Harriet tried to say something, something self-contained, but Miss Tyler went on hurriedly, "Take me, for instance, you wouldn't think now that I was so pretty once."

She tilted her head flirtatiously, and Harriet said, "Yes, I would think so, Miss Tyler."

"Nonsense," Miss Tyler said, and laughed lightly. "His wife is the fascinating one," she said, and when Harriet stared, Miss Tyler said, "His wife, Brad's. My sister. She's always been the fascinating one. You're lucky, you won't ever be pretty."

Harriet knew already that this would keep her heartsick for months, perhaps the rest of her life, and she said thickly, "I'm losing weight right now."

"It isn't that you're so *fat*," Miss Tyler said critically. "You just don't have the *air* of a pretty woman. All your life, for instance, you'll walk like you're fat, whether you are or not."

Harriet thought she was going to cry; her throat was numb, so she said harshly, "Where's the bathroom, please?"

"Oh," Miss Tyler said. She touched the doorway next to them. "Right in there," she said. "I had no idea you were in such a *hurry*."

Harriet went into the bathroom, and Miss Tyler walked slowly through the house to the kitchen. She stopped at the kitchen door and looked through the people inside until she found Mr. Ransom-Jones. When he saw her she waved, and he came over to the door where she was standing, with his glass in his hand and a leftover smile still on his face.

"It's a lovely party, Brad," Miss Tyler said, looking fragilely up at him. "Thank you *so* much for including me."

"Having a good time?" he asked.

"Perfect," Miss Tyler said, "except for—" She waved her hand toward the garden. "She's acting up," she said. "I don't want to carry tales."

"Don't worry about it," Mr. Ransom-Jones said. His eyes began to wander, and he turned his head slightly to look back into the kitchen.

"I'm not worrying," Miss Tyler said easily. "Thank you again for the party."

She moved out of the kitchen doorway, down the hall to the garden again. Mr. Ransom-Jones went back into the kitchen, to his place between Mrs. Donald and Mrs. Roberts. They got back to their singing.

Virginia Donald had never been officially at an adult party before. Always she had been allowed to attend, briefly, as a child, to be talked down to and indulged, but now, safely in the kitchen, she passed the initial test of encountering her mother, who waved genially at her across the room, and ended up talking to Mr. Roberts in a corner.

"But I never really had a chance like this before," Virginia said. "Please?"

"I won't take the responsibility," Mr. Roberts said. "Ask Mama."

Virginia giggled, and put her hand on his arm. "You ask her," she said. "She likes you."

Mr. Roberts debated comically, and then turned and called across the room: "Sylvia! Lady with a daughter name of Virginia!"

“I don’t have any daughter,” Mrs. Donald said, flapping her hand coquettishly. “That’s my sister.”

Everyone shouted at once, and Mr. Roberts yelled over the noise, “Well, can she have a drink?”

“She can do anything she wants to,” Mrs. Donald shouted back.

“Just watch your mother,” Mr. Ransom-Jones said, and then amended it, “I mean, your sister.”

“See?” Virginia said to Mr. Roberts, “I can do just what I want.”

“You better start with a very small one,” Mr. Roberts said. “After all, I’m responsible for you.”

Mrs. Roberts tried the door of the bathroom three times before she got Harriet Merriam out; as she went past, it seemed to her that Harriet looked upset, but there was really no time to find out. In the bathroom with the door safely locked, Mrs. Roberts, looking searchingly into the mirror, told herself: You’re pie-eyed, you’re pie-eyed. A giggle caught her, and she steadied herself against the washbasin. You’re *pie*-eyed, my girl, she told herself in the mirror: you look so nice, but you’re pie-eyed. “I’m pie-eyed,” she said out loud, and then was solemn for a minute thinking that someone might have heard her. How much of it did I say out loud, she wondered, and then, looking at herself in the mirror, began to giggle again. Pie-eyed, she thought; pie-eyed, we’ll show him, the old fool, the old lady’s man, that Donald girl with her father and mother right there, not that the father’s any.... Pie-eyed, she thought, and began to giggle helplessly.

Outside, Mrs. Desmond said to Miss Fielding, who was getting up slowly, “Caroline and I will walk down with you.” She looked around, and Mrs. Ransom-Jones said, “I think she went to find her daddy.” Mrs. Desmond’s eyes widened anxiously, and she said to Miss Fielding, “I’ll only be a minute.”

“I’m *so* sorry you have to go,” Mrs. Ransom-Jones was saying to Mrs. Byrne with Pat and Mary in back of her.

“It was so nice,” Mrs. Byrne said. “We all enjoyed it so much.”

“Thank you very much for a very lovely time,” Mary Byrne said, and Pat said, “Thank you very much, Mrs. Ransom-Jones.”

Mrs. Byrne, followed obediently by her children, began the general departure, and Mrs. Ransom-Jones was saying good-bye to three or four people at once when her sister, beside her suddenly, said, *“He’s* in there. Drinking.” Her voice had been too soft for anyone else to hear, so Mrs. Ransom-Jones pretended not to have heard it either, and went on saying, “Good-bye, it was *so* nice to have you.”

“I can’t find my husband,” Mrs. Merriam said gaily to Mrs. Ransom-Jones, “and I guess we can’t leave without him.”

Harriet pulled at her mother’s arm. “He’s inside,” she said. “Let him come later, when he’s ready.”

“Really, Harriet,” Mrs. Merriam said. “Run and get him, dear.”

Harriet went with deadly reluctance into the house and toward the kitchen. Right in the kitchen doorway Virginia was dancing with Mr. Roberts, and as Harriet went by Virginia said, “There’s Harriet,” and she and Mr. Roberts laughed. Harriet found it impossible to ask anyone for her father; Mr. Ransom-Jones and Mr. Desmond and Mrs. Donald and Mrs. Roberts were singing too loud for her to interrupt, and she would have died before speaking to Virginia. Finally Mr. Desmond broke off to say, “Looking for Daddy, Harriet? He’s in there.” His nod toward the pantry suggested unimaginable horrors to Harriet, but she opened the pantry door and went cautiously in. Her father was sitting alone on an overturned dishpan. He had a full glass in one hand, a cigarette in the other, and his eyes were half-closed. He was humming to himself, and smiling. Harriet said, “Daddy?” and Mr. Merriam jumped and turned around, the smile vanishing.

“Ready to go?” he said. He stood up and put the glass carefully down on a shelf, and came over to Harriet. “I’m ready whenever you and Mother are,” he said.

Harriet felt more protected going through the kitchen with her father, but Virginia grabbed his arm as he went by and said, “Brother Merriam, you haven’t danced with me,” and Mr. Merriam said pleasantly, “Later,” and came out with Harriet into the garden.

He was perfectly sober and perfectly docile, and he said good-bye to Mrs. Ransom-Jones without reluctance, but going down the walk he said to Mrs. Merriam, “You know, I *enjoyed* that party.”

“In the kitchen?” Mrs. Merriam said precisely, and they walked home in silence.

Mrs. Donald and Mrs. Roberts were speaking almost sharply to one another when Mrs. Desmond came to the kitchen door. No one noticed her except Mr. Desmond, but the way she looked at him brought him out into the hall immediately. Out of sight of the people in the kitchen Mrs. Desmond took her husband wildly by the arm and swung him around toward her with a violence that shocked him into silence.

“Where is Caroline?” Mrs. Desmond demanded. “Where is she?”

* * *

“There’s absolutely no question about it at all,” Mrs. Byrne said. She felt the outside of her husband’s teacup before setting it down. “It’s just too hot,” she said. “Let it stand a minute. I’m sure I never would have suspected it.”

"She was in the kitchen, dancing," Mary observed. "I saw her when I went inside for my coat."

"You never really do know people, even living so near them for years," Mrs. Byrne confided. "Imagine, in the kitchen like that."

"I never like to see a woman drinking," Mr. Byrne said pontifically. "Not the mother of children."

"And out in the kitchen like that." Mrs. Byrne shuddered vividly. "I'm sure I don't know what Josephine Merriam thought."

"Or Mrs. Ransom-Jones," Mary said. "After all, it was *her* husband."

"Mary," Mrs. Byrne said.

Pat Byrne put his glass down suddenly. "I wonder what Miss Fielding thought," he said, and began to laugh.

"I'm glad Dad didn't go," Mrs. Byrne said, and then, "Is that the doorbell? Answer it, Pat."

Pat put down his napkin and got up. "Probably some drunk," he said, and his mother said, "Pat!" as he left the room.

The doorbell rang again before Pat reached the door, and he said, "Oh, shut up," irritably as he opened it. "Yeah?" he said when he saw Tod Donald outside.

"Listen," Tod said. His voice was thinner than usual, and he put out his hand and grabbed Pat's sleeve. "Listen, Pat, we've always been pretty good friends, I want you to buy my bike."

"What bike?" Pat said, surprised.

"My *bike*." Tod's voice was insistent and got higher. "I'm going to sell you my bike. You don't have a bike, I'll let you have mine."

"I don't want your bike." Pat started to close the door, but Tod tightened his grip on Pat's sleeve and said, "Listen, Pat, you *got* to buy it. I'm going to sell you my bike. I've been thinking about it for a long time, honestly."

"You're crazy," Pat said.

"Just about five dollars," Tod said urgently. "Ask your father for it, he'll give it to you. It's a good bike, you know that."

Mrs. Byrne called from the kitchen, "Pat, who's at the door?" and Pat said, "Nothing, no one. Look," he said to Tod, "run along, I don't want your old bike."

"It's a good bike," Tod said furiously, "and it's mine to sell, honestly. James gave it to me, and it really belongs to me. Five dollars, ask your father."

"Pat?" Mrs. Byrne said, from the kitchen doorway. "Who's there, Pat?" She sounded as though she were coming closer, and Tod said, "Please, Pat." He loosened his hold on Pat's jacket and stood poised.

"Go on home," Pat said crossly.

"Don't tell anyone," Tod said, and ran off down the street just as Mrs. Byrne came into the doorway behind Pat.

"Who on earth was here?" she asked. "What's the matter?"

"It was Tod Donald," Pat said. "He acted funny."

"What did he want?" Mrs. Byrne went a step outside the door, looking down the street.

"He wanted to sell me his bike or something," Pat said. "He acted awfully funny."

"Listen," Mrs. Byrne said suddenly. Distantly, from the Ransom-Jones house, they could hear singing. "It's disgusting," Mrs. Byrne said. "Come inside, Pat."

* * *

"I didn't see her at all," Miss Fielding said faintly from behind her locked front door. "I'm sorry, I've gone to bed and I didn't see her at all."

“She had on a yellow dress,” Mr. Desmond said, his hands flat against the door, his face close to the wood. “A yellow dress and a yellow hair—”

“I’m sorry,” Miss Fielding said, even more faintly. “I’ve gone to bed.”

* * *

Frederica Terrel said, over and over, “But I tell you I just *looked*. She’s in her bed, where she belongs.”

“Not your sister,” Mr. Desmond said. “I’m not talking about her. This is Caroline, my little girl.” He held tight to the side of the door and stood half-turned away, expecting what Frederica was going to say and already set to hurry on.

“Did she have any money?” Frederica asked, understanding in her sudden way. “You know, sometimes if they have money they just go and spend it and then they come back when it’s gone.”

“This is my little girl,” Mr. Desmond said, starting off. “She’s only three years old,” he called back over his shoulder.

* * *

“Oh, my God,” Mrs. Perlman said, “the little baby?”

“Three years old,” Mr. Desmond said as though it were important.

“Mrs. Desmond,” Mrs. Perlman said, “that poor, poor woman. Wait,” she said, touching Mr. Desmond’s arm lightly, “I’ll get Mr. Perlman.”

“It’s people from outside took her,” Mrs. Mack said, nodding her great old head. “People from the other side the wall.”

“We think she’s just gotten lost,” Mr. Desmond said. “She’s just lost herself.”

“No one from *here*,” Mrs. Mack said. “This is a nice neighborhood, not like places where little girls get taken away.”

Mr. Desmond was still keeping his voice down, without shrillness or panic. “She’s never been lost like this before,” he said.

“Well,” Mrs. Mack nodded again. “That’s what happens,” she said, sagely.

* * *

“She hasn’t been *here*,” Hallie Martin said. “You want me to wake Grandma?”

“I thought she might have followed some of the children,” Mr. Desmond said. “You know, she might just have followed along behind some of the children.”

“Not *this* way,” Hallie said. “I could wake Grandma, but I’m sure she isn’t around here.”

“Thank you very much,” Mr. Desmond said.

“It’s nothing, I’m sure,” Hallie said.

* * *

The Merriams walked right into the Desmond house, since there seemed to be no one around to let them in. There was no sign of Mrs. Desmond, Mr. Desmond they knew was going from house to house, but after they had stood in the hall for a minute Johnny Desmond found them and said abruptly, “Has she turned up?”

“We came to help,” Mrs. Merriam said.

Johnny spread his hands helplessly. “I don’t know what to do,” he said.

“Where is your mother?” Mrs. Merriam lifted her chin confidently. “I want to stay with her.”

Johnny waved at the back of the house, doors the Merriams had never passed. “She’s locked herself in her room.”

Mrs. Merriam went in the direction he indicated, straightening her shoulders in spite of the nervous movement of her hands, and Johnny said, “Now she’s here I guess I can go help look.”

“Perhaps you’d better stay here too, Harriet,” Mr. Merriam said. “Johnny and I will go find Desmond and see what we can do.”

Harriet looked apprehensively at the part of the house where her mother had vanished. “I’d rather go with you.”

She followed her father and Johnny outside and down the block. “When did you find she was gone?” her father asked, and Johnny said, “At the party, when we were leaving.”

“Long time,” Mr. Merriam said. “That was about five.”

“We’ve been looking since then,” Johnny said.

Halfway up the block they met Mr. Byrne and Pat, coats thrown on hastily. “Find her?” Mr. Byrne said.

“Not yet,” Mr. Merriam said. The four of them stood uncertainly on the sidewalk, with Harriet waiting nearby. They all had faintly sheepish expressions, as though they were making fools of themselves, talking and acting with dramatic tension over something which would turn out to be nonsense by daylight.

“Can’t imagine where she could have gone,” Mr. Byrne remarked finally.

“Let’s find Dad,” Johnny said. “Mr. Merriam, we ought to find Dad.”

They began to walk down the street. There were lights in the Roberts house, and Mr. Merriam went purposefully up to the front door and rang the bell. Mrs. Roberts answered; she seemed flushed and nervous, and said, “Oh, it’s *you*, Mr. Merriam; have they found her yet?”

“Not yet,” Mr. Merriam said.

“I only saw her for just a minute this afternoon,” Mrs. Roberts said. “I just caught a glimpse of her. Neither of the boys saw her either. She doesn’t play with the children, of course. But we didn't see her."

"We're going to go out hunting for her, I guess," Mr. Merriam said heavily. "I guess all the men had better get out and look for her."

"Oh," Mrs. Roberts said. Then she said, "Oh, you want Mike, then. Wait a minute." She went indoors a few steps and called, "Mike? Come here a minute."

Mr. Roberts said querulously from the living-room, "What the hell do you want now?" and Mrs. Roberts said, "Mr. Merriam wants you. Just a minute," she said again to Mr. Merriam.

Mr. Roberts came to the front door a little unsteadily, walking with his feet carefully put down. His hair was mussed and he scowled at his wife as he came past her to lean against the doorway. "Evening, Merriam," he said. "Want me?"

Mr. Merriam was embarrassed. "I don't suppose it's anything, really," he said. "It's just we thought we ought to get everyone we could."

"The little Desmond girl's gone," Mrs. Roberts said. She looked at her husband coldly, her smile righteous, her eyes triumphant. "She disappeared this afternoon."

"Gone?" Mr. Roberts said in horror. "Kidnapped?"

* * *

Harriet waited on the sidewalk with Johnny and the Byrnes for a minute, and then said, "Excuse me," and slipped away up the street. She was surprised to see lights in the Perlmans' house, until she realized that, late as it seemed, it was hardly ten o'clock. She ran quickly up the front steps and rang the doorbell.

"Mrs. Perlman," she said breathlessly, "has Mr. Desmond been here?"

Mrs. Perlman nodded her head, looking surprised and disapproving. “You shouldn’t be out so late,” she said. “Come in and wait till Mr. Perlman gets back, and he’ll take you home.”

“I can’t,” Harriet said. “No one’s home at my house. I mean,” she went on confusedly, when Mrs. Perlman frowned openly, “I mean, if Mr. Desmond hasn’t been here yet you don’t know.”

“He was just here,” Mrs. Perlman said.

“Everyone’s out hunting for her,” Harriet said.

“You shouldn’t be out alone,” Mrs. Perlman said. “Oh, that poor woman. Come in for a minute, and Marilyn and I will come with you. Unless,” she added, looking at Harriet, “unless you think your mother would mind if you came in Marilyn’s house.”

* * *

James Donald went to get his mother and sister from the Ransom-Jones house. The front door was open and he went into the hall and called, “Hello?”

Miss Tyler came to him from somewhere, probably her bedroom, because she was wearing a filmy nightgown under a Japanese kimono. “How do you do?” she said formally. “May I help you?”

“I’m looking for my sister,” James said, unable to tell this woman that his mother was here too.

“They’re all out in the kitchen,” Miss Tyler said. She added with a faint touch of malice, “I think they’re having breakfast.”

“I’m sorry I disturbed you,” James said, not thinking of anything except how to get into the kitchen and out again. “Is that the way?”

He started for an open doorway and was halted by Miss Tyler’s faint eager laughter. “That’s my bedroom,” she whispered, and ran past him into the room and slammed the door. “Right straight down the hall,” she said from inside. “Naughty man.”

James went hurriedly down the hall; as he came nearer the kitchen he heard voices, his mother’s shrill. “One quart of coffee coming up,” she was saying.

James pushed open the swinging door of the kitchen, and his mother screamed, “It’s my son! Look, everyone, here’s my little boy!”

They were all sitting around the kitchen table, Mr. and Mrs. Ransom-Jones and Mrs. Donald and Virginia. Virginia and Mr. Ransom-Jones were talking earnestly and did not look up when James came in, but Mrs. Donald ran over and threw her arms around him.

“Come and have some coffee, honey,” she said. She looked at Mrs. Ransom-Jones and said unhappily, “Can my honey have some coffee?”

“Mother,” James said, regretting the voice that came out boyish, “Mother, I want you to come home. Right away.”

“Listen to him,” Mrs. Donald said, and Mrs. Ransom-Jones added caressingly, “The dear boy.”

“Something *terrible* has happened,” James said.

* * *

They gathered, eventually, almost everyone, on what was traditionally their forgotten village green — the sidewalk in front of the Donald house. For once the children were not separated from the adults; nearly every mother kept her hands on her children, and stood next to her husband. The children themselves were silent, afraid to meet each other’s eyes.

“The poor woman,” Mrs. Perlman said companionably to Mrs. Byrne. She had Marilyn in front of her, held by both shoulders. “It’s so terrible to think about, that poor woman.”

Mrs. Merriam was still at the Desmond house, but Harriet stood very close to her father. “All the men,” he was saying, “all the men get flashlights.”

“He called the police from our house,” Mrs. Byrne said. “I suppose they’ll send someone to look for her.”

Mrs. Donald and Virginia stood apart from the rest, with James beside them. “If we’d known,” Mrs. Donald wailed, “if we’d only *known* in time.” Mrs. Ransom-Jones stood beside her, and she turned and said to Mrs. Ransom-Jones, “If we had only known in time.”

Nothing that anyone said had any purpose; they were waiting for something, for an act on someone’s part that would clarify the situation. No one could do anything at all until the occasion was identified — either it was a great climactic festival over nothing, in which case they would all go quietly home, or else it was an emergency, a crisis, a tragedy, in which case they were all called upon to act together as human beings, to be men and women in a community, the men out on dangerous business, the women waiting, going to the window, wringing their hands.

Mr. Desmond stood in the center; he was frightened, and he said over and over, “It will kill her if we don’t find her right away, I don’t know what else she wants me to do, it will kill her.”

Mr. Ransom-Jones and Mr. Merriam were both trying to take charge. Mr. Merriam was saying, “If all the men get flashlights, we can go around,” and Mr. Ransom-Jones was saying, “The police will be right along, I called them again myself.”

The prevailing mood was one of keen excitement; no one there really wanted Caroline Desmond safe at home, although Mrs. Perlman said crooningly behind Marilyn, “The poor, poor woman,” and Mrs. Donald said again, “If we’d only known in time.” Pleasure was in the feeling that the terrors of the night, the jungle, had come close to their safe lighted homes, touched them nearly, and departed, leaving every family safe but one; an acute physical pleasure like a pain, which made them all regard Mr. Desmond greedily, and then turn their eyes away with guilt.

"All the *men get flashlights*," Mr. Merriam said.

James Donald left his mother and came over to Mr. Merriam, saying, "I've got a couple of flashes. I think we ought to start looking right away."

"Good idea," Mr. Merriam said, as though it had never occurred to him. Mr. Desmond said, "Who's that — James?" He put his hand on James's shoulder and said, "It will kill her if we don't find her."

James's voice was, for once, low and steady. He said again, "We ought to start right out."

It looked as if James were going to take charge, with Mr. Desmond on one side of him and Mr. Merriam on the other, both looking at him and nodding. Mr. Byrne said, "Right away," and Mr. Ransom-Jones said, "As soon as the police get here."

In the pale street light, James's head was with the other men's heads, held as tall as most of them, and his voice mingling with theirs in stern masculine comment; Pat Byrne broke suddenly away from his mother's hand, and said loudly, "Did anyone tell them about Toddie?"

"Toddie?" Mr. Desmond said vaguely.

"Toddie?" Mrs. Donald said. She looked around her. "Toddie?"

Suddenly everyone was looking for Toddie; Pat Byrne was allowed to walk over to the group of men forming, and say in his deepest voice, "Tod Donald; he came trying to sell me his bike tonight and he acted awfully funny."

Frederica Terrel stood on her front steps; Beverley was wakeful, and Frederica did not dare leave her house, but she craned her neck to see, and when voices were raised she could hear. She saw Mr. Desmond isolated for a minute, while the group of men stirred, walking up to one another and speaking, and Mr. Desmond was twisting his hands and looking up and down the street eagerly. *That's* no way to find her, Frederica thought wisely; you never find someone who's running away by just *standing* there.

Mr. Donald, next door, was standing in his open doorway. Occasionally he moved a little toward the group in the street and then moved back again. He had a book in his hand, with his finger between the pages marking the place, and now and then he looked longing at his own house, at the lighted living-room window. Why doesn't he go indoors, Frederica thought, they've got enough people standing down there. Suddenly James Donald broke away from the group of people in the street and came up to his father. "Where's Toddie?" he called as he came up, "is he inside?"

Mr. Donald shook his head and James ran past him into the house and came out again after a minute and said, "He's not there." He saw Frederica and said to her, "Have you seen my little brother?"

"I saw him yesterday," Frederica said.

"Today, I mean," James said. "Tonight."

"No," Frederica said. "Not since yesterday."

Suddenly Mrs. Donald raised her voice down on the street. "Toddie," she wailed. "My little baby."

The women standing near Mrs. Donald all moved away from her quickly, and Virginia said roughly, "Be *quiet*, Mother."

Down on the street Pat Byrne stood with the men while James waited in front of his own house. "He acted so funny that I was surprised," Pat said insistently.

Then Mr. Perlman, who had been so quiet until now, waiting with a flashlight in his hand for someone to start off into the dark, said the thing which everyone realized then had been in their minds. “If the two children are together,” Mr. Perlman asked reasonably and softly, “why didn’t the boy bring her home?”

They were all silent, realizing that the first person who spoke now would have to say something worse, something else they were all thinking, something which, whether true or not, would be the most horrible thing that had ever happened on Pepper Street.

It was Mr. Desmond, rightfully, who cracked the tense film of comprehension that lay like the pale yellow of the street light over all the people waiting, keeping even the smallest children taut and expectant. “Toddie!” was all Mr. Desmond said. He walked over to the sidewalk and called up to James, standing on his own front walk, “What has he *done* to my little girl?”

Frederica crushed herself back against her own front door. She was afraid to open it for fear the slight noise and the movement would catch Mr. Desmond’s attention. The people in the street behind Mr. Desmond had gathered closer together so that it was impossible to single out any one of them; Frederica could see their faces in the light, and their hands, but they were so close together that there were no names for any of the faces, and the hands might be clasped tight in the hands of strangers.

* * *

Pat Byrne and Mr. Perlman were with the two policemen who went up to the creek to hunt for Caroline. On the way up there Pat, who was along to show them the way and to tell them what he knew about Tod, walked with long strides, putting his feet down manfully just as the other men did, and he talked using words he would never have dared use before.

It was dark along the road and even darker in the trees around the creek, and Pat had to steel himself to walk alone, ahead of the rest, as though he were really showing them the way, instead of falling back shoulder to shoulder with Mr. Perlman, who seemed faintly nervous and spoke tremblingly when he spoke at all. Once among the trees, Pat was silent; the two policemen communicated in monosyllables, words like “there,” or “in here.” Mr. Perlman came slowly behind, stumbling. Pat looked more at the darkness, the strange black unfamiliar places; he passed the fallen log without recognizing it and lost his bearings, so that the steady searching movements of the policemen lost meaning for him, their voices were rhythmic in their short words, none of the lights ever shone where Pat could see the way, and he was horribly afraid.

Finally, one of the policemen said, “Down there,” and the other said, “Right,” and Pat followed the light blindly, not yet ready to accept any end to the darkness, an object to the search. Mr. Perlman, saying, “My God,” peering over his shoulder, made Pat look ahead to where the policemen held their lights converged, but there was nothing to see except Caroline Desmond lying on the ground; Pat saw her clearly, and said, “There’s Caroline Desmond.”

She was horribly dirty; no one had ever seen Caroline as dirty as she was then, with mud all over her yellow dress and yellow socks and, of course, Pat understood perfectly, what was all over her head must be blood, unconvincing as it looked in the flashlight. It was absolutely unthinkable at the creek, not twenty feet from the fallen log Pat could walk across, and the really dreadful thing, lying right there next to her as though it might be hers, was the rock with blood on it; part of the creek, belonging to it, a rock which had probably been sitting there as long as Pat had been coming to the creek, a rock he might have stepped over or lifted with his two hands. Even though Pat had never noticed the rock particularly before, it should have been left alone.

* * *

It wasn't safe behind the wall where a brick might fall on him, and yet Tod was afraid to move anywhere else, with people going all up and down the block, flashing lights and talking to one another. Tod thought they were looking for him, and yet there had never been this much fuss made over him before in his life, and the principal reason he had not run out and said "Here I am," was his fear of the sudden surprise and the humiliating laughter when they saw him and realized that he thought they were looking for him.

It was cold behind the wall, and Tod kept turning his eyes nervously sideways to see if any of his slight movements had loosened a brick that might come plunging downward; it was like the night he hid in the bushes and heard Hester talking to his brother. James was not visible in the street now; Tod had only been behind the wall for a few minutes and so did not know that his family sat within the walls of their house, all together in one room. What did occur to him was that in any case no one in his family would bother to look for him.

He could see Mr. Ransom-Jones, and Mr. Merriam; they had stood together like that, talking, for a few minutes at the party. Tod had left the party without saying good-bye to Mrs. Ransom-Jones; while leaving stealthily was a social error, technically he was still at the party until he told Mrs. Ransom-Jones that he had had a lovely time. For a minute Tod was prepared to step out from behind the wall and find Mrs. Ransom-Jones, and then he cowered back again. He was safer where he was. But it was long past his bedtime.

He heard voices nearby and looked out carefully to see Mr. and Mrs. Roberts going past across the street. “Too damn drunk to go out with the other men,” Mrs. Roberts was saying.

It was a long time after that; Tod had finally figured out a way to sit down, and had perhaps fallen asleep with his head against the wall, but he looked out suddenly and the street was empty. Not a person, not a light outside. He waited to see if anyone came, and then slipped out from behind the wall and ran, across Cortez Road and on to the sidewalk again in front of Miss Fielding’s, quickly past Miss Fielding’s, jumping almost automatically, as he had done so many times before, over the broken spot in the sidewalk, past the house-for-rent, dark and asleep against the heavy pines that almost hid his own house from him; he stopped, horrified, when he saw that there were lights in his house; were they, could they be waiting up for him?

He went quietly around to the back door, hesitated there till he was sure everything was quiet, and then turned the knob cautiously. It opened, and he slid inside through a narrow opening, closed it softly without trying to make sure that it latched, and then eased himself, step by silent step, up the back stairs. Once in the upstairs hall, familiar and lighted and warm and safe, he could not go slowly any longer but raced for his bed, the pillow, the covers over his head.

Downstairs in the living-room James looked upward, said, “Did I hear something?” looked around at his mother, no longer crying, his father reading, Virginia twisting a lock of hair in her fingers, and rose, saying, “Might as well look again.” He went upstairs and, outside the door of the room he shared with his brother, said, “Toddie?”

“What?” Toddie said from the bed.

“Christ!” James said, and ran to the head of the stairs, yelling downward, “He’s here, everyone! I found him!”

As his mother and father and sister started up the stairs James yelled again, “Virginia, get the Desmonds, hurry!”

* * *

The policeman looked like a doctor, like a dentist, like the man at the movie theatre who wanted to know how old you were before he let you in for half-price. Except that he wore a uniform fascinatingly official, he looked at you in the same way, as though he knew things about you he was not going to tell and yet was going to hurt you anyway, of his own accord, whether you wanted him to or not, like the dentist. Or as though there were no way of getting out of it, and he knew best anyway, like the doctor. Or as though he hated everybody who was legally under twelve, the way the man at the movies looked.

Many people had been in and out of the dining-room where Tod sat with the policeman; James looking stern, and Tod’s mother and father, and unrecognizable people who looked at Tod as though this were their house and not his. Finally he sat there alone with the policeman — the dentist, the doctor — wondering what was going to happen to him.

“All right,” the policeman said finally, leaning back in his chair, the dining-room chair where Mr. Donald sat every night. “All right.”

Tod stared; when they brought him into the dining-room he had gone directly to his own chair, and he sat there now, his legs wrapped around the rungs, his hands in his lap.

“All right,” the policeman said. “Let’s hear all about it.”

Tod shook his head numbly; if he opened his mouth the man might start drilling his teeth, if he moved his arm the man might seize it and puncture him with a needle.

“Scared?” the policeman said. “I’m not surprised. Just tell me what happened.”

Tod shook his head again, and the policeman looked at him, bright cold eyes waiting. “You’re going to have to tell me, sonny,” the policeman said. “You might as well start.”

You’re going to have to.... The familiar words stirred in Tod’s mind, and he moved as though to stand up, but the policeman held out a hand and Tod sat still.

“Look,” the policeman said, his voice a little harder, “about an hour or so ago two policemen and—” he looked down at a piece of paper in front of him— “your friend Patrick Byrne went up to the creek and they found the little girl up there, so we know all about it now. You just tell me what happened.”

Patrick Byrne. That would be Pat. Down on the little piece of paper.

“No one wants to frighten you,” the policeman said. He leaned forward and pointed his pencil toward Tod, now like, most horribly, the school superintendent. “This is a serious thing. I want you to realize that. Tell me how you killed that little girl.”

Tod gasped; once he had been caught copying from his book in an exam.

“Listen, sonny,” the policeman said, “we’re going to put you in jail.”

Without waiting, he stood up after this, and said, gathering his papers together, “Don’t try to run away again. I’m going to leave you here for a little while to think about all this. When you decide to tell me all about it you let me know.” He went out the living-room door, his big back stern and unforgiving and angry as the door closed behind him.

* * *

He was gone longer than he intended, nearly an hour, but Mr. Desmond, crying now, detained him in the hall, and when he came back Tod was dead.

He had taken a piece of clothesline from the kitchen, and his own chair to stand on, the one he sat on every night at dinner. Hanging, his body was straighter than it had ever been in life.

The policeman stood for a minute just inside the door, looking at Tod and flipping his thumbnail across the papers he still held in his hand. “Well,” he said in a great gusty breath, and, finally, “That settles *that,”* he said.

* * *

Harriet Merriam woke up the next morning with a recollection of disaster. Looking around her sunny room with her head still on the pillow, she searched for the source of the flat dead feeling inside her, the knowledge of despair. Something had happened. She remembered slowly; standing in the street she remembered clearly, and coming home alone to bed in the darkness, and, before that, the people in the street, and Mr. Desmond. Mr. Desmond was part of it, she remembered then, and at last it came to her: he was standing laughing in the kitchen when she went by, following Miss Tyler into the house to hear... *fat*.

The ugly, the sickening word came back to her, spoken in Miss Tyler’s small voice: fat. Harriet looked down at herself under the bedclothes; she was gross, a revolting series of huge mountains, a fat fat fat girl.

She turned her head from side to side on the pillow, her eyes shut so as not to see herself. You’ll always be fat, she thought, never pretty, never charming, never dainty. In an ecstasy of shame she searched for every pretty word she knew; she would never be any of them.

Finally she sat up in bed, tears on her cheeks, and looked out of the window. Outside were the eucalyptus trees, like lace against the sky. If it were only possible to lie against them, light and bodiless, sink into their softness, deeper and deeper, lost in them, buried, never come back again....

* * *

"Sure I saw it," Pat said. He closed his eyes. "It was awful," he said.

Marilyn smiled involuntarily, and said urgently, "Well, what was it *like*?"

"Awful," Pat said vividly. "All blood, and dirty. It was awful."

"Was the rock there?" Jamie Roberts asked with respect.

"Sure. I nearly touched it," Pat said, and the children sighed, all together. "It was all covered with blood," he said.

"Golly," Jamie said. He folded his arms and stared wistfully. "I *wish* I'd been there," he said.

"Yeah," Pat said scornfully, "you wouldn't have liked it much, I can tell you. Boy," he said reminiscently, "it was sure awful."

"Listen, Pat," Mary said, "listen, was she *awful*? I mean, all bloody?"

Pat made an expressive face. "There was blood all over *every*thing," he said. "I nearly got some on my *shoe.*"

"Oooh," Marilyn said, her face all screwed up, "Pat, you're *terrible*!"

* * *

Mr. Merriam, walking slowly by the creek in the first dusk, met and recognized Mr. Perlman by the fallen log. They smiled embarrassedly at one another and then stood together, looking out beyond the creek over the golf course.

"I was just looking around," Mr. Merriam said. "I just had an idea I'd kind of like to look around." He laughed uncomfortably. "Suppose the police have covered everything pretty thoroughly," he said.

"I suppose so," Mr. Perlman said. "Doesn't seem quite right, does it?"

"That's what I thought," Mr. Merriam said. "It just doesn't seem quite right."

"He was too small, for one thing," Mr. Perlman said eagerly. "You can't tell me a boy that small could heft a rock that big. Stands to reason."

"No," Mr. Merriam said quietly. "No, I thought of that."

"Just isn't possible," Mr. Perlman said. "And another thing, he came home. Wouldn't have done that."

"You know," Mr. Merriam confided, "Desmond's been saying the kid had blood all over his clothes. Well, now, I was one of the people saw Tod when he came home." Mr. Merriam paused for effect, and then said, "There was not one spot of blood on him. Not a spot."

"Well, then, that's another thing," Mr. Perlman said. "He'd have gotten some blood on him, wouldn't he?"

"You know what I think?" Mr. Merriam said, "I think it was a tramp. Some Godforsaken old bum just hanging around down here. Never did like the kids playing up here, it's a natural place for tramps to hang out."

"Something in that," Mr. Perlman said. "Marilyn's been playing up here; I don't like to think what might have happened."

"My kid too," Mr. Merriam said.

They were both quiet for a minute, looking at the silent trees and the deserted golf course. Then Mr. Perlman said, "At any rate, the whole thing was too hasty. Far too hasty. Everyone jumping to conclusions."

"Take my word for it, it was some tramp," Mr. Merriam said.

* * *

"*I* think they're not telling all they know," Mrs. Merriam said. She nodded emphatically, and Mrs. Byrne said in her comfortable voice, "I don't blame the poor people for not wanting any more fuss, after all."

"*I* think," Mrs. Merriam said, leaning forward to emphasize her point, "that when you get a young boy like Tod, who's obviously, well, not *right*, somehow, taking a little girl like that off into a deserted spot.... Well." She nodded again and leaned back.

"Really," Mrs. Byrne said. She stirred uneasily, and Mrs. Merriam said, "More tea, Mrs. Byrne?" Mrs. Byrne held up a hand in refusal. Mrs. Merriam gave a muffled little laugh, and said, "You'd think I invited you just to talk about this dreadful affair, Mrs. Byrne, but really I can't *help* thinking about it all the time. It's so fresh in all our minds, I suppose, and then it makes you so *mad* to think of him getting off so easy."

"Easy?" Mrs. Byrne said, startled.

"Well," Mrs. Merriam said, flustered, "you know what I mean. Of course, the way he... did it, without telling anything first, is as good as a confession. But they should have gotten the *facts* first."

"He was such a quiet little thing all the time," Mrs. Byrne said. "Seems funny to think about him having gumption enough to go and get the rope, and—"

"Don't," Mrs. Merriam said with a shiver. "I can't even think about it."

"Well, now, Pat, my son, he was there," Mrs. Byrne said. "He went with the policemen that found the... that found her. Not that I think he *should* have been along." She looked at Mrs. Merriam, and Mrs. Merriam rolled her eyes in horrified agreement. "Well," Mrs. Byrne continued, "Pat seemed to think it was like an accident. Like she fell against this rock and hit her head, and Tod saw he couldn't help her and got frightened, and no wonder."

Mrs. Merriam said, "No, indeed, that could *not* have happened, Mrs. Byrne. Think about that boy, think about how he acted all the time. He was always strange, I remember myself, noticing how strange he always was. And then think about the facts they're not giving out. Mark my words," Mrs. Merriam said, “even if that killing was an accident, there were other things about it that *were not* accidental.” She tightened her lips and looked triumphant.

* * *

“‘Woe to him,’” Mrs. Mack read, her voice rising slightly as the dog watched her patiently. “‘Woe to him that coveteth an evil covetousness to his house, that he may set his nest on high, that he may be delivered from the power of evil! Thou hast consulted shame to thy house by cutting off many people, and hast sinned against thy soul. For the stone shall cry out of the wall, and the beam out of the timber shall answer it. Woe to him that buildeth a town with blood, and stablisheth a city by iniquity!’”

* * *

“I am so damn sick of all this business I could scream,” Mrs. Roberts said. She sat up in bed and looked angrily down on her husband, barely visible in the darkness. “What the hell do you know about it anyway?” she demanded viciously. “You were too drunk to do anything except fall over your own feet.”

“Good night,” Mr. Roberts said into his pillow.

“And the way you talked to Mr. Desmond,” Mrs. Roberts went on inflexibly, “right there where everyone could hear.” She raised her voice to a high mimicry. “‘Desmond, I’m so sorry about your little girl getting kidnapped.’”

Indignant, Mr. Roberts rolled over on his back. “What I said—” he began in a voice of cold logic.

“I could have *died*,” Mrs. Roberts said. “And his little girl lying there dead.”

"Oh, God," Mr. Roberts said. He rolled over onto his stomach again.

"I was so ashamed," Mrs. Roberts continued, her voice dropping almost an octave. "Seems like I always have to be ashamed, when everyone else is out there helping and *my* husband has to be lying there dead drunk, the only one on the block who had to go to a nice party and get dead—"

"Good night," Mr. Roberts said again.

"And dancing with Virginia Donald like a college boy," Mrs. Roberts said. "And the children right there all the time." Sitting up in bed in the darkness she began to cry.

* * *

"So." Frederica leaned back and regarded her sister across the round table. Beverley was listening open-mouthed, her hands on the table and her eyes wide. "You see?" Frederica said. "All that I told you is true, every word. You see what happens to bad girls that run away all the time?"

"Tell it again," Beverley begged, scarcely breathing with excitement, "Frederica, tell it again."

* * *

The new road was finished on schedule, the following spring, and the first person across it was Hallie Martin. No one ever heard from the Donalds again after they moved out to Idaho where her family lived, but Miss Fielding died very suddenly about a year later and the Merriams went to the funeral, which was badly attended. Mr. Perlman eventually bought the house he lived in on Pepper Street, and put in some improvements, particularly an addition to the garage for the car he gave Marilyn on her eighteenth birthday. The Terrels moved out very suddenly one day and left no forwarding address; no one saw them go.

The Ransom-Jones's cat, Angel, died, and was buried in the garden alongside her three predecessors. After debating for some time, the Ransom-Joneses took another cat, a brown Siamese. The Byrne family finally moved to a home in a fashionable part of San Francisco because Mr. Byrne disliked commuting by train. The Robertses had a third child, another boy, named Francis.

Although the pavement in the new street was fresher and shinier than the pavement on the old Pepper Street block, it was always less satisfactory for roller-skating, being made of some material slightly more slippery. A wide break appeared in the sidewalk the first winter, near the spot where Jamie Roberts had left the print of his hand in the fresh cement.

Mrs. Mack's house remained, a pastoral eyesore, while the neighborhood changed around it. The new boy who moved into the Donald house once ventured in through the apple trees to see the old lady, and she drove him out with a stick.

Harriet Merriam kept house for her father after her mother's death; she never married. The Desmond house was vacant for nearly a year before it was bought by some people from Oklahoma.

The old lady who had owned the wall and the property it enclosed passed away very quietly one night in her sleep. No one was at her bedside when she died.

Hangsaman (1951)

First published by Farrar, Straus and Young in 1951, *Hangsaman* is Jackson's second novel, appearing three years after her debut work, *The Road through the Wall.* She was a recognisable name to readers by this stage, having attained a certain degree of fame or notoriety due to her chilling and at the time controversial short story, 'The Lottery'. The novel was published shortly before she gave birth to her fourth child in nine years. Her husband, Stanley Edgar Hyman, was a literary critic, staff writer for *The New Yorker* magazine and a professor at Bennington College, where he taught a class entitled 'Myth, Ritual and Literature'. The couple lived in the village of North Bennington, Virginia for most of their marriage with a short period residing in Saugatuck, Westpoint, Connecticut.

Hangsaman is an unnerving and disorientating story focused on a young woman, Natalie Waite. She has an unhappy home life (echoing the author's own experiences) as she is made to feel uncomfortable by her pompous and bullying father and a neurotic and alcoholic mother. At a party hosted by her parents, Natalie experiences a profoundly traumatic event, further isolating her from the family and damaging her sense of self. When she arrives at college, she finds it lonely and unwelcoming, withdrawing into her imagination in search on an identity. Jackson creates an eerie and disconcerting story with disturbing undertones as Natalie's psyche begins to fracture and the boundaries between the real and imagined become blurred.

Jackson, close to the time of publication

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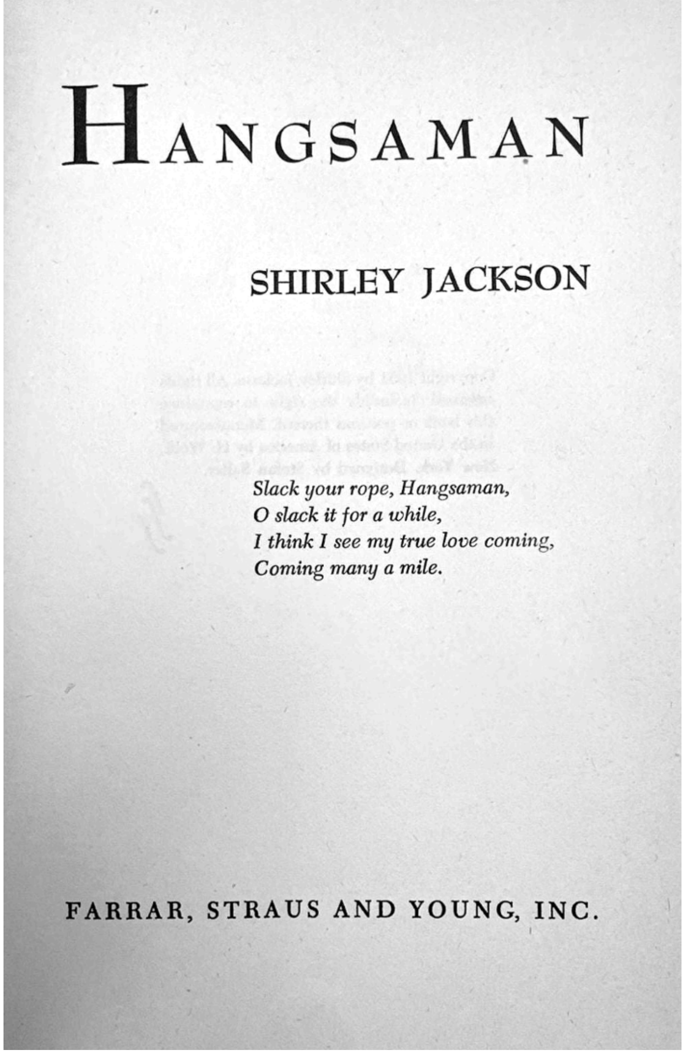


HANGSAMAN

SHIRLEY JACKSON

Slack your rope, Hangsaman,
O slack it for a while,
I think I see my true love coming,
Coming many a mile.

FARRAR, STRAUS AND YOUNG, INC.

The first edition's title page

For my children:

Laurence, Joanne, and Sarah

Slack your rope, Hangsaman,

O slack it for a while,

I think I see my true love coming,

Coming many a mile.

HANGSAMAN

MR. ARNOLD WAITE — husband, parent, man of his word — invariably leaned back in his chair after his second cup of breakfast coffee and looked with some disbelief at his wife and two children. His chair was situated so that when he put his head back the sunlight, winter or summer, touched his unfaded hair with an air at once angelic and indifferent — indifferent because, like himself, it found belief not an essential factor to its continued existence. When Mr. Waite turned his head to regard his wife and children the sunlight moved with him, broken into patterns on the table and the floor.

"Your God," he customarily remarked to Mrs. Waite down the length of the breakfast table, "has seen fit to give us a glorious day." Or, "Your God has seen fit to give us rain," or "snow," or "has seen fit to visit us with thunderstorms." This ritual arose from an ill-advised remark made by Mrs. Waite when her daughter was three; small Natalie had asked her mother what God was, and Mrs. Waite had replied that God made the world, the people in it, and the weather; Mr. Waite did not tend to let such remarks be forgotten.

"God," Mr. Waite said this morning, and laughed. "*I* am God," he added.

Natalie Waite, who was seventeen years old but who felt that she had been truly conscious only since she was about fifteen, lived in an odd corner of a world of sound and sight past the daily voices of her father and mother and their incomprehensible actions. For the past two years — since, in fact, she had turned around suddenly one bright morning and seen from the corner of her eye a person called Natalie, existing, charted, inescapably located on a spot of ground, favored with sense and feet and a bright-red sweater, and most obscurely alive — she had lived completely by herself, allowing not even her father access to the farther places of her mind. She visited strange countries, and the voices of their inhabitants were constantly in her ear; when her father spoke he was accompanied by a sound of distant laughter, unheard probably by anyone except his daughter.

"Well," Mr. Waite customarily remarked, after he had taken his stand as God for another day, "only twenty-one more days before Natalie leaves us." Sometimes it was "only fourteen more days before Bud goes off again." Natalie was leaving for her first year in college a week after her brother went back to high school; sometimes twenty-one days resolved itself into three weeks, and seemed endless; sometimes it seemed a matter of minutes slipping by so swiftly that there would never be time to approach college with appropriate consideration, to form a workable personality to take along. Natalie was desperately afraid of going away to college, even the college only thirty miles away that her father had chosen for her. She had two consolations: first, the conviction from previous experience that any place becomes home after awhile, so that she might assume a reasonable probability that after a month or so the college would be familiar and her home faintly alien. Her second consolation was the recurring thought that she might always give up college if she chose, and simply stay at home with her mother and father; this prospect was so horrible that Natalie found herself, when she thought confidently about it, almost enjoying her fear of going away.

Thus, at nine-thirty of a Sunday morning the Waites had breakfasted together. Mr. Waite felt with complacence the touch of the sunlight on his head; Bud, stirring in his chair, sighed with the deep resignation of a boy fifteen years old who is going back to high school in fourteen more days; Mrs. Waite, looking deeply into her coffee cup, spoke with the soft, faintly wistful intonation she kept for her husband. "Cocktail olives," she said. It was as though she were deliberately setting him off, because Mr. Waite stared for a minute and then said emphatically, “You mean I have to make cocktails for that crew? Cocktails for twenty people? Cocktails?”

“You *couldn’t* very well ask them to drink tea,” Mrs. Waite said. “Not *them*.”

Natalie, fascinated, was listening to the secret voice which followed her. It was the police detective and he spoke sharply, incisively, through the gentle movement of her mother’s voice. “How,” he asked pointedly, “Miss Waite, *how* do you account for the gap in time between your visit to the rose garden and your discovery of the body?”

“I can’t tell,” Natalie said back to him in her mind, her lips not moving, her dropped eyes concealing from her family the terror she hid also from the detective. “I refuse to say,” she told him.

Mr. Waite spoke patiently. “You serve cocktails,” he said, “you’re always making them. With ordinary highballs everyone can make his own. They will anyway,” he added, driving home his point.

“*I* didn’t invite them,” Mrs. Waite said.

“*I* didn’t invite them,” Mr. Waite said.

“I called them,” Mrs. Waite said, “but you made out the list.”

“You realize,” the detective said silently, “that this discrepancy in time may have very serious consequences for you?”

“I realize,” Natalie said. Confess, she thought, if I confess I might go free.

Mr. Waite shifted his ground again; by now he and his wife knew one another well enough to substitute half-hearted disagreement for a more taxing marital relationship, and an aimless, constant argument where either one took any side was to them a familiarity as affectionate as the ponderous sympathy of a Victorian household. “God,” Mr. Waite said, “I wish they weren’t coming.”

“I can cancel it,” his wife said, as she always did.

“I could get some work done for a change,” Mr. Waite said. He looked around the table, at his wife gazing into her coffee cup, at Natalie regarding her plate, at Bud watching out the window some presumably enrapturing adolescent dream. “No one ever *looks* at anyone else in this house,” Mr. Waite said irritably. “Do you realize I’m two weeks behind in my work?” he demanded of his wife. He enumerated on his fingers. “I’ve got to review four books by Monday; four books *no* one in this house has read but myself. Then there’s the article on Robin Hood — that should have been finished three days ago. And my reading, and today’s paper, and yesterday’s. Not to mention,” Mr. Waite added ponderously, “not to mention the book.”

At the mention of the book, his family glanced at him briefly, in chorus, and then away, back to the less choleric plates and cups on the table.

“I wish I could help you, dear,” Mrs. Waite said artificially.

“Are you aware,” the detective demanded sarcastically of Natalie, “that you are retarding the course of this investigation by your stubborn silence?”

“Listen,” Bud said abruptly, “*I* don’t have to come to this thing, do I?”

His father frowned, and then laughed rudely. “What were you planning to do instead?” he asked; if there was a note of thunder in his voice his family ignored it through long familiarity.

“Something,” Bud said insolently. “Anything.”

Mr. Waite looked down the table at his wife. “This son of mine,” he explained elaborately, “has such a distaste for the literary life that he prefers doing ‘something — anything’ to attending a literary cocktail party.” An epigram obviously occurred to him and he tried it out cautiously. “A literary cocktail party holds few attractions for one,” he began slowly, feeling his way, “who is at the same time too untaught for literature and too young for drink.”

The family considered; Mrs. Waite shook her head.

“Adolescence is a time when—” she suggested finally, and Mr. Waite took it up: “When one is too untaught for literature and too young for drink.”

“Too old for literature?” Natalie asked.

Bud laughed. “Too smart to get anywhere near it,” he said.

They all laughed, and the sudden family gesture was so pleasant to them that they immediately took steps to separate themselves from one another. Mr. Waite left first; still laughing, he slid his napkin into the ring which was composed of two snakes curiously and obscenely entwined (“nothing to sit at table with,” Mrs. Waite called it) and rose, saying, “Excuse me,” to his wife as he did so. A moment later Bud eased himself from his chair and was, by a typical sliding grace, able to reach the door ahead of his father. “After *you*, sir,” Bud said grandly as he held the door for his father, and Mr. Waite bowed formally and said, “Thank you, young man.” They went down the hall together, and Natalie and Mrs. Waite could hear Bud saying, “As a matter of fact, I’m going swimming.”

Terror lest she be left alone with her mother made Natalie almost speechless; as her mother opened her mouth to speak (perhaps to say, “Excuse me,” to Natalie; perhaps she was as much troubled by being left alone with Natalie) Natalie said quickly, “Busy now,” and went with little dignity out of the French doors behind her chair and down the flat steps into the garden.

She did not really prefer the garden to several other spots in the world; she would rather, for instance, have been alone in her room with the door locked, or sitting on the grass by a brook at midnight, or, given an absolutely free choice, standing motionless against a pillar in a Greek temple or on a tumbril in Paris or on a great lonely rock over the sea, but the garden was closest, and it pleased her father to see her wandering morning-wise among the roses.

“And your age?” said the detective. “Occupation? Sex?”

It was a beautiful morning, and the garden seemed to be enjoying it. The grass had exerted itself to be unusually green just beyond Natalie’s feet, the roses were heavy and sweet and suitable for giving to any number of lovers, the sky was blue and serene, as though it had never known a tear. Natalie smiled secretly, moving her shoulders stiffly under her thin white shirt, agreeably conscious of herself going from the flat line of her shoulders all the way down to her feet far below, so that she was, leaning back with her shoulders against the solid intangible of the air, a thin thing, a graceful thing, a thing of steel and subtle padding. She breathed deeply, satisfied.

“Will you talk now?” the detective demanded, his voice rising a little, although he kept it still under iron control. “Do you think that you alone can stand against the force of the police, the might and weight of duly constituted authority, against *me*?”

A lovely little shiver went down Natalie’s back. “I may be in danger every moment of my life,” she told the detective, “but I am strong within myself.”

“Is *that* an answer?” the detective said. “What if I told you that you were seen?”

Natalie lifted her head, looking proudly off into the sky.

“The housekeeper,” the detective said, dropping his voice into a vicious, slapping murmur. “She has testified — under oath, mind you, Miss Waite, under oath — that she saw you enter the house fully fifteen minutes before your screams summoned the household to the study where you stood over the murdered body of your lover. Well, Miss Waite, well?"

"I have nothing to say," Natalie said, barely able to form the words.

"What becomes of your story now?" the detective went on ruthlessly. "Miss Waite, what becomes of your precious statement that you were alone in the garden?"

"I have nothing to say," Natalie said.

"Tell me, Miss Waite," the detective continued remorselessly, his cruel face closer to Natalie's, his voice soft and evil, "tell me, do you doubt the word of the housekeeper? Do you dare to say that she lies? Do you believe that she is unable to estimate time?"

"Ten o'clock, Natalie," Mrs. Waite called from the French doors.

"Coming," Natalie called back. Because she almost always ran instead of walking she cleared the steps with one long bound — like a deer, she thought in mid-air — and went in through the French doors. "Where's my notebook?" she asked her mother as she passed, and did not stay for an answer; her notebook was on the hall table where she had left it that morning when she came down to breakfast. With her notebook in her hand, she knocked on the study door.

"Come in, my dear," her father said.

He looked up, smiling at her across the desk as she came in. "Good morning, Natalie," he said formally, and Natalie said, "Good morning, Dad." It was a fiction of theirs that these little meetings began the day for both of them, although before meeting in the study they usually breakfasted together, and pursued privately their personal morning occupations; Natalie watching the morning from her bedroom window and making hasty notes about it on her desk pad, combing her hair so that it fell carelessly along her shoulders, putting on the secret little locket she always wore; her father awakening and looking at himself in the mirror and smoking his first cigarette of the day and, presumably, somehow dressing himself.

"You look very fresh this morning, my dear," Mr. Waite said, and Natalie said to him solemnly, "I've been thinking a lot today," and he nodded.

"Of course," he said. "Brilliant sunshine, seventeen years behind you, the infinite sorrows of growing up on your shoulders — one *must* think."

Sometimes, these mornings in the study, Natalie was uncertain whether or not to laugh at her father's statements. It was difficult, usually, to tell if his remark was a joke because it was a point of conduct with him not to laugh at his own jokes, and with herself the only audience Natalie had only her own reactions to depend on. She was serious this time, because, although her father's expectant air seemed to indicate that this *had* been a joke, his pointing out that she had seventeen years behind her had given her a sudden sense of the immensity of time; seventeen years was a very long time to have been alive, if you took it into proportion by the thought that in seventeen years more — or as long as she had wasted being a child, and a small girl, silly and probably playing — she would be thirty-four, and old. Married, probably. Perhaps — and the thought was nauseating — senselessly afflicted with children of her own. Worn, and tired. She brought herself away from the disagreebly clinging thought by her usual method — imagining the sweet sharp sensation of being burned alive — and turned expectantly to her father.

"Well," he said. He was looking down at the papers on his desk. "Have you brought your notebook?"

Silently Natalie passed it across the desk to him. There was always this moment of dismay, when the words she had written crossed her mind remorselessly and the thought of her father reading them made her hesitate with an urgent desire to be off, out of the study, anywhere. Then the moment passed, and she said as she handed him the notebook, “I did it last night. After you were all in bed.”

“Up all night writing again?” her father asked indulgently. He began to turn the pages of the notebook slowly, savoring them.

“I went to sleep about three,” Natalie said. Her father was bitter about people who moistened their thumbs as they read, and used such vulgarity as a symbol for much of the reading public, but he was probably unaware that as he turned the pages of Natalie’s notebook he wet his lips slightly with his tongue, although he kept his fingers away from his mouth as he always did.

“This has always been a favorite of mine, Natalie,” he said, stopping at a page. “This one about the trees. ‘Lined up against the sky’ is good, very good. And the one on your mother.” He chuckled, and turned another page. “I hope she never sees it,” he said, and looked up at Natalie with a smile like a child’s.

“She’s never interested in my notebooks,” Natalie said.

“I know,” said Mr. Waite. “Nor is she interested in my articles.” He laughed and said, as though in compensation, “I never could have found anyone else so unsympathetic as your mother, and so helpful.”

This time Natalie laughed with certainty. It was a statement very true of her mother.

“Now,” her father said. He stopped at the current page in the notebook, and deliberately hesitant, looked up at Natalie and smiled, turned to select a cigarette from the package on the desk, and made an elaborate ceremony of lighting it. “I’m a little bit worried,” he said. “I’m not really sure I dare read it.”

“It was the hardest thing I had to do yet,” Natalie said. Her father looked at her with a quick frown, and she thought and then said, “It was the hardest thing I have had to do, so far.”

"Can't be too careful," her father said. He braced his shoulders, and bent his head down to the notebook.

While he read, Natalie, her initial nervousness over (once she had given him the notebook each morning her step was taken; it was irrecoverable then, and she had only to wait for it to be returned to her), surveyed the study freshly, as she did every morning. It was a deeply satisfying place. The books which stood expectantly on the shelves around the room had the fulfilled look of books which have been read, although not necessarily by Mr. Waite; the leather chair still held the marks of Mr. Waite's ample bottom, the ashtray beside it already this morning touched with ash. The room was used, perhaps worn, and had nothing of abandon about it; it was relaxed, as though nothing now could surprise it, once Mr. Waite had given into it the care of his own alarming self.

"This is good," Mr. Waite said abruptly. He laughed aloud, and said again, "This is good. Here, where it says, 'He seems perpetually surprised at the world's never being quite so intelligent as he is, although he would be even more surprised if he found out that perhaps he is himself not so intelligent as he thinks.' Too many words, Natalie, and I think you became intoxicated with the first half of the sentence, and only tacked the second half on to make it come down the way it went up. It could be said more neatly, I believe. But it's sound, very sound. And I like, 'He has a great reputation for generosity, although no one has ever known him to give anything to the *poor*.' You've really extended yourself." He sat back and looked at her cheerfully, as she had known that he would. "I am more than pleased," he declared. He fell again to reading, laughing occasionally. "Of course," he said after a minute, "you realize — in fact, I believe I told you this when I gave you the assignment — that I cannot afford to quarrel with anything you have written here."

Natalie said, “Maybe I took advantage of that.”

He shook his head. “I know you did,” he said.

He read again, and Natalie looked around the study; the corpse would be over there, of course, between the bookcase with the books on demonology and the window, which had heavy drapes that could be pulled to hide any nefarious work. She would be found at the desk, not five feet away from the corpse, leaning one hand on the corner to support herself, her face white and distorted with screaming. She would be unable to account for the blood on her hands, on the front of her dress, on her shoes, the blood soaking through the carpet at her feet, the blood under her hand on the desk, leaving a smeared mark on the papers there.

“Oh, no,” her father said. “Not handsome, Natalie. That I absolutely disclaim.”

“But it’s modified,” Natalie said. She chose her words with mischief. “I particularly say that the handsomeness is largely arrogance; that so few people are really arrogant these days that such a person gives the impression of beauty. I liked that idea.”

“It’s an unusual thought,” her father said consideringly. “I’m not sure but that you’re too young for it, though.” He gave the notebook a little push, to get it away from the edge of the desk so he could put his elbows down. “Now,” he said.

Natalie settled herself, watching him.

“In the first place,” Mr. Waite said, choosing his words carefully, “I’m going to quarrel with your whole attack in regard to the problem of description. No description can be said to describe anything — and I’ve told you this before — if it’s in mid-air, so to speak, unattached. It’s got to be tied on to something, to be *useful*. You have apparently neglected this in today’s work.”

"But I thought you said—" Natalie began, but her father held up his hand; he disliked being interrupted.

"Apparently, I say," he went on. "I don't think that you yourself quite realize the *work* you have given to this little sketch. Under any other circumstances your weighting of it would be meaningless, but I gave you this on purpose to try you out, and you did exactly as I expected." He paused, thinking. "Understand," he said finally, "I am not finding fault with your interpretation. You are of course completely free to write whatever you please about me or anything else. I am *interested* in seeing you write what you please, and in encouraging you to write more. But you *must*, if you are ever to be a *good* writer, understand your own motives."

He stopped, and made again his elaborate ceremony of lighting a cigarette. Then he folded his hands on the notebook and looked frankly at Natalie, the cigarette burning handsomely in the ashtray, the line of smoke framing his head on one side, and the squareness of the window shaping nicely on the other side.

"I am not a vain man," he began slowly. "I do not hold myself in undue estimation. As a matter of fact, my own description of myself would be *much* harsher than yours. You do not mention my pettiness, for example, although you hint at it in your statements about" — he consulted the notebook— "the fact that I 'substitute words for actions.' You overlook one of my outstanding characteristics, which is a brutal honesty which frequently leads me into trouble — an honesty so sincere that, applied to myself, it gives me a picture I cannot be proud of, although you name me as a proud man. My honest picture of myself has led me to aim less high than many of my contemporaries, because I know my own failings, and as a result I am in many respects less successful in a worldly sense. They, without knowledge of their own shortcomings, were able to conquer blindly, while I, always hesitating through doubt of myself, lost my chances, and fell. You do not mention — and I am using that same brutal honesty on myself now — that I am not always so kind to my family as I should care to be, because I am perhaps too much concerned with my own emotions at the expense of theirs — although, to speak with bitter truth, I am a person not gifted with great emotions and consequently, while I can never be sentimental, I can never be great." He seemed about to go on in this strain, which was a favorite of his, but then recollected himself, and said wryly, "I reveal myself more with every word. I *am* honest, Natalie, and sometimes ashamed of it."

"I always am, when I'm honest," Natalie said.

"Are you?" he asked with interest. "Do you know when you're being honest?"

"Usually," Natalie said. "If I'm surprised at myself for saying or thinking it, it's honest."

He laughed and nodded, and then said, "You teach me as much as I teach you, my dear." They were both quiet for a minute, counting over their individual virtues, and then he went on, his voice confidential. "Natalie," he said solemnly, "you know by now that it is natural for girls to hate their fathers at some point in their growth. Now I submit that at this time of your life you are growing to hate me."

"No," Natalie said. She stared at him. "Of course I don't hate you," she said. The remark had come so in a context of discussion that it was a moment before she thought to say, "I love you."

He shook his head sadly. "When you were born, and when Bud was born, I realized, even though your mother did not, that there would come a time when you would both rebel against us, hating us for what we represented, fighting to get free of us; it's a reaction so natural that I am ashamed to think that now I have a pang, a twinge, when I recognize it at last; it has been slow in coming, but I am as unprepared for it as I have ever been. Natalie, you *must* remember that it is natural, that hatred of me does not imply that *you* as a person hate *me* as a person, but only that the child, growing normally, passes through a stage when hatred of the parents is inevitable. That is your stage now." He held up his hand again as Natalie tried to speak and then, when she subsided, dropped his hand back to the pages of Natalie's notebook, which he touched as he talked, fumbling with the pages which held her assignment for that morning.

"That does not mean," he continued thoughtfully, " — although, remember, this is actually a new experience for me as well as for you — that does not mean that I am not able to help you, or advise you, or sympathize with you; it only means that we must recognize now that you are a growing girl and I an old man, and that a basic sex antagonism, combined with a filial resentment, separates us, so that we cannot always be honest with one another as we have been up to now."

If it's happening why does he tell me? Natalie thought briefly, and heard from far away the police detective demanding, "Are you prepared to confess that you killed him?"

For a long minute her father looked at her, obviously expecting some answer which she was unable to give; Natalie, her mind moving swiftly, went back over what he had said: what had there been, for instance, which indicated what she was to say? Had he asked a question, perhaps? Made a false statement she was to correct? Praised her, to hear her disclaim modestly?

"Well," her father said at last, and sighed. "It is not necessary to discuss it in detail, my dear. You will soon know more about it than I do. And I shall learn from you."

He sat back in his chair, and stared reflectively down at the desk, his eyes reading absently the lines of Natalie's notebook.

"Handsome," he said, and laughed. "Oh, Natalie, my dear." And he shook his head helplessly.

It was a dismissal. Nothing was to be further identified. As Natalie rose, her mind already moving ahead to the garden, to lunch, to the length of the day stretching ahead, her father pushed the notebook impatiently across the desk.

"You will be at the party this afternoon?" he asked, accenting the "you" just enough to make Natalie remember Bud's refusal to come.

"I guess so," Natalie said lamely because she was wondering where Bud found the courage to announce publicly that he was not bound by family plans.

"Try to help your mother, if you can," her father said. "Entertaining is difficult for her." He smiled up at Natalie, his mind already going on to more important things, the deep complex ideas that were his own work. "A fundamental hatred of people, I believe," he added as Natalie went toward the door.

* * *

On Sundays the Waites regarded themselves as living in a carefree, bohemian fashion, although for the other six days of the week they lived like everyone else. Mrs. Waite was not allowed the services of her maid on Sundays, and on Sundays the Waites usually entertained, with what Mr. Waite confidently referred to as potluck, although it was Mrs. Waite who dealt with the pot — the only reason the Waites were able to keep a maid at all. Mr. Waite customarily invited anyone who pleased him over for Sunday afternoon at his house, and Mrs. Waite was expected to provide various manner of refreshments for Mr. Waite's casual guests. This included, usually, one or another form of small sandwiches and canapés for any number of people — since Mr. Waite was never able to remember whether he had or had not invited any given person — and buffet supper afterwards; Mrs. Waite had thus established for herself a strict eight-o'clock Sunday bedtime, retiring at about the time Natalie and Bud were released from Sunday bondage and Mr. Waite was settling down with his convivial guests.

Natalie and her mother spent Sunday mornings, after Natalie's visit with her father, in the kitchen preparing for the day's guests; Mrs. Waite thought of this as good training for her daughter, and Natalie, telling her father about her mother, had once remarked, "She makes the kitchen like a room with a sign saying 'Ladies' on the door."

The kitchen was, in fact, the only place in the house that Mrs. Waite possessed utterly; even her bedroom was not her own, since her husband magnanimously insisted upon sharing it. He shared also the dinner table and the services of the radio in the living room; he felt himself privileged to sit on the porch and to use a bathtub. In the kitchen, however, Mr. Waite amusedly confessed himself "inadequate," and so Mrs. Waite, one day a week, was allowed a length of time unmolested except for the company of her daughter. Perhaps, even, Mrs. Waite felt that in these hours that they shared the kitchen, she and Natalie were associated in some sort of mother-daughter relationship that might communicate womanly knowledge from one to the other, that might, by means of small female catchwords and feminine innuendoes, separate, at least for a time, the family into women against men. At any rate the kitchen alone with Natalie was the only place where Mrs. Waite talked at all, and probably because she talked so little elsewhere she made her conversation in the kitchen into a sort of weekly chant, a news bulletin wherein all that Mrs. Waite had thought or wanted to say or felt or surmised during the week was aired and considered, in combination with Mrs. Waite's refrain of reminiscence and complaint. Natalie admired her mother at these times, and, although she would go to any length to avoid even the slightest conversation with her mother in the living room, she enjoyed and profited by the kitchen conversations more than even Mrs. Waite suspected.

This morning Mrs. Waite's initial momentum came from her Sunday casserole which, incredibly complex and delicate, would be devoured drunkenly in a few hours by inconsiderate and uncomplimentary people. When Natalie came into the kitchen her mother was leaning over the sideboard, slicing meat beautifully thin with the butcher knife. "Natalie?" she said without looking around. "Did you hear him?" she went on, without assuring herself that it *was* really Natalie and not Mr. Waite come to announce that the house was on fire. "Did you *hear* him? He's an old fool, he really is." She held her breath to cut daintily around a bone, and then went on. "Sometimes I think he must be an awful fool, to think people are taken in by his pretensions. Paranoid," Mrs. Waite announced with satisfaction. "Paranoid. My father used to laugh when he came, he really did. Paranoid. Natalie, I wish Ethel would leave dishes the way I leave them. Little ones inside big ones. It's impossible to believe that anyone can put dishes away in this sort of insane arrangement; she piles them all together without thinking of size or safety. Used to laugh. Sometimes I think he only married me because my name was Charity and it was the fashion then for people like your father to sing songs like 'Buffalo Gals' and dance a Virginia reel. Charity. *My* father knew what he was doing."

Natalie's Sunday morning work usually began with the salad greens. She washed lettuce and carrots, tomatoes and radishes, cleaned them and set them in cold water to be made into salad at the last minute. With both hands full of lettuce leaves, now, she stood at the sink watching the waterfall of the cold water running from the faucet through the clear green of the lettuce. It was incredibly beautiful until her hands began to chill.

"Too lazy to do anything for himself," Mrs. Waite said. "Imagine a grown man taking up square-dancing in New York City. I remember my mother, a real scold *she* was. Her voice up *here* all the time, and I sometimes think your father would profit by her, although before she died she did get pretty quiet without my father. I always used to wonder how people made happy marriages and made them last all day long every day. Seemed to me my mother wasn't happy but then of course I didn't know. Natalie, see that your marriage is happy." She turned and looked earnestly at Natalie, the knife resting against her palm. "See that your marriage is happy, child. Don't ever let your husband know what you're thinking or doing, that's the way. My mother could have done *any*thing, anything she wanted, my father would have let her, even though probably he wouldn't have known. Of course, by the time he died she was too old." Mrs. Waite took the thin slices of meat and began to arrange them in the baking dish. "I remember Sundays at home," she went on.

"You want me to hardboil eggs?" Natalie asked softly.

Mrs. Waite thought, looking around at the kitchen as though the casserole or the lettuce had an opinion she was waiting for. Finally she said, "I guess we'd better, Natalie. Can't ever tell how many will come." She smiled as she went on, "Sundays at home, we never knew how many were coming. Sometimes we'd go to my grandmother's, or to one of my sisters'. All my sisters married before I did, Natalie, there's something for you. *They* could have told me. Or else they'd come to our house. We never knew. They were like a flock of birds — one would take off for someplace, and then the rest would follow. All big men, small women. My uncles — when I remember them I see them sitting on Sunday afternoons, sometimes in one house, sometimes in another. Take my uncle Charles; I usually remember him sitting in the red chair in our dining room — we had to bring chairs in, they'd be so many at table — or else in the old brown mohair chair he kept by the fireplace in his own house. Aunt — what was her name, Natalie? Who married Charles?"

"Helen," Natalie said.

"Helen," Mrs. Waite said. "Well, she used to hate that chair, except I always used to think then that she only made such a fuss because she knew wives always hated their husbands' old dear things and she was afraid no one would respect her if she let him keep the chair without a fuss. Except I don't think she ever paid much attention to doing it seriously." She slid her knife through the piece of cooking butter on the plate, and began to slice an onion. "Fancy African masks," she said. "Cheap dirty silver jewelry. Old blues records you wouldn't want to know the words of if you *could* hear them. Anyway, I always remember that uncle sitting in that chair. I guess all young girls — more water there, Natalie — get to hate where they're living because they think a husband will be better. What happens is that a husband's the same, usually. When I met your father he had a lot of books that he said he read, and he gave me a Mexican silver bracelet instead of an engagement ring, and I looked around at my uncles sitting in their old goddam — your father taught me to say goddam, too, and a lot of words else I could tell you if I wanted, although I *do* believe I've outgrown *that* part of it — chairs and I thought being married was everything I wanted. Only of course it's the same, only now it's strangers for Sunday dinner, and your father will be sick all tomorrow if he smokes anything stronger than cigarettes. Let's have a potato salad. I told Ethel to boil extra potatoes yesterday."

Natalie had discovered that by a slight pressure on a back tooth she could make a small regular stirring pain that operated as a rhythmic counterpoint to her mother's voice; she would not for the world have told her mother that she had a cavity in her tooth, but it was a pleasant change in her body since the day before, and she enjoyed it.

"Ice cream," Mrs. Waite said. "We always *used* to have ice cream."

"Tell me," the detective said insistently, leaning forward, "tell me how it was done; you may rely on my not using the information against you."

"I don't know," Natalie answered silently. "I don't remember."

"I can promise you," the detective said with great dignity, "that I am a reasonable person to confide in. I can be trusted absolutely."

"I don't remember," Natalie told him.

"Of *course* you remember," the detective said impatiently. "No one can live through such things and not *remember* them."

"Natalie," Mrs. Waite said, her hands quiet for a minute while she stared at the wall before her, "what will I do when you're gone?"

Embarrassed, Natalie carefully turned down the flame under the boiling eggs. "I'll be back a lot," she said inadequately.

"A mother gets very lonesome without her daughter," Mrs. Waite said. "Especially when it's an only daughter. A mother gets lonesomer than anything in the world."

One of the things which Natalie most disliked about her mother was Mrs. Waite's invariable trick of putting serious statements into language that Natalie classified as cute. Mrs. Waite, too long accustomed to seeing her most heartfelt emotions exposed, discussed, and ignored, had long since fallen into protecting herself by stating them as jokes, with an air of girlish whimsy which irritated both Natalie and Mr. Waite as no flat statement of hatred could have. Because of this, Natalie — who had sometimes thought of running to her mother with a voluntary expression of affection — said briefly, “You’ll find something to do.”

Mrs. Waite was silent. She had set the casserole carefully into the oven and turned her attention to the silverware before she began again, very timidly, “And at home when we had no dishes for all those people we used to ask one of the aunts to bring along...”

* * *

Lunch on Sundays was a pick-up meal; Mrs. Waite had over the years prevailed upon her husband to accept the fact that the oven would not hold at the same time an unusual meal for his friends and the correct nourishing lunch he believed his due. Although in most ordinary matters Mr. Waite would far sooner have sacrificed his friends than himself, in the question of his hospitality and the probable Monday conversations about it, Mr. Waite was willing, with objections, to forego his own comfort, always believing that it was a temporary measure due to Mrs. Waite’s inefficiency and that the next Sunday would see him sensibly fed. Since it was his custom to greet regular occasions with regular remarks, Mr. Waite habitually observed over his Sunday peanut-butter sandwich, “This is not food for a grown man.”

On Sundays Mrs. Waite had an answer for him, probably because originally she had had all the week to prepare it; she habitually answered, “*You* make the dinner and *I’ll* make the lunch.”

Standing at the kitchen table next to her father, Natalie looked peacefully at the scene of competence around her. The dishes used in the morning had been washed, the breakfast cups and saucers put away, and the company cups and saucers set out instead. The family napkins, suspended for the present lunch and dinner, reposed on the kitchen mantel to be brought out again on Monday. The very familiar kitchen things — the plant which Ethel kept beside the sink, the smaller teakettle, the plastic-handled tableware — were all pushed back and set aside before the company preparations. Natalie, because her mother and father were bickering, transplanted herself to an archeological expedition some thousand years from now, coming unexpectedly upon this kitchen and removing layers of earth carefully from around the teakettle— "This may have been a cookpot," someone said wisely, and someone else added, "Or of course a chamber pot; we have no notion as yet of the habits of these peoples." Further excavations — perhaps three or four days later, and after serious quarrels between the junior and senior members of the expedition, one force maintaining that it would be more sensible to move on; this was an infertile spot for discovery and besides the air was bad — might yield the skull of Natalie, and one, holding her precious head in his hands, turning it over and examining it intimately, might remark, "Look, here, at these teeth; they knew *some*thing of dentistry, at any rate — see, here's one filled, with gold, it appears. Had they any knowledge of gold, do you remember? Male, I should say, from the frontal development." At that time, of course, Natalie reflected with contentment, her life would be done. There would be no further fears for Natalie, no possibility of walking wrong when you were no more than a skull in a strange man's hands. "And see," another voice called from the end of the kitchen, "see, here, these very strange objects — ornaments, *I'd* judge. And look here, at these two skeletons here — see, look *here*, they had *children*."

* * *

The garden belonged exclusively to Natalie; the rest of the family used it, of course, but only Natalie regarded it as a functioning part of her personality, and she felt that she was refreshed by ten minutes in the garden between the arbitrary pleasures assigned her by other people. If she sat on the grass at the foot of the lawn, her back against a tree, she could look out over fields that seemed soft at this distance, into mountains far away, since her father had sensibly enough chosen a picturesque location in preference to her mother's choice of something that might *grow* something; thus, at the back of the house, there was a kitchen garden ineffectually tended by Mrs. Waite, which yielded a regular crop of dubious radishes and pallid carrots, and the rest of the land about the house — some three acres of it — was allowed to run to meadow, or vacant-lot, standards. Natalie's garden was in front of the house, and was tended by a gardener who refused to touch the kitchen garden, and this part of the property ended uncertainly in a sort of cliff — if you looked at it from far enough back — below which ran the south road. Behind the house, behind even the kitchen garden, Mr. Waite had graciously permitted trees to grow unmolested, and when Natalie was younger, before the garden and the view from the cliff had taken such a hold of her, she had delighted in playing pirate and cowboy and knight in armor among the trees. Now, however, for some reason only remotely connected with knights in armor, the tree on the grass belonged to her, and she ignored the trees below as dark and silent and unprovocative.

The sight of the mountains far away was sometimes so perfectly comprehensible to Natalie that she forced tears into her eyes, or lay on the grass, unable, after a point, to absorb it — she was, of course, adequately hidden from the windows of the house — or to turn it into more than her own capacity for containing it; she was not able to leave the fields and mountains alone where she found them, but required herself to take them in and use them, a carrier of something simultaneously real and unreal to set up against the defiantly real-and-unreal batterings of her family. There was a point in Natalie, only dimly realized by herself, and probably entirely a function of her age, where obedience ended and control began; after this point was reached and passed, Natalie became a solitary functioning individual, capable of ascertaining her own believable possibilities. Sometimes, with a vast aching heartbreak, the great, badly contained intentions of creation, the poignant searching longings of adolescence overwhelmed her, and shocked by her own capacity for creation, she held herself tight and unyielding, crying out silently something that might only be phrased as, “Let me take, let me create.”

If such a feeling had any meaning to her, it was as the poetic impulse which led her into such embarrassing compositions as were hidden in her desk; the gap between the poetry she wrote and the poetry she contained was, for Natalie, something unsolvable.

Lying on the grass on Sunday afternoon, while her mother and father debated over their guests for the day, she rested her cheek on her arm and lost herself in contemplation of the fields and mountains below her; the sun behind the mountains was, to a Natalie not quite used yet to the triteness of miracle, a calendar gesture, the overdone and typical scene of a grown-up world; she had seen so many bad pictures of suns behind mountains that she allowed herself to find the sun itself ludicrous and unnecessary. But the mountains, relieved of the pressure of the sun, were dark and shadowy, and the fields, still lighted by the sun, were clear and green, and Natalie, lying with her cheek on her arm, felt herself running, lighter than anything she had ever known, running with great soft steps across the world. Her feet brushed the ground — she could feel it, she could feel it — her hair fell soundlessly behind, her long legs arched, and the breath came cold in her throat. The first to awaken, the first to come, misty, into the world, moving through an unpeopled country without a footstep, going up the mountains, touching the still-wet grass with her hands.

The mountains, full-bosomed and rich, extended themselves to her in a surge of emotion, turning silently as she came, receiving her, and Natalie, her mouth against the grass and her eyes tearful from looking into the sun, took the mountains to herself and whispered, “Sister, sister.” “Sister, sister,” she said, and the mountains stirred, and answered.

* * *

She saw her brother coming from the house and into the garden, and spent a brief moment of wonder at his presence; from his sudden great resemblance to herself, she thought that perhaps he did not know she was there and was coming to sit and look at the mountains, but he was looking for her, she knew then; he called, “Nat? Nat?”

“Here,” she said, and saw him turn his head toward her, but the trees hid her and he came on, saying, “Where are you?”

When he found her and sat down beside her she saw with satisfaction that he had not been here before, because he took a minute to look out over the cliff before he said, “Mother said you were to come in and get dressed.”

“You going swimming?” she asked him.

She could see him making up his mind to say something, and knew from the way his face took on a new expression that it was something he had long ago determined to say when he got an opportunity; it was never possible for her to tell whether his face was so familiar because it strongly resembled her own, or because she saw it three times a day across the table. “Listen,” he said finally, and pulled irritably at the grass. “You *want* to go to this thing this afternoon?”

“I don’t know,” she said. “I don’t mind.”

“Because, listen,” he said. Any kind of positive statement was so much an invasion of his own privacy that he almost stammered, and turned red.

"I'd *take* you swimming," he said.

There was nothing to say except "No," and yet it was impossible to say that. Natalie tried not to look at him, and yet his face was — so much like her own, she was sure — so unhappy at the thought of taking her swimming, that she stared at him and he turned and frowned. "Well?" he said. "You *want* to go or *don't* you?"

"Golly," Natalie said. She pulled at the grass in her turn. "No, I guess," she said. "Dad wants me to stay," she added hastily.

"Sure," he said, relieved. "Dad wants you to stay."

I wonder what he ever thinks about, Natalie thought. "Anyway," she said defensively, "these are very important people, some of them."

"What are *they* good for?" he demanded contemptuously. "Poetry?"

They were quiet for a minute while the sun removed its last light from them and a cold wind came up over the cliff from the fields below. Then Bud twisted himself to his feet and said, "Mother says for you to come get dressed," and started off back toward the house. "Better hurry," he called back over his shoulder. "They'll be here pretty soon."

* * *

"Well," Mr. Waite said genially. It was four o'clock and the casserole was in the oven, the Sunday liquor was set out in the pantry, the ice was freezing dutifully in the refrigerator, the long living room was in order, with ashtrays located at approximately the points at which Mr. Waite's friends were most apt to drop cigarettes, and chairs readied for the brief, inconclusive sittings of Mr. Waite's friends. The books they were likely to want to consult during discussion (*Ulysses*, C.S. Lewis, *The Function of the Orgasm*, the newest English homosexual novel, *Hot Discography*, an abridged *Golden Bough*, and an unabridged dictionary) were set in the small bookscase near the windows; Mr. Waite's own books — the one he had written and the ones he had articles in, as opposed to the ones he referred to — were hidden modestly, bound in green leather, upon the mantelpiece. "Well," Mr. Waite said, with the satisfaction of a country squire surveying his horses and his dogs and his shooting preserve, and he added, as though to his gamekeeper, "Looks fine, all of it."

"Everything *seems* to be ready," Mrs. Waite answered nervously. She had inherited, probably from that indefatigable hostess, her mother, the hostess's conviction that some vital factor has somehow been forgotten (perhaps because no one wanted company in the first place?), so that it would turn out suddenly that there were no cigarettes in the cigarette boxes, or that the magazines would all prove to be an issue old, or that the dust on the table *had* been overlooked after all, or that, suddenly at dinner, Mrs. Waite would have to turn her stricken face to her dumfounded husband as it occurred to them both simultaneously that the dinner wine had been forgotten and lay, unpurchased and unchilled, on the shelf at the store.

"Casserole, salad," Mrs. Waite said, flexing her fingers as though she were counting, or perhaps as though with remembered motions her fingers would recall all that they had done, and by neglected motions point out the forgotten fact, "coffee, pie. Rolls. Cigarettes, candy, pretzels. Please don't let them drop cigarettes on the carpet, it's bad enough as it is. Natalie, are you dressed?"

Natalie moved into the range of her mother's blinded eyes, and said, "I have on my blue dress."

"Good," said her mother. "Did you comb your hair?"

As though I could forget to comb my hair, Natalie thought happily. I am seventeen, after all, and a party is a party even if it *is* all grown-ups. And anyway I spend so much time looking into my mirror...

“Are *you* dressed?” Mrs. Waite said, in so many years she had not found a usable name for her husband.

“Of course,” he said, and he might have added, A party is a party... He had chosen to dress himself in a fuzzy tweed jacket and he looked very literary indeed; no amount of poise could forsake him in this jacket. It was almost equivalent to a brace of pistols and a pair of jackboots; Mr. Waite was arrayed for his own interpretation of a street brawl.

The doorbell rang.

“Oh my God,” said Mrs. Waite. “Casserole, rolls, coffee... will you get it or shall I?”

“I’ll get it,” said Mr. Waite, in a tone which implied very strongly that he did not believe that Mrs. Waite could find the door by herself. As he disappeared into the hall, Mrs. Waite said to Natalie, “I’ll just look at the kitchen,” and ran the other way.

Natalie stood in the doorway between the hall and the living room, thinking, This is a party and I’m here already and I must remember that my name is Natalie.

The first guests were a disappointment; they turned out to be an enormously fat person named Verna Hansen, and her brother Arthur; Mr. Waite had invited them, not believing they would come, in a spirit of neighborly conviviality, since their house was nearest the Waites’, and their estate considerably larger. Partly because they were not proper guests — having been invited, as it were, on the wrong side of the blanket — and partly because he sincerely did not feel that any chair in the living room would hold Verna, Mr. Waite seated these guests on the lawn in wrought-iron chairs which were stronger than the living room chairs and substantially less expensive. He brought Natalie out to entertain them while he went off to fetch them drinks, and Natalie, introduced as, “My daughter and our assistant hostess," found herself, before she was really quite ready for a party, seated on the lawn in an iron chair, facing Verna. Arthur, with a brief and confusing remark about garden sprays, had wandered away, and Natalie, calling herself together, folded her hands and said brightly to Verna, "Isn't it a *lovely* time of day?"

Verna looked at her for a minute, glanced briefly at the doorway within which Mr. Waite had disappeared to find her a drink, and sighed. "Fine," she said shortly. "So you're Natalie?"

"Yes," said Natalie.

"Your father has mentioned you," said Verna, implying with her tone many clandestine meetings with Mr. Waite, during which he very likely called upon his daughter's name in remorse.... "We shall be friends, little Natalie," she added. She looked fatter sitting down, but the wide lawn around her was becoming, and she wore it with dignity. Natalie, who with one part of her mind was reserving judgment on anyone who called her "little Natalie," was, with another part of her mind, vastly impressed by the extreme comfort and ease of Verna's manner; it seemed that all the effort of Verna's life had been spent and all the problems solved, so that Verna, having succeeded, had now to do nothing except sit fatly in the middle of other people's smooth lawns and call people, less fortunate, "little Natalie."

"I can help you get over the preliminaries," Verna said. She half-closed her eyes and thought. "I dislike all the beginnings of conversations where people ask one another as subtly as possible how old they are, and what their names are, and how they are feeling these days." She added all this suddenly, opening her eyes as though recalled from her preliminaries by the unexpected realization that little Natalie needed an explanation, being, as indeed she was, unused to Verna's ways. "I *like* people," Verna said, and she made it sound as though she ate them for dessert. "First of all I shall tell you everything I can think of about myself, and then you will tell me about yourself.” She opened her eyes again, and smiled, and Natalie began feverishly searching her mind for trivial secret thoughts with which to pay for this condescension. “I am older than you are, little Natalie. I am perhaps fifteen years older — a great deal, counted in experience. I have known many people, known them well, known their hearts and their sins.”

Irreverently, Natalie thought of saying, “That must have been very interesting,” but refrained.

Verna sighed heavily. “My name used to be Edith,” she confided abruptly.

Natalie blinked.

“Arthur wouldn’t change *his* name,” Verna said. “Little beast.”

“I’ve often wanted to change my name,” Natalie said untruthfully.

Verna shifted heavily, in a gesture which might have been leaning foward. “Do so, my dear,” she said. “Do so, by all means, if you need to. You will be amazed at the difference a new name will make for you. Take Edith, for instance. Now, when I was Edith, I was coarse, and ugly, and thoughtless. I used to laugh very loudly. I used to accept people at their face value; when someone said to me, ‘Edith, you ought to take more of an interest in yourself,’ I was ready to believe them. It sounds incredible to *you,* doesn’t it? But that was Edith, not Verna.”

“Why didn’t Arthur want to change his name?”

Verna shrugged violently. “Little beast,” she said. “He likes being the same as he always was. *Now* he doesn’t dare, but he thinks the same all right.” She laughed softly, what was clearly her Verna laugh. “Little Natalie, never rest until you have uncovered your essential self. Remember that. Somewhere, deep inside you, hidden by all sorts of fears and worries and petty little thoughts, is a clean pure being made of radiant colors.”

This was so much like the things that Natalie sometimes suspected about herself that she turned to Verna, swept by a rush of warm feeling, and said incoherently, “Verna, how do you ever know?”

Verna smiled sadly. “I know, little one,” she said. Her eyes fixed somewhere over Natalie’s head, she said softly, *“From too much love of living. From hope and fear set free, We thank with brief thanksgiving...”*

“*There* you are,” said Mr. Waite heartily. He handed Verna her drink, and Verna was unexpectedly quiet as she drank.

“My dear,” said Mr. Waite to Natalie, “I didn’t bring you a drink.”

Natalie was surprised. Although her father had made a great point of her being allowed to drink and smoke when she was sixteen, in the year since he had never before offered her a drink. She had learned to smoke, with some amused assistance from her mother, who gave her a cigarette case, but the furtive terrors hidden in alcohol were as yet only vaguely glimpsed by Natalie; she thought now with some shame of a secret passage in her most secret diary (It began: “I hardly think that the taking of cocktails and such is a vice which I shall ever indulge in more than very mildly, since it seems to me that any woman interested in an artistic career dulls the fine, keen edge of her understanding by an indulgence in any stimulant other than her work.” This diary was written for ultimate publication, but Natalie of course intended to go over it very carefully first.), and said shyly to her father, “I’d like to try, sometime.”

“Help yourself,” he said genially.

“Wine is a splendid thing,” said Verna encouragingly. “Little Natalie and I,” she said to Mr. Waite, “were discussing our souls when you came.”

“Indeed?” said Mr. Waite. He turned and looked at his daughter. “Natalie?” he said.

"This is a child of great talent," Verna said, putting her hand on his arm to attract his attention. "This is a chosen child." She handed him her empty glass and said, "I am going to think a great deal of this little Natalie."

* * *

"Do you suppose she'll *ever* go?" Mrs. Waite whispered to Natalie; they were standing together in the doorway. Mr. Waite and Verna were conversing politely on the lawn, and far away, at the end of the garden, they could see Arthur, lost in earnest contemplation of what seemed at this distance to be a dandelion. "I really think she's crazy," Mrs. Waite said.

Natalie was pretending to be a young girl standing in the doorway of her own house next to her mother. If she tried to look as much as possible as though she were seventeen, innocent, protected by her parents, beloved, sheltered here in this house, then perhaps...

There was a slight movement in the hall behind her; Natalie, her eyes fixed on Arthur, stood, seemingly unconcerned.

"She'll keep your father out there all afternoon," Mrs. Waite whispered urgently. "I *know*."

"Really," Natalie was saying silently, "*I* don't know what you mean."

"Do you pretend," the detective said, "that you are actually the daughter of these people? That they will acknowledge you?"

"Sir," Natalie said silently, "this is my mother. That is my father out there."

"And if I ask them?" the detective demanded. "You must be very foolish to suppose that you can rely upon the generosity of strangers."

"The next people who come," Mrs. Waite said, "I'll ask them inside. Then maybe once she's standing up she'll think of going home."

"And your name?" said the detective.

"My name is—" Natalie hesitated in her silent talk. She was about to change her name, was she not? But her hesitation had told against her; the detective was laughing.

"Yes?" he prompted sardonically. "Your name is?"

Mr. Waite rose from his chair on the lawn, and, taking Verna's empty class, came to the doorway where Mrs. Waite and Natalie were standing.

"Natalie," he said, his back to Verna, and grinned. "I hardly know you from her description."

"You'll have to get them *out* of here," Mrs. Waite whispered.

Mr. Waite had already donned his company manners which meant that his usual attitude toward his wife was subdued to a sort of tolerant dismay. "Why?" he asked. "Isn't there plenty of liquor?"

Mrs. Waite gestured helplessly; more people were arriving and she had planned to entertain them indoors; here was Mr. Waite, already too expansive to be reliable, calmly receiving and probably planning to seat these people out on the lawn, which had not been cleaned and which held only four iron chairs and would thus require more brought from the dining room, leaving less for company when they *did* move indoors, because unless you asked company to carry their *own* chairs, then the chairs would be left outside, and so it would rain, and the dining room chairs... not to mention company sitting probably on the floor. "Oh, *please*," said Mrs. Waite madly.

"Keep calm," Mr. Waite said. "You'd be surprised how easy it is for people to have a good time."

"Easy for *you*, maybe," said Mrs. Waite, but her husband did not hear her; he had gone, hand outstretched, to receive his new guests.

* * *

At one point Natalie counted the people on the lawn and found that there were fourteen. She knew that many more than that had been invited, so it seemed wise to go and help her mother now, rather than wait until later when there might be someone she wanted to talk to.

In the kitchen Mrs. Waite, her almost-finished cocktail sitting on the sinkboard, was nervously dabbing cream cheese on crackers.

“They’ve almost finished *every*thing,” she said, without turning around as Natalie entered. “*Why* don’t I ever believe your father when he says he’s invited all those other people?”

Natalie took the knife out of her mother’s hand and began spreading cream cheese. “They’re all having a wonderful time,” she said. “Don’t worry.”

Mrs. Waite took up her drink, finished it in one swallow, and went over to the bottles on the shelf waiting to be produced later. She opened one with a twist of the top and poured whisky into her glass. “I *never* know what to do,” she said. “No matter *how* much I get ready, there are always too many of your father’s friends, and not enough food in the world to feed them all.”

Natalie put one more cracker on the plate, considered piling more crackers on top, and decided it would look too lavish. “I’ll just go on in and pass these,” she said. “You stay out here quietly.”

She had not yet had anything to drink, although it was not possible to pass Verna without being offered a “teentsy sip” of Verna’s cocktail. Natalie had decided privately that later on, when the first excitement of the party wore off, she would try one delightful — alas, not forbidden — taste of spiritous liquor, although her allegiance to her art was still dominant. Therefore, when she went onto the lawn with the plate of crackers and cheese, she tripped perfectly legitimately over the feet of the man in the big chair, although she fortunately saved the crackers and cheese. “My fault, madam,” said the man in the big chair.

Natalie, preoccupied with the balance of the plate, only nodded.

“Daughter mine,” said her father, who came to help her, “has anyone yet corrupted you?”

Natalie smiled pleasantly, knowing from experience that it was unwise to answer her father at one of his own parties, since not even his family were at that time safe from practiced witticisms, and she offered the plate of crackers to the man in the big chair, saying, “You almost had this in your lap.”

Her father came up behind her and said over her shoulder to the man in the big chair, “*This* one is my daughter.”

“A fine figure of a girl,” said the man in the big chair. He took a cracker in each hand, and Natalie went on carefully around the group, presenting the plate to one person after another, answering their questions and watching their feet.

“Natalie, when do you go to college?”

“Aren’t you *growing*, though; you make me feel *ancient*.”

“Aren’t you looking forward to education, after all these years with your father?”

When she got to her father Natalie put the plate under his hand, and he looked up at her and smiled. A dark, pretty girl sat next to him, a girl whom Natalie did not recognize. Her father said to the girl, “This is my little daughter, my Natalie. Don’t you think she’ll grow up to be a beauty?” He and the pretty girl both laughed, and Mr. Waite, laughing, refused a cracker from the plate.

Later, when Natalie had passed farther around the room, she heard her father’s voice rising above the rest.

" — The sacredness of human droppings," Mr. Waite was saying. "Let me illustrate from my personal life. When Natalie was a baby and used to play on the lawn, her mother ignored the droppings of the dog and cat—"

"Only careful not to step in them," said the pretty girl next to Mr. Waite.

"Only careful not to step in them," Mr. Waite agreed. "But when small Natalie fouled the grass, her mother carefully and laboriously cleaned it up with a paper towel—"

* * *

"It isn't any single thing I mind so much." Mrs. Waite sat up and took hold of Natalie's hands, and looked earnestly into her eyes; it seemed, somehow, as though this at last were really true, and now, with all the words she knew, Mrs. Waite could not find unused ones, or authentic ones, or words not debased by her lifetime of whimsy and lies, to tell Natalie that after all, this at last was really true. "It isn't any *single* thing," Mrs. Waite repeated earnestly, the tears on her cheeks. "It's just that — well, look, Natalie. This is the only life I've *got* — you understand? I mean, this is *all*. And look what's happening to me. I spend most of my time just thinking about how nice things used to be and wondering if they'll ever be nice again. If I should go on and on and die someday and nothing was ever nice again — wouldn't that be a fine thing? Wouldn't I have been cheated, don't you think? I get to feeling like that and then I think I'll *make* things be nice, and *make* him behave, and just *make* everything all happy and exciting again the way it used to be — but I'm too tired."

She lay back on the bed again, the tears still on her cheeks. When she had been eager to make Natalie understand the truth of what she was saying, she had not cried, but now, knowing from Natalie's timid smile and soothing pats that of course Natalie did not understand, she began to cry helplessly again. “I keep telling you,” she said finally, sadly, “I keep *telling* you to watch out who you marry. Don’t *ever* go near a man like your father.”

“Would you like to go outside and walk in the garden for a while?” Natalie asked, hardly knowing what she suggested. “We could go out the back door.”

“It all starts so nice,” Mrs. Waite said, twisting her face into a horrible look of disgust. “You think it’s going to be so easy. You think it’s going to be good. It starts like everything you’ve ever wanted, you think it’s so easy, everything looks so simple and good, and you know that all of a sudden you’ve found out what no one ever had sense enough to know before — that this is good and if you manage right you can do whatever you want to. You keep thinking that what you’ve got hold of is power, just because you feel right in yourself, and everybody always thinks that when they feel right in themselves then they can start right off fixing the world. I mean, when I used to listen to him talking about what kind of people we were, then I used to *believe* him.”

“Mother...” said Natalie.

“First they tell you lies,” said Mrs. Waite, “and they make you believe them. Then they give you a little of what they promised, just a little, enough to keep you thinking you’ve got your hands on it. Then you find out that you’re tricked, just like everyone else, just like *everyone,* and instead of being different and powerful and giving the orders, you’ve been tricked just like everyone else and then you begin to know what happens to everyone and how they all get tricked. Everyone only knows one ‘I,’ and that’s the ‘I’ they call themselves, and there’s no one else can be ‘I’ to anyone except that one person, and they’re all stuck with themselves and once they find out they’ve been tricked, then they’ve been tricked and maybe the worst of it is that it isn’t like anything else; you can’t just say, ‘I’ve been tricked and I’ll make the best of it,’ because you never believe it because they let you see just enough about the next time to keep you hoping that maybe you’re a little bit smarter and a little bit...”

“Mother,” Natalie said. “Mother, please stop. You’re not making sense.”

“I *am* making sense,” Mrs. Waite said. “No one ever made sense before.”

“Mother, it’s all right,” Natalie said. “You had a little bit too much to drink and nothing to eat. I could bring you up some coffee.”

“My own daughter,” said Mrs. Waite bitterly. “I can’t even tell my own daughter. If I were dead you’d listen to me.”

“Now how could—” Natalie began and then saw that it was useless. “Shall I bring you some coffee?” she asked. “It won’t take a minute, it’s all hot downstairs.” Downstairs, she thought, the party going on without me, people laughing and making noise while I sit up here in the silence and this thin bad voice going on.

“Listen,” said Mrs. Waite, and, suddenly, she rose and leaned on her elbow and looked sternly at Natalie. “You listen to me,” she said. “You’re my own daughter and the only person in the world I have any right to tell these things to. In another week — in another hour — it might be too late for me even to try telling you. Now you *listen*.

“All these years your father has been trying to get rid of me. Not rid of *me* — he doesn’t care if I hang around the house, cooking and saying, ‘Yes, sir,’ when he opens his fat mouth. All he wants is no one to think they can be the same as he is, or equal to him, or something. And you watch out — the minute you start getting too big, he’ll be after you, too.”

“I think you ought to go outside for a while,” Natalie said nervously.

“With *me*,” her mother continued, “it was because I didn’t have anyone. He picks out the one way he can frighten you most, you see, and I didn’t have anyone at all, because my family didn’t understand me any more after I went off with your father, and I used to lie awake wanting my mother and she wouldn’t have me because I was different by then. And he’ll find the way he can frighten you, too, but it won’t be because you don’t have anyone because *your* mother won’t turn you down. She *won’t,* Natalie,” Mrs. Waite said, beggingly, pulling at Natalie’s sleeve, “she won’t, she won’t ever. I know what it’s like Natalie, and I’ll always protect you from them, the bad ones. Don’t you ever worry, little Natalie, your mother will always help you.”

An agonizing embarrassment kept Natalie from looking away. She looked at her mother and her mother looked at Natalie; it was at this point in her mother’s drunkenness that Natalie always longed to say something sympathetic, and could never find the right, understanding words. Then suddenly Mr. Waite called from the foot of the stairs. “Natalie. Coming down?”

Mrs. Waite began to cry, and buried her head in the pillow. “Poor little girl,” she said. “No mother.”

A sort of intoxication possessed Natalie; this could surely not be the intoxication, she thought breathlessly, born of one weak cocktail sipped timidly in the kitchen. It was instead, and she was almost sure of this, the preliminary faint stirrings of something about to happen. The idea once born, she knew it was true; something incredible was going to happen, now, right now, this afternoon, today; this was going to be a day she would remember and look back upon, thinking, That wonderful day... the day when *that* happened.

“Let us go over the sequence of events once more,” the detective said tiredly. He had leaned back and unbuttoned his jacket, and Natalie, who saw him more clearly than she saw the people on the lawn, thought that no matter how tired he was, he would not stop until he had from her what he wanted. “Let us start from the very beginning,” the detective said.

“I’ve told you all I know,” Natalie said silently. She could see her father across the lawn, leaning forward and smiling as he talked, his arm carelessly around the waist of the pretty, dark girl. Somebody began to sing; at occasional points in the song many people stopped talking and joined in with the singer, even Mr. Waite and the pretty girl, who laughed when they sang.

“One is one and all alone and evermore will be so,” everyone sang.

“*I’ll sing you two-O*,” the single voice sang, clearly through the noise.

All around the lawn people were talking, raising their voices to override what someone else was saying, looking secretly at one another, frowning openly at one another, talking, laughing, talking. As though she had just come onto the lawn, Natalie heard suddenly the swell of sound that so surely meant “party.” It rose and moved and eddied, individual voices rising for a second, laughter riding high over the rest, the thin sound of glasses rattling, so fine that it could be heard straight through the heavier noises. It was shocking, loud, and Natalie stepped back, and found herself almost stepping again on the man who had tripped her when she came in earlier with the plate of crackers.

“Bound we’re going to kill each other today,” the man said, smiling. He was alone now, and Natalie spared a thought for the odd recognition of the fact that his voice came clearly to her through the noise; in spite of the loudness of the party, which she could still hear, she knew exactly what the man was saying as though they had been alone, or, perhaps, as though his voice were in her mind like the detective’s.

Two, two, lily-white boys, clothed all in green-O,
One is one and all alone and evermore will be so.

“Sit down,” the man said pleasantly. “Tired?” he asked her as she sat in the empty chair next to him, and Natalie nodded.

“Now let me see,” the detective was saying, and she could not quiet him now; his voice came to her as clearly as that of the man in the chair. “This morning you were in the garden, were you not? At about what time was that?”

“I don’t remember,” Natalie said. “Please leave me alone now; I want to think.”

“Think?” said the detective. “Think? Suppose you think about the fact that you are very close to being in serious trouble?”

“Are you having a good time?” Natalie said inadequately to the man in the chair. All the polite things she had heard so many people say this afternoon fled her mind, and she could only smile vacantly at him and say something foolish like, “Are you having a good time?”

“Very nice,” said the man soberly. “Are you?”

“Very nice,” Natalie said. “One is one and all alone,” everybody sang, “and evermore will be so.”

The man looked at her curiously and Natalie was provoked. Here he was, this man, in her father’s house — in her *own* house — and he was staring at her and very likely laughing. Worse, he was old, she could see now, much older than she had thought before. There were fine disagreeable little lines around his eyes and mouth, and his hands were thin and bony, and even shook a little. Natalie formulated a thought which she intended to use forever after: “I like a man with nice hands,” she told herself. “Nice hands are a particular beauty in a man.” She tried to remember what her father’s hands were like, and could only remember his doing things with them — lifting a fork, holding a cigar. She glanced quickly across the lawn and found that she could not see her father's hands — one was in his pocket reaching for a pencil, the other lost around the waist of the pretty girl.

" — And so I came," the man was saying. He looked at her as though he expected some appreciation of the point of the story he had been telling her, and, Natalie, still provoked with him, smiled politely. "I'm glad you did," she said, as her mother would have.

"You realize," said the detective weightily, "that you were seen at almost every moment?"

The man in the big chair offered Natalie a cigarette and she took it, hoping earnestly that she would not fumble it, would not blow out the match he was holding for her, would, at all costs, not look as though she had not often smoked publicly before. "Your father tells me," he said, holding the match, "that you're quite the little writer." As though he might have been saying, "a girl scout patrol leader," or, "top in your grade in algebra," and obviously meaning to make her sound less like her mother and more like a frightened girl not yet in college.

Natalie wanted to hurt him back, so she said, quite with the air of a silly girl not yet in college, "I suppose you probably want to write too?" She knew she had done right because he blinked, and she felt a new wild excited joy in the thought that here was Natalie, enough a woman of the world to keep her head during a conversation, to perceive and follow and employ the innuendoes of a man who had probably talked to many people, most of them women, and heard many answers and who could very likely read almost any meaning. Perhaps someday, Natalie thought quickly, chiding herself, I'll learn to talk for a longer time and not stop to think about it in the middle.

" — novel?" the man said.

This was hopeless; they were too far into their conversation for Natalie to say anything at all without losing all the ground she had gained; she would betray herself utterly if she asked him what he had said; she could hardly pretend she didn't care, or walk off, or turn her back; she could certainly not go back now and ask him if he were having a nice time. "I didn't hear you," she said suddenly, frightening herself almost to tears. "I was thinking about myself instead of listening."

Four for the gospel-makers;
Three, three, rivals,
Two, two, lily-white boys, clothed all in green-O,
One is one and all alone and evermore will be so.

"Thinking what about yourself?" the man asked.

Said the detective, leaning foward, "Have you given any thought to the extreme danger of your position? What about the knife?"

"About how wonderful I am," Natalie said. She smiled. Now I can get up and walk away, she thought, the faster the better. She started to get up, but the man got up first, and took hold of her arm.

"About how wonderful she is," he said as though to himself. "Thinking about how wonderful she is."

A little chill went down Natalie's back at his holding her arm, at the strange unfamiliar touch of someone else. Leading her by the arm, he moved to the tray where full glasses stood, took one and handed it to Natalie, and took another for himself.

Five for the cymbols at your door,
Four for the gospel-makers,
people shouted at them as they moved.

"Come along," the man told Natalie. "This I intend to hear more about."

"And the blood?" the detective said fiercely. "What about the blood, Miss Waite? *How* do you account for the blood?"

"One is one and all alone and evermore will be so."

"You will not escape this," the detective said. He dropped his voice and said, so quietly that she barely heard him, "*This* you will not escape."

The strange man led Natalie away from the crowd on the lawn and across the grass; after a minute the people and their voices (*"Six are the six proud walkers..."*) were removed into a background noise, distantly behind them in the night-filled garden. They moved slowly; Natalie was afraid to speak, not trusting her voice in the new silence, perhaps she was still turned to the noise behind and when she spoke it would be in a scream. In those few quick minutes the man walking next to her had changed so rapidly from one shadow, on the lighted lawn, to another shadow, in the dark garden, and her final statement to him had been so conclusive, that past "Are you having a good time?" — which now seemed even less appropriate than before — there was nothing to say.

He spoke, at last. Without the support of other noise, his voice was weak, and perhaps even older than it had sounded before.

"Now then," he said. "Tell me what she thinks is so wonderful about herself."

How far wrong, Natalie thought, can one person be about another? Perhaps in that little time I have grown in his mind and he is now talking to some Natalie he thought he had hold of by the arm. She felt the grass under her feet, the soft brush of bushes against her hair, and his fingers on her arm. It was no longer afternoon; the time had slipped away from under Natalie and while she had been behaving in her mind, under the lights, as though it were five o'clock, she found now in the darkness that it was much, much later, long past dinnertime, long past any daylight. She found that she was carefully carrying a glass in her hand, and she brought it up and sipped at it, standing still to do so.

"Tell me," he said insistently.

"I can't answer that," Natalie said.

"Do you realize," he said, amused, "that you made a perfectly outrageous statement? You *can't* refuse an explanation."

I wonder what I said, Natalie thought; she tried to remember and found that just as her feet were wandering over the grass, so her mind was wandering over the hundreds of words she had heard and spoken that day; it was not possible, she thought, annoyed, to sort out any one statement from that confusion and answer it; he was asking too much. "Where are we?" she asked.

"Near some trees," he said.

They had come, then, to the trees where Natalie had once encountered knights in armor; she could see them ahead, growing together silently. There were almost enough of them to be called a forest. Natalie could still, before reaching the trees, see the path under her feet; the darkness was then not yet absolute, but the light came by some unknown means, since there was no moon and the lights from the house could not reach this far; Natalie thought briefly that the light came from her own feet.

"I used to play in here when I was a child," she said.

Then they were into the little forest, and the trees were really dark and silent, and Natalie thought quickly, The danger is here, in *here*, just as they stepped inside and were lost in the darkness.

What have I done? she wondered, walking silently among the trees, aware of their great terrifying silence, so much more expectant by night, and their great unbent heads, and the darkness they pulled about her with silent patient hands.

When the man beside her spoke she was relieved: there was another human being, then, caught in this silence and wandering among the watchful trees, another mortal.

“Let’s sit down here,” he said, and without speaking Natalie sat beside him on a fallen trunk. Looking up as she did immediately, she saw immeasurable space, traveling past the locked hands of the trees, past the large nodding implacable heads, up and into the silence of the sky, where the stars remained, indifferent.

“Tell me what you thought was so wonderful about yourself,” the man said; his voice was muted.

Oh my dear God sweet Christ, Natalie thought, so sickened she nearly said it aloud, is he going to *touch* me?

* * *

Natalie awoke the next morning to bright sun and clear air, to the gentle movement of her bedroom curtains, to the patterned dancing of the light on the floor; she lay quietly, appreciating the morning in the clear uncomplicated moment vouchsafed occasionally before consciousness returned. Then, with the darkening of the sunlight, the sudden coldness of the day, she was awake and, before perceiving clearly why, she buried her head in the pillow and said, half-aloud, “No, please no.”

“I will not think about it, it doesn’t matter,” she told herself, and her mind repeated idiotically, It doesn’t matter, it doesn’t matter, it doesn’t matter, it doesn’t matter, until, desperately, she said aloud, “I don’t remember, nothing happened, nothing that I remember happened.”

Slowly she knew she was sick; her head ached, she was dizzy, she loathed her hands as they came toward her face to cover her eyes. “Nothing happened," she chanted, "nothing happened, nothing happened, nothing happened, nothing happened."

"Nothing happened," she said, looking at the window, at the dear lost day. "I don't remember."

"I will not think about it," she said to her clothes, lying on the chair, and she remembered as she saw them how she had torn them off wildly when she went to bed, thinking, I'll fix them in the morning, and a button had fallen from her dress and she had watched it roll under the bed, and thought, I'll get it in the morning, and I'll face it all in the morning, and, in the morning it will be gone.

If she got out of bed it would be true; if she stayed in bed she might just possibly be really sick, perhaps delirious. Perhaps dead. "I will not think about it," she said, and her mind went on endlessly, Will not think about it, will not think about it, will not think about it.

Someday, she thought, it will be gone. Someday I'll be sixty years old, sixty-seven, eighty, and, remembering, will perhaps recall that something of this sort happened once (where? when? who?) and will perhaps smile nostalgically thinking, What a sad silly girl I was, to be sure.

How I worried, she would think — would it have happened again by then? "I won't think about it," she said. "Won't think about it, won't think about it."

Get up, she thought, so that someday, as quickly as possible, with infinite speed, somehow, she might get to be sixty-nine, eighty-four, forgetting, smiling sadly, thinking, What a girl I was, what a girl... I remember one time; did it happen to me or did I read it somewhere? Could it have happened like that? Or is it something one only finds in books? I have forgotten, she would say, an old lady of ninety, turning over her memories, which would be — please God — faded, and mellowed, by time. “Oh, please,” she said, sitting on the edge of her bed, “oh, please, please.”

The most horrible moment of that morning, and of that day — horrible in itself by being, horrible with its sidelong (suspicious? knowing? perceiving?) looks from her mother and father, heavy amusement from her brother, horrible with remembered words and impossible remembered acts, horrible with its sunlight and its cold disgusting hours — the most horrible moment of that morning or any morning in her life, was when she first looked at herself in the mirror, at her bruised face and her pitiful, erring body.

She came down to breakfast dressed unfamiliarly in her old clothes; so much of her life had taken place in the blue dress she wore the day before that her old sweater and skirt seemed strange, the costume for some extraordinary Natalie part, which had lain for weeks in a stockroom, waiting for the chosen actress to put them on.

Perhaps a gladiator, entering the arena, might notice with some dull interest the sand underfoot, carelessly raked and still showing little hills and scuff marks which registered the brief passage of previous victims; Natalie, approaching her own breakfast table, observed absently that her napkin, folded by herself at breakfast the day before, was pulled carelessly through the ring. Her mother’s face, Natalie saw, was tired and she looked at none of them; her father was red-eyed and frowning. All of us, Natalie thought, and turned her eyes to the table.

“Good morning, everyone,” she said without cheer.

“Morning,” said her mother wearily.

“Natalie,” said her father without enthusiasm.

“Hi,” said her brother; his voice was outrageously fresh, and Natalie thought briefly, No one ever knows what *he’s* been doing.

We are a graceless family, she thought again, cringing away from her own worn mind. “No egg, thank you,” she said civilly to her mother, avoiding in time a look at the plate of fried eggs. “Thanks,” she said to her brother, who passed her the toast without displaying any conspicuous interest in whether or not she starved.

Her family’s dullness lessened Natalie’s own concern, and she began to lose a little of the feeling that her face showed, as the map of a country passed through by only one traveler and charted with a single destructive route, any of the fears of this morning, although when she relaxed even slightly the “Please, please, please,” still echoed maddeningly through her head.

“What would she do if she knew what I know?” Natalie asked herself, staring at her mother from under her lashes; “What would she know if she did what I did?” And from far within her head came the echo, “please, please, please.” Mrs. Waite, who had hoped for so long to persuade Natalie of her womanhood with words, having no better weapon at her disposal, sighed deeply, and the silence at the breakfast table, which had been a family silence before, became a family pause, a preparation for speech. Who is going to speak? Natalie wondered; not me, certainly. She knew, incredibly, that if she spoke she would tell them what had happened; not because she so much desired to tell, that she wanted to tell even them, but because this was not a personal manifestation, but had changed them all in changing the world, in the sense that they only existed in Natalie’s imagination anyway, so that the revolution in the world had altered their faces and made their hearts smaller.

I wish I were dead, Natalie thought concretely.

Mr. Waite leaned back, so that the feeble sunlight, which had endured for a very long time, touched his hair impersonally. “Your God,” he remarked bitterly to his wife, “has seen fit to give us a black and rotten day.”

Anything which begins new and fresh will finally become old and silly. The educational institution is certainly no exception to this, although training the young is by implication an art for old people exclusively, and novelty in education is allied to mutiny. Moreover, the mere process of learning is allied to mutiny. Moreover, the mere process of learning is so excruciating and so bewildering that no conceivable phraseology or combination of philosophies can make it practical as a method of marking time during what might be called the formative years. The college to which Arnold Waite, after much discussion, had decided to send his only daughter was one of those intensely distressing organizations which had been formed on precisely the same lofty and advanced principles as hoarier seats of learning, but which applied them with slight differences in detail; education, the youthful founders of the college had told the world blandly, was more a matter of attitude than of learning. Learning, they had remarked in addition, was strictly a process of accustoming oneself to live maturely in a world of adults. Adults, they pointed out with professorial cynicism, were tough things to come upon suddenly. As a result, they concluded — and this may be found still in their catalogues, although much of the original thesis has been modified and watered down by their trustees — going to college must be, for girls and boys, something of a drastic experience.

Obviously, in any college which begins with the notion of education as experience, a certain amount of confusion must be allowed for before anything can be done about what is going to be taught. Should the student be free, for instance? Should the teacher be free? Or should the concept of freedom be abandoned as an educational ideal and the concept of utility be substituted? Ought the students be allowed sentimental sciences like Greek?

Or geometry? Should there be a marriage course? What, precisely, should be the attitude taken by the college with regard to a resident psychoanalyst?

The college had been in existence for perhaps fifteen years. Its founders had thought they were cutting their problems in half, originally, by eliminating men from the student body and women from the faculty. They had told one another honestly over beer in the clever apartments where the idea of the college had first seen light that they all of them believed in informality, that more information was derived from one casual conversation than from a dozen lectures, that education was after all a thing of give and take and should be a pleasure as well as a duty. Words like "mature" and "sustained" and "life" and "realistic" and "vision" and "humanities" were used lavishly. It was decided to construct the college buildings entirely of shingle and "the original beams"; it was supposed that modern dance and the free use of slang in the classrooms might constitute an aura of rich general culture. It was decided that anyone who wanted to study anything should be accommodated, although gym was not encouraged, and it was regarded as extremely fortunate that no one spoke up for microbiology before the fifth year of the college's life. It was ardently hoped that moderately odd students — such as perhaps even Negroes, or real Navajo Indians — might desire to enroll. It was unanimously voted that students should be allowed to drink, stay out all night, gamble, and paint from nude female models, without any kind of restraint; this, it was clear, would prepare them for the adult world. Any student was to be allowed to make any suggestion. The faculty members were to be drawn almost entirely from a group which would find the inadequate salary larger than anything they had ever earned; the first legitimately appointed Literature professor was a young man whose series of articles in a political journal had aroused much comment, since they were concerned with the illiberal overtones of a revival of Aristophanes. The music faculty were, to a man, intensely interested in the various usefulnesses of the percussion instruments, and without exception composed drum quartets to accompany the college dancers. A great deal was said about old English ballads, and one entire course with a large enrollment spent a semester studying “Frankie and Johnny.” It was not believed among the science people that information came before experiment, except in the most extreme cases; “Theory is nothing, experience all,” was a phrase used most effectively in the college prospectus. The people in the town near the college felt strongly that the college community was Communistic, and could not understand, when they thought about it, why so many rich people sent their daughters there.

Unfortunately, this state of mind, happy as it might be for the future adults of the world, did not in the last analysis profit the college. It was found that certain compromises with conservatism were desirable. Although the college catalogue continued to lean heavily on “expression” and “creative activity,” the practice of both became more restrained, and some required courses were found necessary. Instead, for instance, of being allowed to dance as they pleased, students were now required to dance in patterns. Students who formerly waited on table for the joy of common effort were now paid small wages for their work. Instead of being allowed to gamble and drink freely, they were permitted to do neither on campus without the condoning presence of a faculty member or wife, the young man who resented Aristophanes having been dismissed after two years. The students indeed might stay out all night if their rigid schedules permitted, but only if an accurate address were left with the college officials. It had been found dreadfully necessary to install a sort of house resident in each living center; this person was called a “tenant,” inhabited a faculty apartment, and was expected to exert a semi-official influence over the girls in the house and to invite them in to tea occasionally. These faculty apartments were much sought after, because they were inexpensive compared with what the students in the houses paid for their rooms, and because they were a more comfortable place for single faculty than the living centers devoted to faculty or the unusually perishable faculty houses.

Thus the college was, in brief, a place modern, authentic, progressive, realistic, honest, and humane, with decent concessions to the fact that it was supposed to be, and had to be, a strictly budget-balanced proposition, a factory in which the intake must necessarily match the outgo. It had a clean-shaven president who played golf and who made speeches to Women's Clubs in a mildly humorous vein, a board of trustees who came regularly to sherry parties and tours of inspection, a faculty with more-or-less accurate caps and gowns to wear at Commencement, and a set of alumnae ranging from the bold-eyed members of the first graduating class, who were almost without exception divorced and haggard women of the world, to the well-trained members of the most recent graduating classes, who came back comfortably to reunions with their small children.

It might also be noted that the "original beams" having been found to need constant repair, plastic brick had been substituted wherever possible.

* * *

It was, for Natalie, precisely a new start. The room was almost square, perhaps a little longer than it was wide, with only one window that filled almost the entire far wall. So far, completely blank and empty, it was expectant, almost curious, and Natalie, standing timidly just inside the door, in the wall opposite the window, looked at the bare walls and floor with joy; it was, precisely, a new start.

The walls and ceiling had been painted a dull tan, in the proper institutional bad taste, so uninspired as to be almost colorless, and the dark-brown woodwork and the smallness of the room made it seem cell-like and dismal. The uncurtained window showed the rain clouds; because the room was on the third floor it was lighter than many, but still Natalie had to turn on the light, a bare bulb in the ceiling which lighted with a string, in order to admire most fully the clear spatial beauties of her room. These were walls to be adorned with her pictures, or whatever else she chose to put on them (a fine of twenty-five cents for every nail hole, of course; graduation from the college not allowed until every blemish on the walls of the room, including marks left by scotch tape, had been paid for), the floor was readied for the movements of her feet, presenting itself as exactly right-angled at the corners and in respectful anticipation of anything Natalie might be inclined to set upon it (excepting, of course, scratches, which must be eradicated at the comptroller's office by the payment of a small fine) and the ceiling, bleak and neat in the unshaded light from the bulb, stood at attention over Natalie's head, setting her in a sort of package, compact and square and air- and water-proof, a precise, unadulterated, fresh start for Natalie, a new clean box to live in.

They — the unidentified, fearsome, unsleeping *they* of the institution — had furnished it, of course. They, along with their nightmare watchfulness, and their frantic concern over marring, possessed an unerring sense of the minimum in form and design, in material and workmanship, in color and quality, which a girl, paying her tuition and her room and board as expected, could endure in silence. The bed was narrow and its mattress thin enough for the sleep of exhaustion, never thick enough for the restless pre-exam sleep of worry. The sheets and pillowcases were piled neatly on the foot of the bed. Natalie had her own blankets in her trunk; her mother had chosen dark rose as most practical, and had indulged Natalie in a bright bedspread and matching curtains for this room.

For the first time, standing in this doorway of this precise room on the day she first saw the college, Natalie knew a certain pride of ownership. This was, after all, the only room she had ever known where she would be, privately, working out her own salvation. Briefly, she thought of long nights alone in this room (no one to notice her light, no one to tap on her door and ask was she all right, dear) and long afternoons spent at the narrow desk in the corner, writing whatever she pleased and perhaps making only silly pictures on paper if she chose. If she liked, she might lock her door. If she pleased, she could entertain here; if it suited her pleasure, she could shut the windows, open the windows, move the bed, upset the chairs, go in the closet and hide. A purely mechanical love possessed her; the number on the door — it was 27; a good number, owning a seven for luck and a two for work, and adding, triumphantly, to nine — belonged only to her; she might tell people, "Room 27," and know that her own dear possessions were surely inside. Tomorrow morning, she thought, and leaned back happily against the door, she would wake up in this room.

* * *

For the whole first afternoon that she was alone at college Natalie asked herself constantly, Is this meaningful? Is this important? Is this part of what I am to go home knowing?

They sat around the living room of the house, the girls who were to live in it, eying one another, each one wondering, perhaps which of the others was to be her particular friend, sought out hereafter at such meetings, joined in the terrible sacred friendship of these years. Each one wondering, perhaps, who it was just and right to be afraid of in the room: who, for instance, was to be the belle of the house, superior and embarrassing with her greater knowledge, her secrets? The ones who had been senior queens in high school stood out, the one or two who had been high school class historians were clearly marked, as were the students, the learners of facts, the ascetic amateur writers with their poems safely locked away upstairs; the hangers-on were there, eying the beauty queens, estimating clearly which one it were best to appropriate immediately. The poor ones, with their obvious best clothes, the smart ones, with their obvious right clothes, the girls who would teach the others to dance, the girls who would whisper inaccurate facts of life, the girls who would fail all their courses and go home ingloriously (saying goodbye bravely, but crying), the girls who would fail all their courses and join the best cliques, the girls who would fall in love with their professors, either desperately and secretly, or openly and disgracefully, the girls whose hearts would break and the girls whose spirits would break — a group of girls from whatever kind of homes, with whatever agonized mothers wondering, tonight, at home — herded uneasily together into one room to await the preliminary steps of an education.

They sat, murmuring, in the living room of the house they were going to live in, which was to replace whatever houses they had left that morning or the day before or the week before, the old houses still so clear in their minds and so much home, to be so soon replaced by this one, with its careful undistinguished furnishings, designed to be neither better than the worst homes left behind, nor worse than the best; the living room where the perfect college girl could entertain, circumspectly, her immaculate date. It was designed to form a reasonable and not too indicative background for any of the girls who lived in it (who would, of course, never have lived in it if they had not been that most clearly indicated of all types, the college girl), and thoughtfully chosen to harmonize with the best college fashions being shown in the smartest middle-price department stores (in all cities; ask for the College Shoppe or the Sub-Deb Salon or for Teen Tempos or Girlhood Styles, Incorporated: third floor, fifth floor, pen and pencil sets on the main floor, stationery); its discreet neutral walls, the green-and-gray-striped chairs, the helpless vases on the mantel, the picture over the fireplace, which may have been of a past president of the college or of a financial lover of education — all were so carefully devoid of personality that the room as a whole reduced conversation to the exact level which a well-bred girl would choose.

Natalie, accustomed to rooms and to company which were, as a complete unit, intended to bring out the maximum personality any given organism possessed, felt smothered by the room and by her companions. She sat in a corner, on the floor because when she came in after an uncomfortable farewell to her mother and father and brother, still carrying the money her father had pressed into her hand and the box of cookies her mother had nearly forgotten, more girls were sitting on the floor than on chairs and because by now all the chairs were taken by girls who had obviously exercised a freer choice than Natalie had; and she looked, trying not to seem looking, at the other girls in the room.

There was one directly opposite who had bright-red hair, and who was laughing and talking with several girls around her; more girls were listening and edging nearer, and Natalie, drawing back from that side of the room, thought, *There* is someone I will know only slightly. The girl next to her had hair that grew in an ugly line across her forehead, and when Natalie risked saying, after rehearsing it for some minutes, “Do you know any of these people?” the girl said, “No,” briefly, eyed Natalie for a minute, and then looked away. She is not looking for me, Natalie thought, and the girl on her other side was not looking for Natalie either; as Natalie turned to her, to repeat her question, she rose quickly and went to join the group by the red-haired girl. Will they all notice that I am sitting almost alone? Natalie wondered. Did the red-haired girl thank her fate every morning and night, when she looked at herself in her mirror, with a comb in her hand? Did the girl near Natalie bewail secretly the ugly line of her hair, and persuade herself that she was more aware of it than anyone else? Was someone regarding Natalie, identifying her by some extraordinary characteristic which Natalie did not know or had forgotten or had convinced herself that no one saw? Was it not possible that the girl over there, in the blue dress, had put the dress on that morning wondering if it would do for her first day at college? Because it would not, and had she spent the day concerned with it, or had she forgotten it immediately she put it on? Had the mother of the one in green told her not to forget her pills? Was the one with glasses afraid of waking in the night, alone? Which of them had come to college hoping secretly to meet a thin nervous girl named Natalie? Did she expect Natalie to recognize her first? And, worst of all, what terrible change were they all expecting so immediately, so fearfully? Was something going to happen?

Natalie had already discovered that it was not possible to think clearly in this bedlam, any more than it was possible to act clearly. All thoughts and actions were called for so quickly, were so subject to immediate and drastic change, that she dared not try to rise to go upstairs and find her room again, and she dared not estimate finally the probable characters of the girls in the room, for fear that, in either case, someone should look at her and laugh; suddenly, permanently, seeing her as, “That girl who...”

Then without warning the room quieted, and Natalie perceived that the red-haired girl was standing. “Shall I?” she said to someone sitting near her, as one who has intended to all the time and merely expects public confirmation; the girls around her nodded and spoke urgently, and the red-haired girl turned prettily to the room, spread her hands, and said, “Listen, everyone, we’ve all got to introduce ourselves to each other. After all, we’ll be living in the same house for a long time.” Everyone laughed as though, unexpectedly, she had voiced the hidden dismay of them all, and the red-haired girl said, “I’ll go first. My name’s Peggy Spencer, and I came here from Central High School in—”

The girl next to Natalie, the one with the unpleasant hair, leaned over suddenly and said to Natalie, “Isn’t she cute?”

Cute? Natalie thought. “She certainly is,” she whispered back.

Around the circle of girls, each one in turn announced her name and her immediate past record. Each one, speaking her own name in a voice she had rarely heard pronounce it, was more or less embarrassed; when Natalie’s turn came, and the girl next to her had identified herself as Adelaide something or other from some school or other, and turned expectantly to Natalie, as one who sees an ordeal safely past and another up for the question, Natalie found herself surprisingly able to say clearly, “My name is Natalie Waite.” *Is* it my name? she wondered then, afraid for a minute that she had appropriated the name of the next girl, or of someone she had met slightly once and remembered only in the recesses of her mind which seemed called upon unreasonably to function now, socially, and without experience. The name passed without comment, perhaps because no one was listening, actually, to any name other than her own.

After each, then, had with shame called upon herself to stand forth alone, the red-haired girl, without so much pretty confusion, said in the voice of one to whom amateur parliamentary procedure is familiar (“Well, of *course* it will be Peggy Spencer for vice-president...”), “All right, then, since we’re all frosh together, we ought to settle any problems we’ve got right now.”

Frosh, Natalie thought, problems. Are the problems to be settled here? She wanted desperately to go to her room.

By the second day (waking up delightedly into the strange room, dressing alone without the certain knowledge of her mother moving downstairs, putting away her own things, selecting her own places for underwear in the dresser, books on the shelves, papers in the desk) she was able to find her own room without being puzzled by the stairs or the length of the hall. She had taken to staying around the floor bathroom at bedtime, with the rest of the girls, asking odd, uncertain questions of the others as they did of her, laughing at jokes whose inevitable point was the uncanny ability of new students to outwit old students, shouting meaninglessly at people she hardly knew. She knew the name of almost everyone on the floor; the red-haired girl, who was already running for some freshman office or other, nodded cordially to her whenever they passed on the stairs, the girl with the ugly hair sat next to her at breakfast one morning. It was thus possible to live — breakfast, lunch, dine, brush one's teeth, sleep, read — in an odd, random fashion, in this world. As one who wakens to find his city destroyed and himself alone in the ruins, Natalie found herself a rude shelter, food, and comfort, by a system almost scavenging.

* * *

It could have been a nightmare, but it was a frantic, imperative knock on her door. Natalie, fumbling, turned on her light and looked, as though it were important, at the clock: three o'clock. That meant it was the middle of the night, and her mind, suddenly concerned lest its own signal system be awry, moved quickly over obligations and commitments. No class at this hour, surely, no appointments. A fire, then? Something wholly beyond her own jurisdiction? A murder? Perhaps in the room next door? (A thought of the glories of innocent witness-ship crossed her mind, perhaps for future reference: “But *that* man is not a postman, Inspector; did you see the way he opened the mailbox?”) Perhaps they were waking Natalie, as someone who might help, who was known to keep her head in emergencies, phone the doctor first, know always who was to apply the tourniquet, who the makeshift splint. Or, perhaps, waking Natalie as the obvious, destined victim? War? Pestilence? Terror?

“Initiation,” called a long voice down the hall. “All freshmen out...”

“No,” said Natalie, and reached for the cord of her light. Was she a freshman? So designated by those who did not know her name? Or had she been awakened by mistake — or *was* this meant for her? Natalie alone, then? (Her untrusted mind playing her tricks? A dream, so that she should stand in a moment, shivering and miserable, alone in the hall while doors opened up and down the length of the building and curious, mocking faces peered out, saying, “What *is* she doing?” and answering, “She dreamed, she dreamed she was a freshman and it was something called initiation, she keeps saying something about a murder, she keeps asking what her name is, she doesn’t seem to know where she is...”) “I *am* a freshman,” she said aloud, and, quickened by a sudden excitement, she swung out of bed and into a bathrobe. “College,” she told herself cynically, hurrying with the bathrobe cord, “initiation,” stuffing her feet into her slippers. She opened her door, tentative at the last moment, to find the hall lights on and the hall full of nervous, curious, bathrobed girls.

“Where do we go?” someone asked Natalie immediately, perhaps assuming from her late exit from her own room that she had some special inside information.

“*I* don’t know,” Natalie said. “We better stay here.”

"I understand," said someone, and giggled, "that they make us..." The rest of her words were most unfortunately lost to Natalie, whose arm had been seized by a temporarily authoritative hand, and whose ears had been seized by a voice saying, "Frosh? This way."

Resenting again the movie word "frosh" (and, to a certain degree knowing curiosity tempered with excitement, so that she thought consciously, in the midst of an unwanted fear, So *this* is why they always pick the middle of the night for things to happen! and knew she had hit upon something very profound), Natalie followed the firm hand, and the rest of the girls followed her. Behind her someone still giggled, someone still said, "But where are we going?" Someone insisted nervously, "I'm not sure my *doctor*..."

"Where are we going?" Natalie asked the person leading her; she discovered with strong embarrassment that this person was masked with a handkerchief over her face, tied approximately at the back of her head; this cops-and-robbers effect conveyed to Natalie the fact that the night's escapade (she did not phrase it to herself like this until much later, however) was something these people might not care to do in daylight, with their faces uncovered; there was about her conductor a faint air of many people provoking one another, saying, "Go *on*, I dare you... go *on*; you look *wonderful*; *I* will if *you* will," and the intoxication which comes of a deed hallowed in tradition but uncertainly remembered in detail.

"Shut up," Natalie was told, in answer to her question, and she thought of how bold the lack of a face made one, and, perhaps, how not having a face of one's own might lead to universal peace, since a face was, after all, only...

"In here," said the faceless creature.

It was extraordinary how not having faces had changed the bodies of the girls in the house. Falteringly, Natalie was able to pick out two or three, but, reflecting that she had known them at best only by their make-up and the way they did their hair, she was forced to distrust her own judgment and to believe, most charitably, the best of them. One, who seemed to have constituted herself leader, remarked as Natalie, first in line, was brought in, "Do you have any qualification for entering here?"

They were sitting in a semicircle on the floor, all masked as foolishly as the girl who had brought her, all wearing their own pajamas, which surely their mothers, picking them out, had not destined for such midnight purposes; or, indeed, had they? Did the mothers of such girls encourage their superiority, egg them on to masked acts? Did they, sending their daughters off to college, remark, as last-minute advice, "And, dearest, *remember*, when you get after the frosh... *do* please wear your blue-and-white-striped p.j.'s — they look the best, and they'll stand the splinters in that floor..."

"No, I was brought," said Natalie, and received for reward a push from the girl who had brought her, so that she fell clumsily against a girl sitting, and the girl said, very humanly, "*Cut* it out," and pushed back.

Now I *will* keep quiet, Natalie thought, knowing — and it was not, after all, any too soon to learn — the resignation of a perceptive mind before gleeful freed brutality — and let someone else get pushed.

" — for entering here?" the leader was asking the next girl.

"I don't know," said the girl uncertainly, and was pushed.

As that girl dropped down next to Natalie, she whispered, trembling, "I wish I'd never come."

"Me, too," said Natalie inadequately.

She found that she was thinking absurdly of Jeanne d'Arc; perhaps the next girl, or the one after that, would turn in contempt from the leader, and, addressing a dim figure in the background, drop to her knees and say, "You, Sire, are my king..."

After the first few girls, their mentor was tired of pushing them — perhaps she had worn out her rage, or her arms? — and they were allowed to seat themselves quietly. No one spoke, and beyond their mutual and spreading apprehension came the sure conviction among the freshmen that their superiors had exceeded themselves, that the "*I* will if *you* will" had begun to evaporate, with the laughter and the bad puns; that the torment they had devised extended perhaps to one or two girls and could not, for sheer bodily weariness, be repeated, over and over again, for twenty. Moreover, it became increasingly clear that the party had fallen flat, that the pure number of girls entering docilely had worn thin the viciousness in the voice of the leader, that she and her cohorts were going to skim over the last few girls, relying for their effect upon the first few, and, perhaps even with discomfort for themselves, let the business go to pieces now without further emphasizing their futility; the part of wisdom lay clearly in choosing the weakest first.

Natalie, at least, felt a grateful relief when, instead of calling upon her as the first girl, the leader waited until all the freshmen were in, and crowded uneasily onto the floor, and sitting or kneeling, then pointed to a girl in the middle and said, "You, there."

It crossed Natalie's mind then that if she had stayed in her room quietly and never heeded the call to frosh, she would have been overlooked, since no one seemed to care about those who did not come. With this in mind, Natalie turned cautiously and scanned the ranks of freshmen for the red-haired girl, but did not find her. Another instance, she thought regretfully (or at least remembered later that she had so thought), of ritual gone to seed; the persecution of new students, once passionate, is now only perfunctory.

The girl chosen was required to sit upon a low stool in what was, most of them now recognized, the center of the second-floor lavatory — the largest in the house, and the one with most floor space — and she was required further to give her name and her previous educational experience, as though that had not all been gone over before by people more qualified to know, and then the leader, hesitating and prompted, had chosen to confer with a colleague rather than to continue the questioning immediately. Then someone from the masked circle around the new students said, "Look, we're all allowed to ask questions, aren't we?"

"Sure," said the leader, with obvious gratitude.

"Then listen, Myrna," said the girl happily, from behind her mask, "you a virgin?"

Natalie saw the freshman blushing full-face and the upper-classmen blushing behind and above their masks, and thought, I hope they don't ask me, and, It's the girls with masks on their faces blushing too. Could it be, she wondered tiredly, that a mask is no protection at *all?*"

"Certainly," said the girl on the stool, surprised at the question, and blushing as well as the rest.

"Tell us a dirty joke, then," said someone else.

"I don't know any," said the girl, writhing, obviously repressing a seemingly forgotten story that came unfortunately to mind. "I don't listen to *those*."

"Excused," said the leader. The girl came off the stool and retired, blushing and explaining, to oblivion among her friends; she had passed; she had at that moment taken on a protective coloration among the general run of girls in the house; she was not in any way eccentric, but a good, normal, healthy, American college girl, with ideals and ambitions and looking forward to a family of her own; she had merged.

“Next,” said the leader. She gestured at random, and her gesture was answered with alacrity by someone who, seating herself on the stool, showed that she, and no other, was possessed of the information the masked girls wanted to hear, and that she was, in addition, prepared to lie valiantly to deprive them of it and to exalt herself in the eyes of the freshmen girls.

She gave her name in a pleased voice and eyed the circle defiantly, as though daring any of them to match her siren experience or to question it.

Natalie, who needed abruptly to establish her own position, leaned to the girl next to her and whispered, “I won’t answer them.”

“Shhh,” said the girl next to her, bending forward to hear the victim on the stool, who was delivering the punch-line of a joke. The girls in the masks did not laugh, or at least did not show beyond the masks that they were laughing. “That’s not very dirty,” said one.

“It’s the best I know,” said the girl on the stool innocently.

“Excused,” said the leader helplessly. Then, unbearably, unbelievably, she looked squarely at Natalie. “You,” she said.

“No,” said Natalie, but the desire to assume the stool, if not the confessional, drove her. Sitting in the center of light, with everyone watching her, she knew at once and for all time the hard core of defiance with which she might always face unknown faces staring; she knew with strength that it would be as easy, or even easier, to resist than to expose herself.

She gave her name (*was* it her name?) and then, when asked if she were a virgin — and this question, gaining adherents from the unkind and the merely curious, was being asked now by three or four voices at once, and even, Natalie saw from the high point of the stool, being echoed by the traitor freshmen themselves — said briefly, “I won’t answer.”

The worst she had expected was another push, but obviously everyone was afraid to push her with everyone else watching; no single girl there dared expose her own self (“Are *you* a virgin? Well?”) with any untoward gesture by now; no single girl dared, however much she desired, take on the limelight; because perhaps by now one small gesture of resistance from the freshmen would have dissolved the upperclassmen into tearful dismayed people, without superiority, and tearing off their masks, saying, “It was *her* idea — I wouldn’t have done it at *all* except...”

Someone said menacingly that she had better tell, and someone else said that if she didn’t *want* to tell, well, that proved it.

“Tell a dirty joke,” said the leader.

“I will *not*,” said Natalie, who, like everyone else there, was more afraid of being found not to know dirty jokes than of being found to have a rich supply. “Don’t you know *enough* jokes?”

“Bad sport,” someone called, and then others took it up. “Bad sport, rotten sport, not fair.”

What a silly routine, Natalie thought, not realizing, sitting there alone on the stool in the center of the ring of girls, how she was jeopardizing her own future in college, her own future for four years and perhaps for the rest of her life; how even worse than the actual being a bad sport was the state of mind which led her into defiance of this norm, this ring of placid, masked girls, with their calm futures ahead and their regular pasts proven beyond a doubt; how one person, stepping however aside from their meaningless, echoing standards, set perhaps by a violent movement before their recollection, and handed down to them by other placid creatures, might lose a seat among them by questions, by rebellion, by anything except a cheerful smile and the resolution to hurt other people.

"I won't," Natalie said, not knowing whom she was answering.

"Excused," said the leader.

Natalie, realizing that she must relinquish the stool and the light, said as she rose (and loud enough, she hoped, to carry to the fortunate girls still asleep, the red-haired girl and the others who had not answered the call), "I think this is the silliest thing I ever saw." Follow me, she prayed to the girls still sitting in the ring, follow me, stand up, and a new world is made; but no one, standing up beside her, or even raising her voice or her eyes, noticed Natalie by now.

"Dirty joke?" the leader was saying to the new girl.

"I don't know," said the new girl, blushing pleasurably. "Let me think."

Natalie opened the door, observed but not interfered with, and went out.

She went, alone and with a realization of aloneness, to her own private, untouched, room.

Dear Dad,

This is going to be my most ambitious letter to date, and *please don't criticize*, because I am writing fast and not stopping to correct, and even though that might be the way to get things down best, it makes for a lot of mistakes. Because this is going to be about the college. I know you saw it that first day when you and Mother and Bud brought me down, but at that time we were all strange and didn't know what it was like, and now, after over two weeks (and it seems like two years, really) I feel so much at home here that I don't really remember what it was like to live anywhere else, and I sometimes think of how that first day is all *you* know of the place, and you still see it like that, and I can't remember.

First of all, let me tell you about my house. I guess you saw most of it when I moved in — and by the way, that was the *only* time I saw it *that* way, like a stranger with her mother and father and brother, I mean, because right after you left it got all different and I started feeling like a college girl who lived here. Do you know what I'm trying to say? Anyway, the house you saw isn't the one, I think, that I live in at all. By now it's turned into something where girls are yelling and laughing and feeling somehow completely private, and sort of in a world of their own. It has four stories, and I live on the third, as you know. I have a little room, like all the other rooms they give to freshmen. The third- and fourth-year students can have double rooms or suites, but the freshmen and usually the second-year students have rooms alone.

Our house is supposed to be the best because it's attached to the dining room and kitchens, and the girls here only have to go down the stairs and down a hall to get their dinner. Some of the others have to come all the way across the campus, from the other houses we saw. The main part of the campus is a long lawn, where we sit on warm evenings, and I keep thinking about that lawn, because, when I saw it the first day I was with you and Mother and Bud, I kept thinking how I was ever going to find my way back across it and get to my own house, and now I think I know every tree on it, and I go up and down the paths every day. Almost all my classes are in the lecture halls in the big building at the end of the lawn, but one class — Langdon's English I — is usually held outdoors on the lawn or else in the living room of our house. Some of the girls here asked him to have the class here instead of in a lecture hall so he said yes and the college said OK. I like it better because you can sit in a comfortable chair and smoke and not in a lecture room. There's more noise, though, and girls keep opening the doors and starting to come in and then they always get scared and excuse themselves and run out.

I get up as early as I can in the morning, but it's usually just in time for my eight-o'clock class, which is music two days a week and philosophy another two. Classes last an hour and a half, and I get terribly sleepy along about nine o'clock, especially since I don't usually have time for breakfast and I get hungry too. Then at nine-thirty I usually go up to the campus store for a coke and doughnuts, and of course I usually run into my professors there, because somehow everyone always goes there between classes. Then at ten o'clock two days a week, after music, I go to French, which I *hate*. I would drop it only I'd have to take something like Spanish instead. They won't let you graduate without one year of language. Lots of people think Spanish is easier. And I have a sociology course two afternoons a week, and the other two afternoons, of course, is English with Arthur Langdon. That's supposed to be an hour and a half too, but it's usually longer because we all stay around talking to him. I guess he's the most popular person on the campus. He runs the beauty contest before the Senior Dance.

The meals are terrible. They have a kind of salad made of sliced bananas and peanuts, and it seems like we have it five times a week. Also liver. And the coffee is no good, which is why no one ever bothers to go to breakfast.

I played some tennis yesterday with a girl named Helen something. I went down to the courts to practice, and she was there and asked if I wanted to play so I said yes. I wasn't half good enough for her, and we only played one set. We're going to try again sometime when I'm more used to these courts.

I'm looking forward to coming home for a weekend but guess I'll be too busy for a while yet. I'm working hard and having a fine time, and I'm very glad to be here. We're starting *Romeo and Juliet* in English next week.

Tell Mother I am well and I think I am gaining weight. In spite of the bad food, I eat a lot more here than I did at home. Tell her I could use a box of cookies or a cake, lots of the girls get packages from home.

I guess there are about three hundred girls here. Some very nice ones.

Lots of love to everyone at home,

Natalie

It was almost dark outside; the one window of Natalie's room showed black when she had the light on, and pale when she had the light off. When the light was off the room was beautiful and shadowy, with the light from the window moving gently onto the bright bedspread, touching slightly the paper on the desk, coming to rest on Natalie's own hands and the page of the open book before her. When, reluctantly, she turned the light on again — feeling that to seem to be abed at this hour was somehow disgraceful, and indicated perhaps a guilty conscience or perhaps even loneliness — the window fell black and the bed became square and neatly made, and the corners of things became then apparent, from the corners of the room to the corners of the book, and the feet of the desk on the floor were somehow obscene.

She was not trying to study; the fact of study was still strange to her, so that she read with appetite the freshman English textbook, and took novels from the library, and read with mild interest and a wandering mind the textbook of biology (having read, the first day, as had everyone in the class, the chapter on human reproduction), and saw no pattern and no meaning in the French text, the sociology book (past the chapter on prostitution), and regarded with blank contempt the book which very likely held all the world's carefully alphabetical facts upon the analysis of words — learned, very likely, and infinitely careful about theories, but duller than words had any right to be. For music, fortunately, she had only to arise at eight the next morning with both ears still attached to her head; so long as her ears *were* there, the fact that she did not use them to listen enthusiastically was unimportant to the music lecturer. For philosophy she had long ago evolved a complex and — she suspected — meaningless theory, which she kept by her in case the professor should raise his old head, ever, and look in her direction. “Sir,” she meant to say brightly, “if Descartes *really* means that he exists because his mind *thinks* he does, then wouldn’t it be true that...”

A knock on her door was as strange a thing to her as the fact of the door itself; at first she thought, It is across the hall, how clearly it sounds; then she thought, It is a mistake; she wasted a minute thinking of someone looking at the outside of the door steadfastly, as she looked at the inside, and meant to mark the next day whether the panels outside were the same as those inside; odd, she thought, that someone standing outside could look at the door, straight ahead, seeing the white paint and the wood, and I inside looking at the door and the white paint and the wood should look straight also, and we two looking should not see each other because there is something in the way. Are two people regarding the same thing not looking at each other?

The knock came again. “Come in,” occurred to Natalie then as reasonable thing to say, but the door was locked, so she stumbled, hastily and spilling her book, off the bed and across the room and finally remembered how to turn the key and open the door.

“Yes?” she said blindly, now that the door was removed.

“Hello,” said the girl outside; Natalie remembered, as though once the door was opened the world outside it slowly established itself, small section after small section — as though, in fact, it had not been prepared tonight for Natalie to open her door again, and had been caught completely unaware, and was putting a bold face on things and getting everything back together as quickly as possible, so that Natalie should not perceive it, looking through her door, and say, “Just as I thought; this confirms everything I have always suspected” — she remembered, slowly, seeing the girl’s face before and then, that her name was Rosalind.

“Hello,” Natalie said.

“Are you busy?” Rosalind said, leaning slightly to look over Natalie’s shoulder and into her room. “I mean, I just thought I’d come over and say hello, but if you’re busy...”

“No,” said Natalie, surprised. “I’m not at all busy.” She stood away from the door, and Rosalind came into the room, looking around curiously, as though she had not left one just like it immediately before, although perhaps Rosalind’s bedspread was blue instead of patterned, and she had perhaps been reading different books, and the clothes in the closet would of course be different.

“I wanted to talk to someone,” Rosalind offered; once in, she sat quickly on the bed and tucked her feet under her. “I saw your light on and thought that since we didn’t know each other very well it might be a good time to come and make friends with you.”

“I’m glad,” Natalie said. She was happy at having been disturbed; her books would still be there after Rosalind left, and who knew what odd thoughts and notions Rosalind might have brought with her? Natalie sat uneasily on the desk chair, knowing it was her duty to speak, and able to think of nothing but the list of irregular French verbs she would not be able to remember half so clearly tomorrow. “I was just trying to do my French,” she said, with an embarrassed laugh that she deplored.

“French,” Rosalind said, and shuddered. “I’m glad I took Spanish.”

“Is Spanish terribly hard?” Natalie asked politely.

"Listen," Rosalind said, obviously feeling that the amenities were over and it was time to get down to business, "do *you* know any of the girls around here?"

"No," said Natalie, "not very many." Not that I *want* to know them, she longed to add, I'm *very* careful about my friends, I dislike knowing lots of people, I don't make friends easily because I keep them for a long time, I make friends slowly and with discrimination, I devote myself to my studies... "Not any of them, really," Natalie said.

"That's what I thought," Rosalind said. "Did you *ever* see anything like them? I mean, they certainly aren't very *friendly*."

"I haven't really tried—" Natalie said.

"Peggy Spencer and *her* friends," Rosalind said disdainfully. "Helen Burton and *her* friends... and such a noise going on all night. I can't even *sleep*."

"I've never had any trouble getting to sleep," Natalie said eagerly.

"We ought to show them they're not so very special," Rosalind said. She lifted her chin and shrugged. "You go into one of their rooms and they're all there and they stop talking and say, 'Yes?' as though you were a beggar until you turn around and go and then you can hear them laughing after you shut the door. I don't think they're *that* important, I *must* say."

"I've never gone into any of their rooms," Natalie said, feeling that she had an end of this conversation to keep up.

"Well, you know what they say about *you*," Rosalind said. She looked at Natalie as though for the first time aware of the particular person she was addressing, calling to mind this person's special liabilities. "*They* say you're crazy. You sit here in your room all day and all night and never go out and *they* say you're *crazy*."

"I go out to class," Natalie said quickly.

"They say you're spooky." Rosalind said. "That's what they call you, Spooky, I heard them."

"Who?" Natalie said. "*Who* knows what I do?"

"Well, *I* think it's your own business," said Rosalind critically. "I mean, everyone has the right to live the way they want, and naturally none of *them* has any right to call a person names just because a person wants to live their own way."

Feeling a sudden quick warmth toward Rosalind for not having watched her, Natalie said, "All I want them to do is leave me alone."

"Well, *that's* what I say," Rosalind said, "but if you really don't belong to their little crowd, *naturally* they think you're crazy, and they never even stop to think that maybe you and I don't *want* to run around with people like *that*, and what I'd like to know is how does anyone get to belong with them if they look at you like you were a beggar and then laugh when you go out? Does it really seem *fair?*"

"What they think is actually not at all important," Natalie said with dignity.

Even as she spoke she knew her position, and her mind, racing ahead of her, was counting over its special private blessings: there was her father, of course, although he seemed, right now, far away and helpless against laughing girls, there was Arthur Langdon and the fact that she seemed, more than any other, to be comprehending and alert in his class, and had received a sort of recognition, as though they were kindred, from him — but then perhaps, she thought, frightened, perhaps not everyone thought of Arthur Langdon's regard as special. Perhaps he was not so valuable to these watching, laughing girls as other things Natalie had never heard of. But then, of course, there was always and beyond all laughter and beyond all scrutiny her own sweet dear home of a mind, where she was safe, protected, priceless... “They’re trivial people, really. Mediocre.”

“Try and get anywhere *without* them,” Rosalind said cynically. “They’re *every*thing.”

Not everything, Natalie thought hastily, not quite everything. Not the place ten, fifteen, twenty years from now, the place of pure honor and glory, from which one perhaps looked down and said, “*Who?* What was the name, please? Did I ever meet you before? In *college?* Dear heaven, so *long* ago...”

“They get away with murder,” Rosalind said. “Think any of *them* has to do what *we* do?” She put out her lip sullenly and began to swing one foot back and forth. Looking at her, Natalie saw clearly what had not seemed important before now: that Rosalind was squat and ugly, and had a drab dull face and a faint growth of hair on her upper lip. “Listen,” Rosalind said, “you know that girl, the skinny one who’s such a good friend of Peggy Burton’s? The one they call Max, because her name’s Maxine? Well, the reason *she* went away last weekend was because she had an a*bor*tion.”

“Oh,” said Natalie.

“Heard them talking about it through the door,” Rosalind said. “And Peggy Burton — *she’s* only been lucky. You know that guy of hers, the football player?” She nodded emphatically, and glanced slyly at Natalie. “I mean,” she said, “not that I want to repeat scandal, but they’re *all* like that. We ought to be thankful we don’t have more to do with them. I mean, I’m *sure* the college people know all about them, and if you hang around with them, first thing you know they think the same about *you*.”

“About me?” said Natalie. Far off, in the untouched, lonely places of her mind, an echo came: It isn’t true, it didn’t happen...

“Not that either of *us*,” Rosalind said, and laughed lightly. “I mean,” she said, looking again at Natalie, “I know about *me*, and I guess about *you*.”

Pride caught at Natalie; here was this hideous girl attempting an alliance on the grounds that Natalie was — what? was there a word? (Innocent? Who was innocent — this girl with her nasty eyes? Chaste? Chaste meant no impure thoughts; virginal meant clear and clean and could not include this Rosalind with her low coarse face; untouched? Spotless? Pure?) Could I, Natalie thought, in the second when her eyes met Rosalind’s, could I possibly associate on any grounds with this girl? Whichever way I speak, she will follow me. “It isn’t true,” she said.

“Of *course* it’s true,” Rosalind said indignantly. “Don’t I hear them talking every night through the wall? Some nights they’re in there giggling until I think I’ll go crazy, things you and I don’t even think about, much less talk about, and then when I pound on the wall you’d think *I* was the one, the way they yell back.”

“I mean,” Natalie said apologetically, “if *we* don’t meddle with *them*...”

Rosalind shrugged. “I just think it’s terrible,” she said, “them thinking they’re so good, and the things they do. What they don’t realize is that no one *wants* to be in their crowd, for fear of having people think things about them.”

Suddenly (and it gave a sudden clear picture of her decision to come here in the first place; suddenly, on a phrase, perhaps not even considered, so that she knocked on Natalie’s door at random, because it was the third from the end of the hall, or because the door somehow resembled, in some mystic, impossible way, the door to her own room, far away at home) she rose, pushed her hair back with an unattractive gesture, and said wearily, “Anyway, I wouldn’t want anyone knowing *I* had anything to do with them.”

"Of course not," said Natalie helplessly; she answered the girl's leaving as she had answered her coming, without volition, without desire, without conviction.

"Listen," said Rosalind, as though it were a sudden idea, "let's go to breakfast together tomorrow. OK?"

"I have an early class," said Natalie hastily.

"So do *I*," said Rosalind. "I'll come and knock on your door about seven-thirty. You be ready."

"I don't know if I'll have breakfast before class," Natalie said. "I always wake up so late—"

"I'll see that you're up," Rosalind said. "We'll show them they're not the *only* people in the world. OK?"

From Natalie's secret journal:

Dearest dearest darling most important dearest darling Natalie — this is me talking, your own priceless own Natalie, and I just wanted to tell you one single small thing: you *are* the best, and they *will* know it someday, and someday no one will ever dare laugh again when you are near, and no one will dare even *speak* to you without bowing first. And they *will* be afraid of you. And all you have to do is wait, my darling, wait and it will come, I promise you. Because that's the fair part of it — they have it now, and you have it later. Don't worry, please, please don't, because worrying might spoil it, because if you worry it might not come true.

Somewhere there is something waiting for you, and you can smile a little perhaps now when you are so unhappy, because how well we both know that you will be happy very very very very soon. Somewhere someone is waiting for you, and loves you, and thinks you are beautiful, and it will be so wonderful and so fine, and if you can be patient and wait and never never never never despair, because despair might spoil it, you will come there, someday, and the gates will open and you will pass through, and no one will be able to come in unless you let them, and no one can even see you. Someday, someone, somewhere. Natalie, please

In the class named philosophy, Natalie appeared two mornings a week, although it was not proven that Mr. (Doctor by ambition, although his thesis — "The Probable Intention of the Subjunctive in Plato" — had not yet found a completion) Desmond noticed, particularly, whether or not Miss Waite had chosen to attend any given morning. Under her father's tender care, Natalie had been formally introduced to both Plato and Aristotle, but had never, until now, been required to digest such ideas reduced to the probable, or diagram, level of the schoolgirl mind. The man — that would be Mr. (to be Doctor) Desmond — who taught this class, and who had named it philosophy, obviously felt that anyone who had spent years studying his subject should by rights end up as something rather better than a man trying to teach ideas to girls, or at least as something more reconciled; he was bitter and impatient, and made his own intimate friend Plato as disagreeable as possible, perhaps to keep the uneager girls from intruding unwarily into some secret philosophical circle, where bitter men who taught philosophy drank deeply of clear wine with the Platos and Berkeleys, the Descartes and the Hegels, and commiserated with one another over the fate of philosophers: *philo*: love; *sophia*: wisdom.

"Nothing," the philosopher might remark at sometime after nine in the morning, fingering his gray tie, or touching with uncertain fingers his pockets, or merely eying unenthusiastically the penciling girls in the front rows, "nothing," he would say thoughtfully and with some relish, "*nothing* in the world exists in a perfect form."

Nothing in the world exists in a perfect form, Natalie wrote in her notebook, feeling as she wrote that there just *might* be something.

“How about a vacuum?” the girl next to her said unexpectedly.

There was a silence. The professor (so soon to be Doctor Desmond) stared, repeated to himself: What about a vacuum? and raised his eyebrows slightly.

“Well,” he said, his surprise not yet demonstrated to his own satisfaction, “*what* about a vacuum?” One heard — or rather, perhaps, only Natalie heard — the faint murmur as Plato leant to Descartes, Dewey asked Berkeley, “*What* did she say? What *was* it?” the learned teachers of philosophy all raising their eyebrows and smiling at one another, telling one another perhaps, “Science... science.”

“Well,” said the girl next to Natalie, who was suddenly discovered by both Natalie and the girl on the other side of her to be a clumsy creature, given to raw blushing, and undoubtedly not finely drawn in mind, “I mean, when you say there’s nothing perfect?”

“Nothing in the world exists in a perfect form,” the professor murmured, watchfully. “Yes, I said it.”

“Well,” the girl said; she stared straight at the professor; to confound a professor of philosophy midway through the first month of the first semester of your first year... “Well,” she repeated, “I mean — what about a vacuum? I mean, *that’s* perfect, isn’t it?”

Natalie perceived that one of the junior members of the philosopher’s circle (William James?), overeager, anxious to establish himself among the select, hurried with his joke, and was hushed by the others, and drew even a shade of a frown from the Bishop himself; would these impetuous young fellows never learn their equivocal standing? — and the professor, at whom the student was staring entranced, looked quickly, once, around the class, opened his mouth, and smiled.

* * *

There was, on alternate mornings, the class named history of music, and here the professor was a man equally thwarted, but happy about it nevertheless; he was ridden by a sort of genius, and felt strongly that it was far more valuable for college freshmen to participate two mornings in the week in the intricate, subtle, unendingly lovely convolutions of a genius mind than to concern themselves tidily with dates and composers, the whole-tone scale, the *castrati*.

“Listen,” he told them one morning, too soon after breakfast, and he held up one finger of one long hand in a graceful eloquent gesture, “this morning I shall play for you...”

He selected, with the quick decisive motions of a man captivated by a thought he cannot elude, a volume from the stack on the desk; although his air was one of unpremeditated desire, he had nevertheless remembered to procure in advance copies of the music to pass among the girls in the front row. Natalie, who sat at the end of the front row nearest the piano, was thus able to follow the music and the professor’s playing together, and found it perhaps as little instructive as anything she had ever heard; she was accustomed to listen to music rarely, and then in strict solitude, with her eyes shut and various odd glories in her head; she could read barely enough music to perceive that the professor consistently played a sharp where a double-sharp was written. To confound a professor of music midway through the first month of the first semester of the first year...

At the end of the class Natalie stopped at the desk where the professor was modestly disclaiming the shrill feminine compliments on his playing; when he turned to Natalie with his smile ready, she said meekly, “Please, may I ask you something?”

Where did you study? Is it a natural talent? Why do you not compose? The continuing smile on the professor’s face showed Natalie that she had not made her question quite clear. “I mean,” she said, “here—” she had the book open, her finger on the spot, all ready “ — you always played a sharp and isn’t this a double-sharp? I mean,” she added, in the face of his uncomprehending smile, “I just wondered, while you were playing.”

“Playing very badly, by the way,” he said, still smiling, and raising one hand gracefully against the low voice of protest, in which Natalie, to her eternal recognized cowardice, found herself joining. “No,” he said, “I really *did* play badly. One knows.”

“But—” Natalie said, her finger on the book.

“This girl,” he said, his hand on Natalie’s arm, his face turned toward the other girls, “this girl listens to music, as — how shall I say it? — as an artist. Perhaps music has a meaning for her beyond what it has for the rest of us.”

Perhaps it has, Natalie thought; I am fairly beaten. Desiring to retire with an understanding grin and a knowledgeable look, she turned when the professor spoke to someone else and went softly away, no one turning to look after her.

* * *

At the beginning of her second month at college, one day Natalie turned a corner suddenly (where was she going? what was she running from? She was never able to remember afterwards, since at the moment the incoherence of her life dissolved and she became again a functioning person, somewhat later than the red-haired Peggy Spencer, perhaps, but still much sooner than many of the girls around her) and crashed into someone who, picking her up, said, in the voice of one who was not confused but knew these many corners perfectly, “I’m terribly sorry; I should have looked where I was going.”

"My fault," Natalie said. She had not dropped anything, otherwise she could have hidden her face searching for it on the ground. As it was, she was forced to observe that she had run into a woman, who was a woman as surely as Natalie was a girl, since where Natalie was unconnected and vague, this other was purposeful and compact. "You all right?" the woman asked the girl. "You're new, aren't you?"

Natalie, blessing her for avoiding the hateful word frosh, nodded and looked up. A pretty woman. "New," Natalie confessed, "and confused. And frightened, I guess."

"Everyone is," the woman said. She hesitated, and Natalie, who was these days forming estimates about people because she feared speaking to them, imagined that the woman had had a destination and was wondering if it would wait while she helped Natalie; the desire to be helpless and the pride against being helped by a woman who might be, after all, inadequate, made Natalie say dismissingly, "I suppose I'll get over it." She pretended to be ready to walk on, but, blessedly, the woman decided suddenly, and turned to walk with her.

"I was new here recently," the woman said and smiled. "I'm Elizabeth Langdon," she said. "My husband teaches English. I used to be a student." And that's all she knows to tell me about herself, Natalie thought, and said, "Oh, yes. I believe I'm in one of Mr. Langdon's classes. At least," she added doubtfully, for fear of being thought by his wife to have a crush on Mr. Langdon, "I *think* it's his class."

"Is he short, with a mustache?" the woman asked, as though it were of some importance, "or dark? Curly hair? Blond with glasses?"

"Dark," Natalie decided, remembering the slim figure which moved gracefully before the class, speaking with humorous informality of Shakespeare; suppressing quickly and emphatically the recollection of her own vague daydreams ("Miss Waite? I don't suppose you remember me? Well, I'm Arthur Langdon; I want to tell you that your performance of Portia was..."). "Of course, it must be Mr. Langdon. It's just that, being so new here..."

"Of course." The woman sounded relieved, still giving the impression that the point had been important. "Has he begun to quote Suetonius yet?"

Natalie suddenly wanted to make a good impression on the wife of the slim figure who might, at any moment, quote Suetonius. "My father," she said, "says that people only quote when they can't make a point any other way."

"I see," said Mrs. Langdon; Natalie thought that perhaps she was storing the remark away to use on her husband later. ("Dear, I understand that people only...") "How do you like it here?" Mrs. Langdon asked.

It was, of course, not the first time Natalie had been asked; she laughed with embarrassment and then, changing her mind for some reason in midstream, said uncomfortably, "I don't know yet. I mean, I have so much yet to learn."

"Like not running around corners?" said Mrs. Langdon, and paused, smiling, in their walk. "This is where we live," she said. "It's a faculty house — observe the architecture, done by a fellow faculty member, since deceased, observe the college stonework and the handy-man air about the drainpipes. Students," she added soberly, "are to feel free to call upon faculty members for assistance and advice, although it is recommended that they do not visit a faculty home without specific invitations having been issued." She smiled again, and Natalie smiled back. "No one pays much attention to that sort of thing," Mrs. Langdon said. "Won't you come in?"

"Thank you," Natalie said; could it be true that she was so casually invited into Arthur Langdon's house?

As the door closed behind them Natalie hesitated in the small hallway; the fact that this was certainly the house where Arthur Langdon lived seemed somehow to color the air of it, and was that not a trace of his pipe smoke? It could be that as Natalie stood in the hallway her feet were set precisely in Arthur Langdon's footprints. It was undeniable, also, that he had at some time touched this doorknob.

Elizabeth Langdon, her own door closed behind her, had changed, as a bird stepping again inside its cage is no longer a creature of circle and parabola, but a hopping thing; Elizabeth pushed off her hat and slipped her coat from her shoulders and, preceding Natalie into a light living room, dropped her hat and coat on a couch. "Take off your things," she said with a gesture. Seemingly she had accepted Natalie inside her house as a person, something more than the mere student Natalie had been outside the house. Natalie saw dimly, as she fumbled with the buttons of her coat, a succession of meetings with Elizabeth Langdon outside her house, of formal questions after one's health and dutiful laughter, of civility and disinterest and courtesy, of Elizabeth Langdon denying politely anything she might ever have said inside.

"It's so nice here," Natalie said. Although she had already glanced quickly around the room (wondering, as she did so, with a fast secret look at Elizabeth Langdon, What is it in here she finds so alarming? Will *I* be happy here? Will I ever know these things well?), she made now a great performance of looking around, letting her eyes stop suitably long at the Hayter etching over the mantel, taking in gratefully the blended colors of the slipcovers, the curtains, the rug. There were books, and she estimated them and the Langdons by her own secret process (the proportion of bright jackets to dull bindings) and found them dubious — too much yellow and red, too little calf. It occurred to her that she would probably like the Langdons very much, while privately deploring Elizabeth a little.

“I *can* offer you a drink, you know,” Elizabeth Langdon said; she had been busied hanging up their coats and now backed out of the closet, her hair rumpled. “Would you like a cocktail? Martini?”

Natalie realized how *very* indelicate this all was. She had been in college not more than a month, and this woman had certainly no business offering her cocktails, or even speaking to her so. “Thank you very much,” said Natalie, thinking, *She* must be *terribly* lonely. Her problem was illustrated directly with the question of sitting down: as a student, she should certainly not seat herself while a faculty wife stood; as a guest, she certainly could. The only solution was to lift the whole situation into a never-never land where neither rule applied, so Natalie, with dogged informality, followed Elizabeth into the small kitchen.

“May I help you?” Natalie asked.

“Nothing to do,” said Elizabeth, her head now buried in the refrigerator. “Arthur keeps a pitcher of martinis already made. I can’t make them,” she added, drawing out her head, “and he’s always too tired when he comes back from class. Olive?”

“Thank you.”

“God *damn*,” said Elizabeth. She leaned back, trying to see the top shelf of the pantry. “No more,” she said, and turned and laughed at Natalie. “We’ve got to have our martinis in fruit juice glasses. There’s only one cocktail glass I haven’t broken and of course I have to give that to Arthur.”

Natalie, who was not really completely certain of the difference between a cocktail glass and a fruit juice glass, spared a moment to wonder about the oddness of saving the last glass for Arthur, before she said, “Mother never lets me dry the glasses at home because I always drop them.” Why did I say that? she wondered again, it isn't true. Now I'll just have to remember it so I won't tell her in a few minutes that I never break anything.

They took their cocktails into the living room again, walking cautiously and not speaking. Then, when Natalie had lowered herself tentatively into an overstuffed armchair, with her cocktail correctly on a coaster and a cigarette offered and declined (Natalie was afraid to smoke until she had solved the problem of who was going to light whose cigarette; it was difficult for Natalie to get up from the overstuffed chair and walk across to Elizabeth with a match, but it was unthinkable that Elizabeth should stand up from the couch and walk across to Natalie with a match. It occurred to Natalie that she could light a cigarette after Elizabeth was well started on hers, taking one from her pocket with an absent-minded air, as one who smokes without thinking, and lighting it carelessly, holding the match a trifle too long while she talked), Elizabeth leaned back on the couch, looking at Natalie smilingly, and said, with an air of having all the time in the world to get to more important subjects, "So you're one of my husband's students?"

"I believe I am," Natalie said cautiously — best not to appear too anxious.

"Do you like it here?" Elizabeth asked.

It was still not a question Natalie was entirely equipped to answer. She decided finally that the least she could do was reply again to this determined friendliness in an open manner, and so she looked at Elizabeth and smiled and shrugged. "I don't really think I like it very much yet," she said. "No one seems to pay much attention to anyone else."

Elizabeth nodded, choosing to take this statement as one of fact. "That's true," she said. "You'll find as you go on that they'll pay less and less attention to you, and you get used to it. It's because everyone here is so much interested in themselves and their own concerns, and no one cares about anyone else or education or teaching the young or helping anyone else, but all they care about is getting as much as they can as fast as they can."

What did I start? Natalie thought. "I suppose that's a good description of education," she said, feeling her way. "Except that even if you learn *that* much, it's something."

This was lost on Elizabeth; she was staring into her cocktail glass, her long fair hair falling softly down on either side of her face, her eyes intent. When she looked up suddenly, as Natalie finished speaking, she smiled and said, "I suppose I'm more bitter because I used to be a student and now I'm a faculty wife."

"I should think that would just give you twice as many friends," Natalie said, wondering if it was friends they were talking about.

Elizabeth shook her head; Natalie thought that the motion would spill her drink and then saw that Elizabeth's glass was empty. Hastily Natalie took up her own glass and sipped. "It means I have almost *no* friends," Elizabeth said, now watching Natalie drink. "You can't, you know. I mean, girls I used to know as students are in their last year now, and it's very hard for me to talk to them. And of course all the other faculty wives are too old for me."

"You didn't finish college before you married?" asked Natalie with interest, *here* was an achievement to be envied.

Elizabeth shook her long hair again. "I never wanted to come in the first place," she said. "I'm *only* about three years older than you are."

And yet she can sit here and serve cocktails, Natalie thought. "I'm seventeen," she said.

"You see?" said Elizabeth. "I was twenty-one my last birthday."

Should I tell her she doesn't look it? Natalie thought. "I think you're terribly pretty," she said, shocking herself deeply by this statement, which was not in her usual repertoire.

Elizabeth smiled again, her smile this time deepening with pleasure, her eyes shining. "I think that's *nice* of you," she said. "Another cocktail?"

Natalie looked at her half-finished glass. "I'm very slow," she said.

"I'll wait for you," said Elizabeth, turning her glass in her fingers. She was so obviously planning *just* to wait, not doing anything else, that Natalie quickly drank down the last of her cocktail, catching the olive in her mouth and holding out her glass with her mouth still full.

When Elizabeth came back with the drinks, she said, "Try to keep up with me," as she set Natalie's glass down on the table.

"Yes," she went on, taking up her conversation where she had left it, "I never realized what I was getting into, marrying my English teacher." She sat down on the couch and regarded Natalie gloomily. "Sometimes I could *cry*," she said.

Natalie, who was unused to drinking at best, and certainly unused to two fast cocktails after a confusing afternoon, was beginning to feel delightfully at home, and friendly, and strong, and sympathetic. She could see clearly by now that Elizabeth was a wonderfully beautiful woman; it no longer seemed strange that a student in college should marry, but only strange that any unhappiness should approach this perfect creature.

"I wish I could help you," Natalie said. She was almost certain that there were tears in her eyes.

"Be my friend," said Elizabeth. She looked at Natalie earnestly. "Be my *friend*," she said. "Don't ever tell anyone."

"Don't ever tell anyone what?"

Elizabeth, who had risen at that moment with her empty glass in her hand, stopped, turning slightly toward the door to listen. When there was no sound in the room they could hear voices from outside, calling to one another and laughing. After a minute Elizabeth relaxed, and made a perfunctory movement toward Natalie's glass.

"No," said Natalie, "oh, no, thank you."

Without comment Elizabeth turned and went to the kitchen, and came back in a moment with her full glass. "Don't ever tell anyone," she said. "No one thinks I'm unhappy, no one even *dreams* I'm unhappy, and you know once you let them know you're unhappy then they start wondering why, and then they look at you and they think you're getting old or something. They were all so jealous *any*way. I'm still as pretty as I ever was." She turned her head proudly on her neck, and Natalie, feeling herself more than ever thin and unformed, nodded admiringly. "You see," Elizabeth went on, spreading her empty hands in front of her and looking at the fingers, "all the students think I'm friends with the faculty wives and all the faculty wives think I'm friends with the students or with the *other* faculty wives and all the other faculty wives think I'm friends with the other faculty wives and all the other—" She stopped, her eyes wide. There was a definite step outside the door, then it opened and Arthur Langdon came in.

He was handsome and tired, and looked, in his worn sports jacket with the elbows patched in chamois, rather as though his mental picture of himself was somewhat more refined than the actual sight of him to others. When he came in through the door his eyes took in, swiftly, his wife, Natalie, and their empty cocktail glasses. Without speaking he set his brief case down just inside the door, and came slowly into the room. After one quick, inclusive glance again at Natalie, he regarded his wife.

"My dear," he said cordially, and smiled over his shoulder at Natalie.

"I only had one," Elizabeth said. "This girl will tell you, I only had one."

"Of course you did," he said to her, and turned and smiled largely at Natalie. "My wife seems to be reluctant to introduce us," he said. "I'm Arthur Langdon."

Who did he think I *thought* he was? Natalie wondered. "I'm Natalie Waite," she said, and, to establish her position immediately (so that he might throw her out if he chose?), she added, "I'm in your freshman English class."

"I thought you were," he said. "Think I could join you in one of those?"

He took Natalie's nearly empty glass from her, passed his wife without apparently seeing her glass, and went into the kitchen. After a minute he came back, looked once at his wife, and handed Natalie her full glass. "Here's luck," he said, and he and Natalie drank, Natalie very cautiously, and noting that he had taken the one cocktail glass for his drink. "Well," he said, and sat down on a chair near Natalie, "what do you think of it here?"

"I like it very much," Natalie said. "It's a little strange still, of course."

"It will be strange for quite a while," he said. "It's taken *me* four years to get used to it, I know."

"I've been enjoying your class," Natalie said, thinking, My father taught me to be more intelligent than this; but Arthur Langdon perplexed her. He was subtly familiar to her, as though his words were meaningful on more than one level, as though there were an established communication between them in the course of five minutes, as though, actually, he were clearly aware that she *could* talk more intelligently than this, and was waiting indulgently for the strangeness of the environment to wear off before any conversation began. I wonder if he makes everyone feel like this, Natalie thought. The horror of feeling a reaction everyone else might feel led her to say, stumbling, "You reminded me of my father this morning in class."

He smiled. “All first-year students find sooner or later that some professor reminds them of their fathers.”

“Now you remind me of him again,” Natalie said. “*He* talks like that.”

Arthur Langdon raised his eyebrows incredulously.

“He’s a writer,” Natalie said weakly; it crossed her mind that she would not have so much trouble bringing out the words if her father had been a plumber, or even a policeman; unless he asks me who my father is, she thought, I will have to come right out and tell him and then suppose he doesn’t know who I’m talking about and what *can* I say? “Arnold Waite,” she said.

“Really?” Arthur Langdon nodded; for a minute Natalie was sure that he had never heard of her father and that she might — with discomfort, with confusion and perhaps even apologies — have to explain, and then Arthur Langdon nodded again and said, “Like to meet him sometime.”

“I hope you will,” Natalie said politely.

Elizabeth Langdon, who had been leaning forward with her long hair falling about her face and her empty glass cupped in both hands, staring brightly from her husband to Natalie as each one spoke, now said with an appearance of alert interest, “Isn’t he the writer?”

Her husband and Natalie both looked at her silently. “I mean,” she said, moving her glass in illustration, “isn’t he Arnold Waite, the writer?”

“I suppose so,” said Natalie lamely, “although he’s only really written one *book*.”

“I was *sure* he was a writer,” said Elizabeth Langdon with satisfaction. “You remember,” she said nudgingly to her husband, “you gave me some article of his to read in some magazine, and I read it and I thought it was very good.”

Arthur Langdon said to Natalie, “I hope when your father comes to see you we’ll be able to get together. And when you write him,” he added with a modest laugh, “tell him I’m using some of his stuff in my advanced classes.”

“I certainly will,” said Natalie thankfully.

“By the way,” said Arthur Langdon, turning directly to his wife to show that he was speaking to her, “a couple of the girls are going to drop over sometime before dinner.”

There was a short silence. And then, “Who?” asked Elizabeth Langdon.

“A couple of my students,” said Arthur Langdon.

“It must be almost five,” said Natalie quickly. “I’d better be getting back.”

She rose, and Arthur Langdon said, “Don’t go, unless you really have something important to do. You might enjoy meeting these girls.”

“Well,” said Natalie hesitantly, not knowing to what extent these people might be trusted to want her for her father’s sake, or her own. “I *would* like to stay,” she said, reverting to her never-never land of no precedents.

“*Please* stay,” said Elizabeth Langdon.

This, at any rate, could not be insincere. Natalie smiled shyly and sat down again.

Once she had definitely indicated her continuing presence Arthur Langdon seemed to feel free to speak to his wife, as though Natalie were now enough a member of the family not to hear anything he said. Her seniority as guest allowed them to talk of the new guests expected, and even to hope, perhaps, that Natalie might share in their arrangements for entertainment, perhaps carrying glasses, or emptying ashtrays, or simply preparing herself with a stock of small talk to be used directly they entered.

"They won't drink any more than two cocktails apiece," said Arthur Langdon to his wife. "Do you have any pretzels or anything?"

"What's all the fuss over *them*?" Elizabeth asked, not moving.

"I like things to be nicely arranged when my students come to see me," he said.

"It looks all right to *them* if they get a free drink and a few words of wisdom from you," Elizabeth said.

"Nevertheless," he said emphatically, "I want my students treated as well as possible."

Elizabeth addressed Natalie, "You and I don't need anything fancy, do we? Pretzels? Imported caviar? Breast of guinea hen?"

Natalie opened her mouth to speak, Arthur Langdon opened *his* mouth to speak, and the doorbell rang. "I'll get it," Arthur said quickly. His wife watched him without expression as he hurried to the door.

"Can't wait, can he?" she said unpleasantly to Natalie.

Natalie, uncomfortable and wishing she had left, and yet at the same time enjoying immensely a series of events which she could watch without being really implicated, stood up uncertainly as Arthur opened the door.

"Can I get the pretzels or anything for you?" she asked Elizabeth.

Elizabeth laughed. "Arthur will get them," she said. "Watch little Arthur be the little host."

Arthur came back into the room, followed by two girls. Natalie, looking at them with a frank stare possible only because they were both looking at Arthur and for the moment ignoring both herself and Elizabeth, saw with the irritation she was beginning to know as jealousy that they were both lovely, in the way that Elizabeth Langdon was lovely: the rounded, colorful, rich beauty of girls who have been pretty babies and pretty little girls and pretty boarding school girls and who have, at last, in college, reached a fulfillment of prettiness because they are finally nubile; that their loveliness would be deadened as Elizabeth's had been deadened was not more than a small consolation to Natalie; that this loveliness built and recharged itself with an awareness of loveliness, and almost certainly masked vacant stupidity, was no consolation at all. The further thought that, premising the loveliness of young women as nature's infallible way of insuring them husbands, these two could at best marry no more than a few of the men in the world, was less than no consolation at all.

Vicki, one of them was named, and the other was Anne. Vicki had great, long-lashed dark eyes which she disguised, as though it were a joke between herself and the beholder, with heavy-rimmed glasses; these glasses, to enhance the joke, she played with constantly, taking them off and putting them on with a mock-efficient gesture, using them to wave with, to hold in her hands, but very rarely keeping them over her face. With or without the glasses, she gave an additional impression of seeing clearly everything that went on around her, and of enjoying it without pity.

Anne — had these girls become friends on purpose? — was sweet and subdued; like something out of *Little Women*, Natalie thought with scorn, thinking almost at the same minute that she would not be wise to underestimate Anne, who smiled shyly and almost curtseyed, who looked sweetly at Natalie and at Elizabeth and at Vicki and at Arthur Langdon, as though in this pretty world it was incredible that everyone should be so kind to shy Anne; who would never, it was perfectly clear, give away an inch of anything she had once gotten hold of.

"How do you do, Mrs. Langdon?" said Anne softly to Elizabeth. "*How* are you?"

"Very well, thank you, Anne," Elizabeth said, not moving from the couch.

“Mrs. Langdon,” said Vicki, coming over to Elizabeth with her hand out, “it’s been so long since we’ve seen you.”

Are these old friends of hers? Natalie wondered; perhaps some of the girls she knew as students? She turned as she heard her name. “Natalie Waite,” Arthur was saying.

“How do you do?” said Natalie politely, and felt for a long minute the two pair of eyes regarding her, disdaining her perhaps, estimating her.

“I think I’ve seen you in the dining room or somewhere,” Vicki said, as one to whom the dining room was a lesser estate, belonging to her general inheritance, but rarely visited, perhaps because of its barrenness, or the provincial nature of its inhabitants.

“You’re new, aren’t you?” added Anne.

And that, Natalie thought, is the extent of my impact upon the college so far; she signified that she was very new indeed, and somehow managed, unwillingly, to imply that she was now in the presence of the first four people she had spoken to as formal acquaintances since she had reached the college. All four of them smiled upon her, for the only time united, in their mutual superiority at having been in this place longer than Natalie had. Perhaps, too, at that moment, something vague solidified within Natalie, in the face of the three lovely girls in the room, so that she became less of a meek and submissive personality and was without warning as good a soul as the rest of them; from within the strongholds of her own possessive pride in herself it became now apparent to her that there were weaknesses of defense in other fortresses. She might, she thought in this minute, choose to pursue an acquaintance with these two girls; it was obvious that both Elizabeth and Arthur Langdon had perceived that, of the vast unidentified face of the new student body, Natalie had become an individual, with a father, and recognizable. Was it — and again this thought had never in these words troubled Natalie before — worthwhile bothering with any of them?

At any rate, acquaintances or not, it was first necessary for all of them to find a place to sit down, and for Arthur to get everyone drinks, and for Elizabeth, never moving from the couch, where she was now half-reclining, to say some few words, somehow — as it seemed — managing to choke out the barest civilities, in a manner both indifferent and insulting. Natalie looked into her glass with embarrassment, not so much for Elizabeth as for the fact that she had suddenly discovered that in the confusion attending the entrance of Vicki and Anne, she had consumed without knowing it the rest of the cocktail, making, with the new one Arthur handed to her, four strong cocktails for Natalie. She wondered, and thought she had wondered before, that this intoxicant should be liquid, why was it that a substance so indulged in should not be a solid, like candy, or a smoke, like tobacco, or even merely a scent? The oddness of having to *drink* alcohol (surely she could not have consumed so much water in the late afternoon) perplexed Natalie, and she wanted to speak of this unique perspective but could not find phrases; then she became aware that Arthur Langdon was speaking.

“ — And so I thought that we might work from that angle for a while. You ought to read that book,” he was telling Anne.

Anne looked at him for a long minute before answering; it had the double effect of keeping everyone’s eyes fixed on her while they waited for her to speak, and of convincing everyone, apparently, that she was serious, and timid about voicing her opinions, and also led one to believe that when she did speak it would be with a slight, charming lisp. Natalie unwisely thought that this method must be ineffective with anyone of sense, after the first time. “Will you lend it to me?” Anne asked Arthur finally.

What a *fool* she is, Natalie thought, and looked at Elizabeth to see if Elizabeth too thought that Anne was a fool, but Elizabeth was staring again at her own hands and her empty glass.

“How do you like it here?” Vicki asked Natalie. “Still pretty strange?”

“Not at all,” Natalie said politely. “Everyone has been so kind.”

“Anne and I live on the floor below you,” Vicki said. “Did you know it?”

“In the same house?” Natalie said, surprised.

“The same house,” Vicki agreed, making it sound like a bordello. “They always put a few reliable upperclassmen in with the new students. To make them feel at home,” she added, and grinned.

“I haven’t seen you,” Natalie said.

“We were in your room the other day while you were out,” Vicki said carelessly. Natalie stared at her and she laughed. “We knew you wouldn’t mind,” she said. “We were curious about you because you looked more interesting than most. There’s a red-headed character—” She shuddered theatrically. “Anyway, we thought we’d find out what you were like, so we wandered in one day when we knew you were out.”

Anne had given over her conversation with Arthur to listen to Vicki, and now she laughed prettily. “We practically *sneaked* in,” she told Natalie.

“Can’t trust this pair,” Arthur Langdon added with something that might have been pride. “They’ll do *any*thing.”

“I don’t understand,” Natalie said uncertainly, meaning that she did not understand her own feelings at the moment; the thought of anyone, and particularly these two girls, coming unbidden into her room was abhorrent to her. On the other hand, they seemed to think nothing of it, but looked at her now with calm, guiltless, amused eyes; they premised their visit on what must be a complimentary opinion of Natalie, they criticized the red-haired girl, and they had Arthur Langdon's blessing upon them, although Elizabeth looked at them now with incurious contempt.

She shook her head; should she accept this and gamble upon the value these two girls might possibly hold for her; should she show anger and demonstrate to Arthur Langdon that she was not to be tampered with, that even Vicki and Anne might not tangle safely with Natalie Waite? Elizabeth was at best a dubious ally, Natalie's journal was always locked and the key always with her, she had as yet incriminated herself in no way with her room. She smiled quickly and said, "But how did you get in? I always lock the door."

Anne and Vicki laughed, and even Arthur laughed with them. Then Anne said very meekly, "All the corresponding rooms on each floor use the same lock. Your room is 27, so the keys to 17 and 37 and 7 all unlock it."

"Didn't you ever know we'd been there?" Vicki asked Natalie. "We sat on your bed and read some of your books."

And my letters, Natalie thought, and judged my clothes and commented on the dirty laundry under the bed and opened my dresser drawers and observed the view from my window and tried my lipstick and sampled my perfume and tested... "And what did you find out about me?" she asked.

"I thought," said Anne in her innocence, "that you must be an awfully interesting person to know." She just avoided saying "awf'ly int'resting." "All those *books*," she added.

"Except for your bedspread," Vicki said impolitely. "Who *did* pick that out?" She edged the remark over into a faint compliment by hesitating just long enough, and then saying, "Not *you*, of course."

Resolving not to be rid of the bedspread until it was worn to shreds, Natalie said, "My mother. She also chooses my clothes." She hoped she had implied that she was too mad a creature to concern herself with clothes and bedspreads, perhaps even the despair of her mother's heart for her giddy impracticality. "My father chooses my books," she told Arthur Langdon, and he nodded, impressed.

"Don't you make up your own mind about anything?" Anne asked sweetly.

"*My* mother," Vicki said ruefully, "doesn't care *what* I wear. Once just to prove it I put on black nail polish — this was when I was about fifteen," she added hastily, looking from Natalie to Arthur Langdon, " — and when I came to the dinner table and waved my hands around frantically trying to make her notice, she finally said to me, 'Victoria dear, I wish you'd eat more vegetables; you seem so nervous.'"

Natalie laughed; she had committed herself now to amiability, and she was determined to make the knowledge of her these girls had acquired legitimate; she thought, I will have to see the bedspreads in their rooms before I can sleep privately in mine again.

"Another drink?" said Arthur Langdon. He made a large gesture with his hand of sweeping all the glasses together.

"Thank you so much," said Anne, and Vicki held out her glass with a smile. Natalie discovered with horror that she had finished another drink, but her small protest was overwhelmed by Arthur Langdon. As before, he passed his wife without offering to take her empty glass, and Vicki and Anne glanced at each other, and then, bewilderingly, at Natalie, and they all smiled.

"Did you have a pleasant summer?" Elizabeth asked abruptly.

Anne shrugged perfectly, and Vicki said, "About the same as usual, I guess. Sort of dull."

"You were together, of course?" said Elizabeth, this time addressing Anne, the polite hostess speaking first to one guest and then to the other.

"Of course," Anne said, and laughed deprecatingly. "I guess we always are," she said.

"We were on the island, most of the time," Vicki said.

"This island," Elizabeth said deliberately to Natalie, it being perhaps Natalie's turn to be spoken to, "about which Vicki is so modest, is a little hideout of approximately four hundred square miles that belongs to Vicki's family. It's named something like Bide-A-Wee or Dew Drop Inn or Joe's Place."

"Shangri-La," said Vicki coolly. "*I* didn't name it."

"It's lovely there, though; so *private*," Anne said, looking at the wall between Elizabeth and Natalie.

Elizabeth said to Natalie, as though wanting this clearly defined, as though it were necessary now to emphasize these facts, "Anne's mother, by the way, designs evening gowns neither you nor I can afford."

First of all, Natalie thought, How does she know I can't afford...? and then she understood that she was an as yet untried but possibly very strong ally, and if Elizabeth could use a heavy social parody to set Anne and Vicki into a different world and locate her sensitive, impoverished army securely behind their pride... thinking this far, Natalie thought, She must know I hate their going into my room, and said, "My mother chooses my evening gowns." Evening gowns, she thought, evening gowns for Natalie Waite, that debutante.

"*My* brother sells insurance in New Jersey," Elizabeth said, playing it just a shade too heavy.

Natalie laughed, and Vicki and Anne turned to look at her together, speculatively.

"She's making fun of us, you know," Anne said to Natalie.

In my own country I was accounted quite a killer, Natalie thought; next time she'll stay where she belongs. "I'm sure she *must* be," Natalie said sweetly.

Elizabeth leaned over the edge of the couch and set her glass firmly on the floor. Natalie and Vicki and Anne watched her silently, and then Elizabeth lifted her head and looked at Anne.

She is sure I'm with her, Natalie thought; what is she going to do?"

"You still chasing after my husband?" Elizabeth said suddenly to Anne. "Doing any better this year?"

"Everybody about given me up?" Arthur Langdon came back into the room carrying a tray on which were four full glasses and a bowl of pretzels. As he set the tray down upon the coffee table and began handing around the glasses, he said, "Sorry to keep you all waiting. I had to mix more cocktails." He looked for a long minute at his wife, who stared back solemnly at him. "They were all gone," Arthur said. "Pretzel?" he added politely to Anne.

"Dear," said Elizabeth softly, "Anne and Vicki have just been telling us all about what they did this summer. They had the *most* interesting time."

"Really?" Arthur said to Vicki; his voice was faintly wistful.

"The usual thing," Vicki said, and Elizabeth laughed loudly.

Natalie was now far too happy to think of leaving. She thought she would like to be in Vicki's place, perhaps, in this scene, or even in Anne's; her feeling of pity for Elizabeth, which had been momentary at best, was now a sort of curious wonder; what further could this madwoman do? How could she expose herself as so weak before these two girls, before Natalie, whom she knew so slightly?

"Tell me about your father," Arthur Langdon said to Natalie. Natalie retraced his thought. (Vicki's family, money, fame, Natalie's father) and said, “I’m sure he’d love to meet you. I’ll have to write him all about you, you know.”

He looked at her inquiringly, and she said, “I write him almost everything that happens, and particularly,” she said, thinking, Why not throw him a fish? “all about any interesting people I meet.” She smiled with an excellent imitation of Anne’s shy smile.

“He’s certainly an interesting person,” Anne said immediately.

“Your father will—” Vicki began.

“Interesting like a potato bug,” Elizabeth said from the couch.

We are all a little drunk, Natalie told herself wisely.

When the phone rang it was perfectly clear to everyone in the room that Elizabeth was not going to attempt getting off the couch to answer it, and everyone except Arthur Langdon waited tensely for him to leave the room again.

As his voice came distantly from another room saying, “Hello?” Vicki said quickly to Elizabeth, “I don’t think you ought to talk to Anne the way you did, Mrs. Langdon. After all, Anne has never—”

“I’ll *bet* Anne hasn’t never,” Elizabeth said.

Vicki gestured helplessly at Natalie. “These women always suspect—” she said directly to Natalie.

Natalie thought of saying, “I understand,” sympathetically, but decided not to. Further irony would not materially improve this situation, and she was still not irrevocably committed to Elizabeth.

“Suppose you come to my office,” Arthur Langdon said from the other room.

Anne glanced briefly at the door beyond which Arthur was somewhere talking into the phone, and said with just the right amount of confused indignation, “After all, Mrs. Langdon, Arthur and I are only—”

"Mr. Langdon," said Elizabeth.

"Mr. Langdon," said Anne obediently. "We're only studying together. I mean, since I'm one of his students it's only natural that we should—" She hesitated admirably. " — Study together," she said.

"And remember," Vicki said, "*you* were one of his students once, Mrs. Langdon. You must remember what an interest he takes in—"

"Goodbye," Arthur Langdon said from the other room, and everyone was silent and did not speak again until he came back. He sat down in his chair again and said to Natalie, "You were telling me about your father."

"We *must* go," Vicki said. Anne nodded, and rose. Natalie, who had opened her mouth to speak of her father, closed her mouth again and started uncertainly to get out of her chair.

Vicki looked at her. "Come along with us," she said finally.

"We can go to dinner together," Anne said.

"I'd love to," Natalie said, thinking, I'm not an ally, I'm a mercenary. "Thanks very much," she said to Elizabeth, and to Arthur, "I've enjoyed myself immensely."

"Come in any time," Arthur Langdon said, seeming actually to mean it.

"It was terribly nice of you to have us," Vicki said to Elizabeth. She did not go over to the couch to say it, but stood near the door, as though she realized perfectly that she had better not get close enough to Elizabeth to let Elizabeth reach her. "Perhaps you'll be able to come over for a drink with us some day soon?"

"Thanks," Elizabeth said.

"Mrs. Langdon," Anne said. "Thank you very much." She and Vicki turned to the door, with Natalie following, and Anne said to Arthur, intimately but somehow very clearly, "Arthur it was *so* nice."

Arthur Langdon looked nervously at his wife, and said, “I hope you’ll come again soon.”

“We’d love to,” Vicki said.

They got out the door, the three of them, with Arthur Langdon waving to them as they started down the path. When he had finally closed the door behind them, Vicki laughed, and then was quiet for a minute, she and Anne walking on either side of Natalie and both of them, Natalie felt, observing her and amused. Then Vicki said finally, as though to no one in particular, “How much did she put away before we got there?”

“I’m not sure,” Natalie said. Should she carry tales? “Three or four drinks.”

“Someone ought to slap her pretty face for her,” Vicki said. “I wish Arthur had guts enough to do it.”

Anne stuffed her hands into the pockets of her jacket and did a little dance step along the path. “*I* wish I could be there now,” she said, “to hear them fight.”

Natalie, my child,

No, indeed, I do not read Shakespeare any more; I have passed the age when such things are felt to be essential, and have reached the age when half a dozen esoteric quotations are all I ever need — those, that is, and a Concordance for any unexpected crisis. I feel very strongly the pull of the middle-aged personality, when a ball game and the evening paper are the food of love.

Which reminds me that your mother has had a cold and I must (see, here is a quotation, but, I fear, a rather usual one) I must trouble you, I say, once more for congratulations. Some odd little magazine has done me an odd little honor — my own modest way of rephrasing a particular request from them for a series of articles, so you may, if your mother permits, have a new coat this winter.

I admire your Mr. Langdon. Arthur Langdon, did you say? His name is familiar; ask him if he has ever published. I seem to recollect a series of poems in an arty journal, but perhaps, now that he is an associate professor, he would prefer to forget them? You do not say much about Mrs. Langdon, except that she used to be one of his students — is that the only unusual fact about her? Walk not in the sun, my Natalie, nor reproach your father hereafter for his unlearning. Forgive also the fact that this letter is so short. I am taking time from my writing to keep in touch with you; your letters are, believe me, a very bright center in my life. I sent you to college to enjoy yourself, not to get an education, but, my dear, please hereafter *do* try not to split infinitives. ("To enthusiastically admire Mr. Langdon" indeed! We neither of us thank you!)

Your mother insists that I inquire about your health. I tell her that it is no longer our affair, but she feels that maternal interest is evidenced by a scrupulous investigation of your internal workings. Do you have any trouble with your eyes, she wants to know? Your chest? Your feet? Be sure, she says, to keep handy a bottle of cough medicine in the event of that nasty cough you used to have at night... when you were three.

Love,

Dad

Somewhere in the world trees were growing, Natalie thought as she walked down the hall of the house where she now lived; her feet on the linoleum floor made a flat sound, as of one walking upon dead earth. And perhaps there were still flowers in the garden at home and her father, glancing from his study window — perhaps her father thought, I wish Natalie were here. On either side of Natalie as she walked toward her own room were doors: perhaps behind one door a girl was studying, behind another a girl was crying, behind a third a girl was turning uneasily in her sleep. Behind a certain definite door downstairs Anne and Vicki sat, laughing and speaking in loud voices whatever they chose to say; behind other doors girls lifted their heads at Natalie's footsteps, turned, wondered, and went back to their work. I wish I were the only person in all the world, Natalie thought, with a poignant longing, thinking then that perhaps she was, after all. She reached her own door, and wondered again — Is this possible, my *own* door? Can it be that after so short a time I can recognize one door among many, and call it "my own"? Or is it only from here, in the hall, that it looks so extraordinary — after all, I can only go *out* one door from my room; it's coming in that is so confusing.

Inside, her room was expectant and without interest in her, as though her final decision upon one door was a matter of small concern to the room itself, and she might as well have walked into limbo, or into a well of fire, for all the room cared. The book she had put down over an hour ago had not consumed any more of its own pages, the typewriter had not turned out any literature, the window had not seen any interesting sights since she left. She dropped her books tiredly on the bed and went with method to hang her jacket in the closet before she sat down at the desk. A vague ambition touched her briefly: should she put a sheet of paper into the typewriter, and perhaps even write on it? Should she read, dress, eat her mother's cookies, sleep? She was staring uncertainly at the window (she might jump out?) when there was a knock at the door.

"Come in," she said, thinking as always, Was it really my door they wanted? It was Rosalind, which made it certainly Natalie's door, above all others, that she wanted.

"Listen," Rosalind said without greeting as she came through the door and half-closed it softly behind her, "listen, Nat, want to see something?"

"What?"

"Come *on*, then," Rosalind said urgently. "Come *on*."

Natalie rose and followed Rosalind through the door again, and back down the hall. They reached a door halfway down toward the stairway — it belonged to someone Natalie knew vaguely; perhaps the girl with bangs whose name might have been Winnie Williams or a girl they called Sandy — and Rosalind stopped in front of the door and said very softly, "Wait, I'll open it, then you'll see."

"Listen—" Natalie began.

Finger on her lips, Rosalind took hold of the doorknob and turned it, opening the door with a sudden push. She craned her head around and said, "Look, look."

Natalie, embarrassed, looked over her shoulder, phrasing apologies ("Sorry, thought it was the john") in her mind, but there was no one inside.

"They've gone," Rosalind said, disappointed. "You should have seen them."

"Who?"

Rosalind laughed, and shrugged. "Next time," she said. "See you later." She went off down the hall and Natalie, going the other way, went back to her own room.

* * *

It was that night that the talk of theft was first openly in evidence. In the basement room where the girls played bridge, where there was a stone floor and one dismal ashtray and a broken couch, and where Natalie sat cautiously in a corner, hoping that someone would notice her, and comment, perhaps, on her professional manner of smoking, the girls gathered noisily, the two or three who always heard news before anyone else raising their voices and insisting.

"*Honestly*," Peggy Spencer said honestly, "I wouldn't have said a *word* unless I *knew*. They are *really* going to search *every*body."

"Me?" said Natalie, raising her voice for the first time in that room.

"*Honestly*," Peggy Spencer said, addressing herself for the first time to Natalie across the room. "See, there's been so much stuff missing..."

Natalie did not know. Because she did not, had not heard, she found that all at once everyone was talking to her as though they knew her, even though one girl did persistently call her Helen and another thought that she lived on the fourth floor (it was here a comfort of sorts to Natalie to know that she had not been so universally observed as she thought), they all spoke directly to her.

"I lost this evening dress," one said, her voice riding over the others. "That was really the *first*. You see, I went out of my room for a minute and the dress was hanging..."

"Someone on the second floor lost forty dollars," said someone else.

"It's been going on for *ages*," Peggy Spencer said. "Everyone's been missing things for about a month, and no one said anything because..." She hesitated, searching for a reason why no one had said anything. "Anyway," she went on, "it finally got so bad that Old Nick heard about it, and then of course when she started asking questions..." Peggy shrugged. "Why, *then*," she said, "it turned out that nearly everyone had lost something or other. I don't think," she added thoughtfully, turning her red head around to look at everyone in the room, "I don't *really* think that all those things were *really* stolen."

"My *dress* is gone — I know I didn't send it to the cleaners that day because I remember thinking especially—"

" — and this little cigarette lighter I got from this boy—"

" — and imagine a pair of *shoes*. Who could wear anyone else's *shoes?*"

" — and lots of money. There was this girl lost forty dollars, and lots of other people had money that just—"

" — and someone said a girl on the first floor lost some letters and a lot of jewelry."

"A slip, too. Real lace."

Natalie, smoking professionally, was checking desperately over her belongings; if she had lost any clothes or jewelry she would hardly have known it, since she had worn the same sweater and skirt for a week, and except for the formality of hanging her jacket on the hook just inside her closet door had not opened her closet since she took out the skirt she was now wearing, but the persistent thoughts rode her mind side by side: first, it would not look well if she had not lost anything, and, second, was she not an obvious thief? She felt her cheek reddening, and turned her head down to watch her foot scuffing out the cigarette; if I *had* stolen anything, she thought (And had she perhaps not? She was suddenly aware of the excitement of going silently into someone's room, looking smilingly over someone else's possessions, reading letters, scrutinizing pictures, fondling jewelry, discarding whatever did not meet her fancy, and then — the most dangerous part; up until this moment her carefully planned excuses would let her off — slipping the roll of bills into her pocket, stuffing the book into the front of her sweater, flinging the real lace over her arm as though it belonged to her, and coming softly out of someone else's room, closing the door gently, walking boldly down the hall, counting over her new dear ownings behind the tightly locked door of her own room), and she thought that all of them were looking at her, unexpectedly quiet, all thinking at once, Why, it was *that* girl, of course; I remember now, I saw her coming out of my room, I always *said* she was...

“Have *you* lost anything?” Peggy Spencer asked Natalie directly.

In the small brief silence Natalie said, thinking, “Only some change that I left on my dresser. I put it there when I came in and then I went to take a shower and when I came back it was gone.” All the faces were turned to her now. “I didn’t want to say anything,” she explained, “because then I didn’t know that anything else was missing and I didn’t want to make any trouble for anyone.”

“That’s the way *we* all felt,” someone said approvingly.

“And yet,” Peggy Spencer said earnestly, “if no one ever *said* anything, whoever it is would just be getting away with it all the *time*.”

“That’s true,” Natalie said. “I mean, now that I know about it, I feel differently about it.” Why am I talking, she wondered in shame; who am I convicting, whose soul am I selling, what murder am I helping to commit; why am I here, she thought sadly, pretending that someone else has stolen from *me?*

* * *

After the special trip Natalie had made back to her room to freshen her lipstick and comb her hair, it seemed almost callous of Arthur Langdon not to turn and smile at her when she stood timidly in the doorway of his office, not daring to knock for fear he had already seen her, not daring to enter for fear he had not already seen her; she thought of trying a slight cough, or of saying softly, “Mr. Langdon?” or of going away a step and walking heavily up to the door again, but all these devices were of course only endless vicious circles around the central point, which was that for some reason Mr.

Almighty Langdon thought he need not, if he chose not, notice Miss Natalie Waite, and really thought he could keep her waiting uncertainly, endlessly, in the doorway to his office. As she was wondering, then, if a sort of dignified march back down the stairs might not prove that she was something more than this, he looked up at her, blankly for a minute, as one who thinks deeply, and then recognized her with a nod of companionship that said she was to enter but not speak. She moved respectfully into the room, thinking that she was the kind of woman who knows when to keep quiet, and sat docilely in the chair beside the desk, her hands folded, and her eyes discreetly turned away from him, to show that she was not in the least interested in what he was doing. She could see, however, from the corners of her eyes, that he looked tired as he bent his head over the papers on the desk; he's been fighting with Elizabeth, she thought with new knowledge, and hoped he would notice her quiet sympathy.

"I wish I were an insurance salesman," he said abruptly, shoving the papers back on his desk.

Natalie lost her moment, in the split second during which she realized that *he* had been hoping that *she* would notice; she held with herself a seemingly endless debate over what to say and do ("Stop acting like a child, my dear," her hand gently on his?), and by the time she had finally decided that his remark was to be treated as a joke, he had swung around in his chair to face her and was saying, "Well, Natalie?"

She smiled, and the moment became unexpectedly one of excruciating embarrassment. Natalie heard the back of her mind gibbering obscenities, and thought for a mad moment that she might be saying them aloud and not realizing; perhaps, she thought, I am undressing, or in the bathroom, or looking at myself in the mirror, and only pretending that I am here alone with Arthur Langdon; perhaps I am here with Arthur Langdon and pretending that I am dressing and talking really to myself; perhaps I will say something frightful and never know whether I have really said it or not, because of course he would pretend I never said it but he would always remember — a thousand years from now, Arthur Langdon telling Elizabeth for the hundredth time about the girl (Natalie? Helen? Joan?) who had said the shocking thing to him, and Natalie laughed suddenly, bringing herself immediately back to the present in Arthur Langdon's office, where she certainly *was* at the moment, and he was saying curiously, "What *were* you thinking about?"

"I was thinking about when I would be dead," Natalie said.

"Dead?" he said, surprised. "Are we going to die, you and I?"

"I only worry about *how*," Natalie said soberly; unlike most of the things she found herself saying to Arthur Langdon, this was true. "I keep thinking that of course it's *got* to happen, and even to me, but then I always think that somehow and someday this interesting person of mine will..." She searched for a word. "Subside," she said finally. "I mean, I will be very suddenly aware of an ending, and that there is not going to be any more for *me*, and that I am not going to be with myself any longer. And all of that's all right," she said, going on quickly as he opened his mouth to speak. "I'm only afraid of being caught unaware, of that terrible fast panic that comes when you're very very frightened, and of being *afraid* when it happens. So then, of course, I always think I'll kill myself before it *can* happen."

She stopped, and Arthur Langdon said, "You have a very original mind, Natalie."

"That's what I mean," she said, thinking, Oh, the fool, "can you imagine having a mind like mine and losing it when you die?" Had she, she wondered, had she *the* original mind?

He waved his hand at the papers on the desk. “There are almost two hundred papers there,” he said. “I have to read every one of them. And I always watch for yours.”

(Joan? Helen? Anne?) “I find your criticisms very helpful,” Natalie said demurely. “My father discusses my work with me very much as you do.” She thought of her father with sudden sadness; he was so far away and so much without her, and here she was speaking to a stranger.

“Does your father think your work shows talent?”

“My father does not praise anyone.”

“Do you plan to be a writer?”

A what? Natalie thought; a writer, a plumber, a doctor, a merchant, a chief; the best-laid plans of; a writer the way I might plan to be a corpse? “A writer?” she repeated, as though she had never heard the word before.

He was staring at her with his mouth half-open; she must have delayed her idiotic answer beyond any reasonable time for thought. “Do you plan to be a writer?” he asked again.

He *did* mean it, then. “Look,” Natalie said, “why does everyone say they’re going to be writers? When they’re not? I mean, why do you and my father and everybody say ‘to be a writer’ as though it were something different? Not like anything else? Is there something special about writers?”

Her delay had not helped him any. “It’s because writing itself,” he began, hesitating, and then, “I suppose it’s because writing — well, it’s something important, I suppose.”

“Well, then, *what* am I going to write?”

“Well...” he said. He looked at her and then irritably at the papers on his desk. “Stories,” he said. “Poems. Articles. Novels. Plays.” He shook his head and then said, “Anything — well, creative.”

“But why is it so important, this creating?” Natalie was positive at the moment that she was asking him something very important, and that he could answer it, and she leaned forward eagerly; she needed only one answer, only one, she thought, and then she knew that he would not tell her, because he shook his head and said, “Natalie, this is metaphysical nonsense. Questioning one’s own soul is not something at which I am particularly good at any time, and certainly it is not a subject which ought to be indulged in broad daylight. Some other time,” he laughed, “we can sit in the darkness under an oak tree and tell one another vast truths.”

It was precisely as Natalie’s father would have rebuked her; she sat back in her chair and thought, I will never ask him this again, and then thought, What a silly person I am, and now he *does* think I am a fool.

“Tell me,” he said, leaning forward. “You were giving me your ideas about death.”

* * *

“But the *best* thing they did,” Anne said, laughing before she had even begun to describe it, “was the time they wrote to someone’s boy friend and told him not to come to the dance.”

“They sent him a telegram,” Vicki said. “And the girl waited and waited and of course he never showed up.”

“But everyone knew except *her*,” Anne said. “That was the joke of it.”

“Didn’t she ever find out?” Natalie asked.

“*That* was the best part,” Anne said. “Of course she found out later, and of course it was *awful* for her, but she had to be a good sport about it, *naturally*. It was only a joke, after all, and she waited and waited all dressed up for the dance.”

"And remember the time they called up and pretended to be some guy's mother and had this girl almost in hysterics?"

"And that old car and they ran it right across anyone's lawn or anything or anywhere they pleased, and they weren't afraid of *any*one; and the time they poured iodine all over someone's fur coat?"

"*She* was sore," Vicki said with satisfaction.

"I should think so," said Natalie.

"But of course she had to be a good *sport*," Vicki said.

"And the time," said Anne, giggling, "that they sent invitations to all the faculty, inviting them to a party, and on the bottom of the invitation it said in big letters 'Your wife is NOT invited'?"

Vicki laughed. "There was trouble *then*," she said.

"Nothing's the same since they graduated," Anne said wistfully. "No one can think of anything to *do*, any more."

Natalie, my dear,

Needless to say, your letters amuse and delight me, although, as I have often told you (how humorless I sound!) your style leaves much to be desired; how *very* often, my dear Natalie, have we, you and I, spent our morning hours puzzling out the intricate filigree of the subordinate clause, and yet I find, in your last letter but one, the following (please forgive my quoting you, my dear; it is the only way, you know, to improve you. I have a notion you would hardly read a bare, invented example): "I like college very much, but am still a little confused. I don't think I'll ever learn French. I like philosophy, though. Is there any chance of your coming down soon?"

Ignoring the sense of the quotation (except to mention, in passing, that it is not possible to "learn" French; as I believe someone else has said, one either is or is not born with the kind of personality to which French is a mother-tongue), let me only say that two self-evident remarks connected with “but” do not constitute an English style. Nor do a series of short sentences, unless they are building into something very clear and definite, which in your case seems to be “with love to all, Natalie” — a desirable sentiment, and one your mother could hardly do without, but surely not an adequate consummation — almost, in fact, an anticlimax.

Enough for your letter; you are presumably studying English composition and we may expect to see an improvement soon. Your mother and I are better able to avoid one another without you and your brother cluttering up the house. Your mother remarks nostalgically that the dinner table seems unusually deserted, which of course is true, although it persuades me finally that your mother has from the beginning counted her children only by the places set at table, and has marked your growth from one chop to two with pride and appreciation — soon her little girl will be quite grown up, and able to manipulate her own knife and fork. You may, however, suppose that we miss you.

Has your Mr. Langdon seen my piece in the last *Passionate Review?* If not, you may use its arguments as your own, and confound him.

Obediently,
Dad

Natalie’s journal; middle October:

I suppose you have been wondering for a long time, my darling Natalie, what I can find to be thinking about. I suppose you have even noticed — Natalie seems so strange lately, she seems so withdrawn and distant and quiet, I wonder if Natalie is coming along all right, or if there is something troubling her. Perhaps you have been thinking, dearest, that Natalie had something she wanted to say to you. Perhaps, you thought, Natalie is frightened and perhaps she even thinks sometimes about a certain long ago bad thing that she promised me never to think about again. Well, that's why I'm writing this now. I could tell, my darling, that you were worried about me. I could feel you being apprehensive, and I knew that what you were always thinking about was you and me. And I even knew that you thought I was worried about that terrible thing, but of course — I promise you this, I really do — I don't think about it at all, ever, because both of us know that it never happened, did it? And it was some horrible dream that caught up with us both. We don't have to worry about things like that, you remember we decided we didn't have to worry.

No, what I have been thinking about is something entirely different. I have been thinking — and it is very very hard to say this, so be patient with me — about the beautiful wonderful exciting things that are happening. That does not quite describe it. Look. Let me say it like this: when I came here to college I was all alone and that bad thing had just happened and I had no friends and no one to think about and I was always frightened. Now all of a sudden I find that I am walking around in a world very full of other people, and because they are all frightened too I can afford to be frightened, and then once I *know* I am frightened then I can go ahead and forget about it and start looking around at other things. And of course now I know that it isn't important about other people, and only the people who don't dare be all alone need friends. I don't suppose I will need any friends or anything for the rest of my life, now that I am not frightened.

But of course I think sometimes (thank heaven no one will ever read this but you and me, my dear) about being in love, which is something I hardly expect ever to happen to me, but I think I have just a slight idea, from the way I feel about other things, what it would be like. I think, for instance, that no one can really love a person who is not superior in every way. For instance, I know from how I feel about people who are superior to me in some things just exactly how I would feel about someone who was superior to me in everything, which of course would be the only kind of person I could really love.

I wanted to tell my father about this, and I wanted to tell Arthur too, but of course it is not really possible to go up to some man and say that you could never really love any person who was not superior to you in everything and let them see clearly that they are *not* that.

I wish I knew why I am so excited all the time. I keep thinking something is going to happen. I keep thinking I am right on the point of telling someone all about myself.

I wonder what I would say to a psychoanalyst. I wonder where people find words for all the funny things inside their heads. I keep turning around in circles and finding how well things fit together, but nothing is ever complete. I think if I could tell someone everything, every single thing, inside my head, then *I* would be gone, and not existing any more, and I would sink away into that lovely nothing-space where you don't have to worry any more and no one ever hears you or cares and you can say anything but of course you wouldn't *be* any more at all and you couldn't really *do* anything so it wouldn't *matter* what you did.

Of course I realize that the first thing to do if you wanted someone to tell you everything would be to make your minds go along together, so that if for instance a psychoanalyst wanted me to tell him everything in my head, he would have to be very close to me so that our minds were running exactly together, coinciding, and what I told him would not be told, really, but only an echo of the way both our minds were going, and would sort of cancel out. And there, you see, is what I mean by superior, because after all this he would have to have enough left over after he had taken all my mind, so that he could keep on thinking by himself, after I was nothing. But of course I don’t believe anybody really exists like that and that all these people like Elizabeth who talk about going to psychoanalyst don’t want this at all, or perhaps their minds are so little and move on such a small amount of energy or space that a psychoanalyst could use just a little bit of himself to capture them and have plenty of mind left over, so as not to be absorbed in them at all particularly. And that, I suppose is why these people find it so easy to get along with the idea of having their minds taken away from them, because their minds were never very useful to them in the first place. Although I do not have to worry about being modest here, it is certainly not necessary to point out to *you* that Elizabeth is not as wise as I am.

I want somebody who will fight about it, too. Suppose there is a person, somewhere very near me, right now, who is thinking about me and who watches me and knows everything I think about and who is just waiting for me to recognize

Odd things, these days, came back into Natalie’s mind. For instance, she remembered a scene that happened when she was about six years old; it recurred to her often, and mostly during classes when her mind relaxed and she drew strange little patterns in her notebook, and, with her eyes fixed earnestly upon the front of the room, wandered away by herself. The scene she remembered so clearly was of herself, small vague Natalie in a pair of shorts and sneakers, looking honestly and with the eyes of pure truth up at her mother, who bent down over her and listened with concern. “I found a wishing stone,” little Natalie was telling her mother. “I knew it was a wishing stone because when I dug it up it *looked* like a wishing stone, so I held it tight in my hand and closed my eyes and wished for a bicycle, and then nothing happened at all and so I threw the stone away.” Natalie could still, this many years later, see her mother’s stricken eyes. She remembered that her father had laughed, and that her mother had begged for the bicycle for Natalie; these cynical later days, Natalie suspected that her mother had been right. It was less important, Natalie thought, to allow her father's humor to be transmitted to his children than to keep alive her mother's faith in magic. Too, Natalie saw now that if she had kept the wishing stone until the right time came, she could have used it to wish for a bicycle on that Christmas Eve when a bicycle was so obviously awaiting her under the Christmas tree. Then, magic would have been sustained, and cause and effect not violated for that first, irrecoverable time.

Behind Natalie a girl said aloud, puzzled, "Well, *I* think that if Romeo wanted her so much all he had to do was *take* her. I mean, why all that bother with secret marriages and stuff when they could just walk off together?"

Mustn't violate the sacred rules of magic, Natalie thought sleepily. Never wish for anything until it's ready for you. Never try to make anything happen until it's on its way. The formal way is best, after all; no short cuts allowed in this passage.

"Seems to *me*," said someone on the far side of the room, "that if the ending was happier it would be a better play."

She was a minute or two late and was trying to phrase apologies in her mind when she knocked softly on the door of the Langdon's house. It was a perfectly legitimate delay, but it was difficult to tell Elizabeth Langdon that one was late for tea with her because her husband had stood in the center of the path, refusing to recognize any hints about appointments, asking endless questions, making well-turned compliments... she knocked again, a little more emphatically. The door was not latched, and slipped back and open under her hand. For a minute she stood there and then, thinking that she was expected and telling herself she would do the same anywhere, she pushed the door a little farther and stepped in. For a minute she saw nothing and then, all at once, she saw Elizabeth Langdon asleep with her head on the arm of the couch, and the thick line of smoke rising from the upholstery near her head. Moving quickly and crying out, “Elizabeth,” before she thought to say, “Mrs. Langdon,” Natalie went to the couch and pushed Elizabeth’s head aside, and began to slap at the burning couch.

“Oh my God,” said Elizabeth from somewhere behind Natalie. She too began to slap at the chair, hitting Natalie’s hand, and then she said, “Wait, wait,” and ran down the hall and into the kitchen. The cigarette that had fallen from Elizabeth’s hand had burned itself out of sight in the couch, and the smoke coming from some horrible secret inner part choked Natalie as she leaned over it. Elizabeth came back behind her with a shakerful of cocktails and said with a giggle, “Couldn’t wait to fill a pitcher with water. Got to remember to save two drinks.” Natalie knocked her arm away so that the cocktails poured on the floor, and said, “That stuff burns! Get *water!*” Elizabeth stared vacantly, and Natalie, thinking, I am acting in an emergency, ran into the kitchen and filled a saucepan with water and hurried back, spilling water on the hall floor as she ran, and poured the water carefully and accurately into the burning hole on the couch.

As the smoke died away Natalie realized that Elizabeth was laughing, and she began to laugh too. The hole became a sodden ugly spot, the smoke stopped, and the room suddenly smelled most violently of gin. Elizabeth lifted the shaker and peered into it. “Terrible waste,” she said.

“I’ll never be able to drink it,” Natalie protested, laughing because it was over and she felt that she had been perhaps a little impulsively heroic. “I thought *you* were on fire,” she explained with embarrassment.

“I nearly *was*,” Elizabeth said, wide-eyed. “Thanks,” she said.

"I'm sorry I shouted at you," Natalie said. They stared at one another uncomfortably for a minute. Then Elizabeth said, "Saved some cocktails, anyway."

"Spilled water on the hall floor," Natalie said.

"*That's* all right," Elizabeth said largely. "That's the third time I've done it, you know. Fires, I mean."

"The *third* time?" Natalie said, unbelieving.

Elizabeth nodded. "Third time this year," she said. "Once the fat in the frying pan caught fire because I wasn't watching it, and before I could put it out the kitchen curtains caught, and then if Arthur hadn't been there my dress would have caught but he pulled me out of the way and put the fire out. He was so frightened he couldn't talk. I could have been killed."

"That's terrible," said Natalie earnestly.

"And the second time was when I accidentally dropped a lighted match into the wastebasket in Arthur's study, and the wastebasket flamed right up and that time my skirt *did* catch fire, but I picked up the wastebasket and ran into the bathroom and turned on the shower and threw the wastebasket under it and got under myself. So *that* time was all right."

"I'll bet he was frightened then," Natalie said.

"He was when I told him. He wanted me to stop smoking. He said—" Elizabeth looked at Natalie queerly " — he said I was trying to kill myself."

"Are you?" Natalie asked in spite of herself.

Elizabeth shook her head. "I don't know," she said mournfully. "I really don't know. Sometimes, though, I think I have cause." She stopped, thinking, and there was a silence. Natalie stirred uneasily, and Elizabeth said, "Serve him right, too."

"That's no way to die, though," Natalie said.

“It certainly is *not*,” said Elizabeth, and shuddered. “My God, I was scared,” she said.

“Me, too.”

“Well,” Elizabeth said, as though done with the subject. “How about we finish off the cocktails?” she asked.

Natalie made a face. “I don’t know if I can stand it,” she said, and gestured at the room at large. “Seems like it’s into everything.”

“You won’t notice it after you’ve had a drink,” Elizabeth said. The shaker sat on the table where she had put it down, and she picked it up and looked into it again. “There’s really *quite* a lot left,” she said, and carried it with her out into the kitchen to get glasses. While she was gone Natalie opened the window and stood looking out onto the college campus. Somehow, inside this room, in the house, she was removed from those girls in their bright sweaters who walked easily across the grass, under the colored trees, ignoring the paths and putting their clean brown-and-white shoes down as though their tuition had bought them a permanent share in this very land. They understood the functioning of the college, these girls outside, talking to one another as they walked, and knowing the places to which they were bound; they were intimate and sympathetic with this college, and never saw it as the spot where Arthur Langdon taught, or where one was held apart from home and kindness by the dubious good intentions of strangers. Inside here, Natalie thought, turning abruptly to look into the room and at the furniture and books and even the burned couch, inside this room is the only place except my own home where everybody knows my name.

“At least two drinks apiece,” Elizabeth said gaily, “and probably more.”

“Hadn’t we better save some?” Natalie said prudently.

Elizabeth's face turned sullen. "At least this time," she said, "he won't be able to say I drank them. *This* time he can't blame *me*." She looked at the couch. "He can't even be angry at *that*, very well."

"I don't think it's badly burned," Natalie said.

Elizabeth shrugged. "Oh, well," she said, and sat down on the couch; because her favorite corner was burned she was forced to go to the other end, and she sat there uncomfortably, resting on her wrong elbow. "I was reading," she said, looking irritably at the burned spot. "That's what happened, I was reading."

"Next time put out your cigarette before you fall asleep."

"That's what I get for reading," Elizabeth said. She pointed with her toe to the book on the table. "Psychology," she said. "*I* can't understand it."

"Then why do you do it?" Natalie asked, wondering at the vast freedom of one who could learn if she chose and could, if she chose, flatly refuse to understand.

"We *all* do it," Elizabeth said. "All of us, the faculty wives. Got to do something, you know. And besides, it feels good to sit next to those kids in class and look at them frowning and trying to make something out of it, and you sit there thinking how much more you know than they do, and they have to call you Mrs. Langdon."

"At least you don't have any trouble passing."

Elizabeth made a face. "I never finish up the courses," she said. "Those poor kids, they have to come rain or shine, and answer when they're asked questions — me, I can just say, 'Go to hell professor,' and walk out if I'm bored."

"How about your husband's class?" Natalie asked.

"I *took* that class," Elizabeth said, and laughed. "I got through the whole thing — and I passed, too — before I ever married Arthur. He used to give me back my papers with notes written on them. I'd laugh out loud, sometimes, in class when he gave me my papers back with those notes on them. And he'd read things like speeches from *Antony and Cleopatra*, and some of the kids would be blushing and some of them would be just looking at him like lovesick chickens, and I'd think of how anytime I wanted I could get him to read the same things to me all alone and I'd look around that class and think how pathetic those kids were and I'd want to laugh in their faces."

A great envious excitement filled Natalie; she promised herself quickly that she would somehow, later, examine how it would feel to sit in class with such special secret knowledge, with such delicious sense of possession.

Elizabeth sighed. "I *liked* that class," she said. She was smiling reminiscently still as she rose to fill Natalie's glass. "And sometimes," she said, "I'd meet people like Mr. and Mrs. Watson — he was biology teacher then — and I'd say, 'How do you do, Mrs. Watson, Mr. Watson,' so politely, and all the time I'd be thinking of how when Arthur and I were married I could call them Carl and Laura. And about sitting with the faculty at trustee dinners or college movies. And running into Arthur's office whenever I pleased, and not caring *who* saw me. And staying out all night if I felt like it, and laughing in anyone's face the next morning. And faculty parties," she said, "and pouring at teas. And getting the best of everything." She sighed again, her head on her arm and her long hair falling against her face. "I thought it was all going to be so wonderful," she said.

Suddenly, again, Natalie felt the small chill of dismay when Arthur Langdon's footsteps sounded outside the door and, with the opening of the door, the same familiar shock of finding him slightly smaller than she had remembered him.

"Hello?" he said, blinking after the bright sunlight outside, and then, his voice hard, "Smells like a brewery in here."

Elizabeth stood up quickly and hurried across the room to him. "Arthur," she said, and her face showed alarm but her voice was rich, "Arthur, listen, I tried to kill myself again this afternoon—"

* * *

It was on a Thursday evening early in November that the peculiar events in the dormitory where Natalie slept began to attract attention. On that Thursday evening (there was a full moon, which several people insisted hysterically had certainly something to do with it) the girl who lived alone in the room almost directly under Natalie's arose from her bed asleep and unlocked her door and moved slowly and with seeming purpose down the hall. Where she could, she opened doors and went in to awaken all sleepers. At each bed, the story went, she bent over gently and smoothed the pillow, before giving the girl asleep a quick slap to awaken her. "No sleep tonight," she told each of them pleasantly, and left the room. By the time she had reached the end of the hall a group of girls had gathered, half-asleep and frightened and talking among themselves in whispers. One girl who found herself more competent than the rest separated herself at last from the group, and, approaching the sleepwalker, threw a blanket around her; then half a dozen girls of great courage half-carried the sleepwalker — now walking awake — and shut her into the closet of her own room with the door locked, where she stayed all night, crying and promising to behave if they let her out.

The next night — that would be Friday, with the sleepwalker safely in the infirmary — word of thievery again spread through the house. Natalie, who had not been awakened the night before, was tonight on the outskirts of the group that gathered swiftly in the hall — almost as though everyone had been waiting for some new excitement — when one of the girls announced that she had caught another girl coming out of her room with a blouse in her hand. Miss Nicholas was quickly brought from her bed — she too had missed the excitement the night before, although she had been notified in time to let the girl out of the closet before breakfast — and, with judicious attention to all those who had something to tell her about things stolen, and with sober announcements about being *sure* before any charge was brought, searched thoroughly the room of the girl accused, assisted by the accuser and several friends. Although none of them were able to uncover any of the stolen articles, it was said and echoed that the girl could have sold the clothes and spent the money. One or two most subtle minds, who volunteered to help the girl tidy up her room after the searching party had finished, reported later in the smoking room that she had said nothing which might be construed as incriminating.

On Sunday afternoon, while most of the girls and Miss Nicholas were at Sunday dinner, one of the girls on the top floor, who had stayed away from dinner because she had to lose two pounds by the next weekend in order to fit into the dress she was wearing to a houseparty dance, walked out of her room and saw a man running down the stairs. It was decided that he was a Peeping Tom, and several of the girls recalled having seen someone in what must have been that same brown coat hanging around outside the dormitory, as though he were a janitor, or something. One of the girls, who had been severely surprised when she was eleven years old by a man who exposed himself before her as she passed him on the street, explained that this was a kind of neurosis some men had. Many people recalled having heard that such things happened frequently around women's colleges, and one girl left school because she wrote her mother some of the things she heard around the smoking room.

A senior girl, questioned in the smoking room, said that such things always came in waves. It was a college season, she explained. She told some of the things that had happened during comparable seasons when she was younger, and added that she believed it had something to do with the fact that the Thanksgiving and Christmas vacations were due soon. “Some people have trouble adjusting between college and home,” she explained.

The girl who had been accused of stealing left college, and almost immediately afterward a girl who lived on the second floor reported that her allowance check was missing from her room. It turned out during the next day or so that several people were losing things; one girl went to look for an angora sweater she had put away in her bottom drawer and it was gone; shortly after that, two cartons of cigarettes disappeared from another room, and everyone in the house who smoked that particular brand changed abruptly.

A very brief enthusiasm sprang up for bringing tiny bottles of rum into the dining room and adding the rum to the dinner coffee. This was replaced by an inexplicable and childish two-day enthusiasm for pig-latin. Also in the dining room one evening, an entire tableful of girls rose and walked out in the middle of the meal because they were refused more bread. A girl on the third floor who was seen crying was reported faithfully as suffering from a venereal disease, and a petition was sent to Miss Nicholas to require the girl to use the basement lavatory. Miss Nicholas was reported to be secretly married, and the Peeping Tom identified as her husband, looking for her on the top floor. Two girls in another house tried to kill themselves with double doses of the infirmary sleeping medicine. An unnamed girl, also in another house, was said to have died of an abortion, and several people knew the name of the baby’s father, who was reliably identified as a local man who worked as a lifeguard summers and in the gas station winters. It was generally believed that it was completely possible to become pregnant by using the same bathtub as one’s brother, although not necessarily at the same time.

November 12 — Nov. 13

Natalie, my dear,

It is late at night, and I have just come home from a rather ribald gathering, and nothing, it seems to me at the moment, would delight me more than a note of paternal warning to my only daughter. May I — and through how many faulty media — *may* I, then, issue one note of paternal warning? And over again I reflect on the faulty media — mine own words, the United States mails, the extreme long chance that this letter will reach you at all, that your benevolent housemother (Old Nick, did you say?) should not read this herself and destroy it, that your house should not burn down and this letter with it, that the stamp should not fall off nor the address be erased by some postal cataclysm — suppose, indeed, daughter, it should be one of those letters we read about in the daily newspapers, lost for twenty years, but faithfully found and delivered at the end of that time — how will you feel, twenty years from now, reading a lost letter from your father, with advice well meant and long useless — faulty media? I begin to perceive that it is impossible for this letter to reach you at all.

Let me, then, warn you direfully against false friends. And against those for whose friendship toward you you can find no material motive. And against all fawners, all liars, all nodders. Believe me, girl, without a motive no friendship can be, and without a motive no friendship can last, and whether it be father to daughter or lover to wife, no friendship can come to birth without it have a motive and an end in view. And further, daughter, I charge you: do not trust entirely to your own knowledge for these things. One person inaccurate upon his own behavior may nevertheless be accurate upon yours. Consult, therefore, the blind and honest; they can do you no harm, and one, at least, wishes you none.

Later

Natalie, I wrote this much last night and would not for the world deprive you of my paternal effusions, particularly since I can see that in spite of my heavy manner, very much, I believe, in the style of an Old-Testament God, I was trying to say something very real, which I must have supposed last night you were old enough to hear. What worries me is, I think, the fact that in your letters you show yourself as not entirely happy. I have been sure for a long time that things were difficult for you, but please remember, my dear, that they would have been difficult anywhere. I chose this college for you because I knew that it was a fairly exclusive, expensive place and, while I pretend to no less snobbishness than any man, it seemed to me additionally valuable in that you *will*, snobbishness or not, find intelligence and culture accompanying persons of a certain social class. There is no doubt but what the class of girls you have as friends is not a representative one, but my plans for you never did include a broad education; an extremely narrow one, rather — one half, from the college, in people and surroundings; the other half, from me, in information. My ambitions for you are slowly being realized, and, even though you are unhappy, console yourself with the thought that it was part of my plan for you to be unhappy for a while. The fact that you associate intimately with girls who do not care for the things you do should strengthen your own artistic integrity and fortify you against the world; remember, Natalie, your enemies will always come from the same place your friends do. So try to bear with these girls, try not to let their occasional silliness upset you, try not to let them cultivate you for mental values rather than social values — briefly, try to do what I advised last night: scrutinize carefully anyone aspiring to be your friend, examine her conduct for motives, and deny your friendship if your estimate of her motives shows them ignoble. I should, if I were you, be extremely cautious with Arthur Langdon; I have been re-reading his poems. He is a spiritual man, and one to whom things of the spirit are meaningful. Past a certain point this sort of person is not trustworthy; he will expect more of your compliance than you should be ready to give; your humor will offend his mysticism. Do not under any circumstances allow Arthur Langdon to convert you to any philosophical viewpoint until you have first consulted me.

As the person who knows you most dearly, and who loves you always the best, I am equally the one most capable of telling you these things. It has been *my* plan, Natalie, all of it, and when you approach despair remember that even your despair is part of my plan. Remember, too, that without you I could not exist: there can be no father without a daughter. You have thus a double responsibility, for my existence and your own. If you abandon me, you lose yourself.

Your devoted,
Dad

Being assistant hostess to Vicki and Anne at cocktails was not in any way similar to standing up with Mrs. Arnold Waite to receive guests. For one thing, Mrs. Arnold Waite had been supplied, beyond all else, with the material for bribing people to like her house. On the other hand, since the college had once been progressive, and retained privileges where it had lost principles, students were allowed to own and serve liquor and a minimal amount of food (food, after all, was served in the dining room, but there was no bar on campus) without the conviction, which Mrs. Arnold Waite had to perfection, that it was in any way possible to live differently. Ice might be readily procured at the college store, and carried dripping from a newspaper the length of the campus lawn. Toothbrush glasses might be freely confiscated from the common bathrooms, rinsed inadequately, and dried on other people's bath towels. There were, of course, girls who brought their own sets of glasses to college, and kept them on the bookcases in their rooms, but these were mostly upperclassmen, or girls who realized that their lives were unendurable without the tradition of dressing for dinner.

At the entertainment proffered by Vicki, Anne, and Natalie, the glasses used to serve cocktails to Arthur and Elizabeth Langdon had been borrowed up and down the hall, so that on the front of the tray, with Vicki's good vermouth and Anne's gin, bought that morning in town, were two unchipped and matched cocktail glasses, property of someone on the first floor who lent them with the information that if it hadn't been for Arthur Langdon she would have declined and that, furthermore, Arthur Langdon or not, she would have the hide off anyone who broke them; they had fine gold edges and looked really quite professional. Farther back on the tray, and hidden carelessly behind the gin bottle, were a chipped wineglass, a fruit juice glass stolen from the college dining room, and a plastic bathroom glass; these were for Vicki and Anne and Natalie. On the bookcase next to the tray were a plate, also stolen from the dining room, a jar of cheese spread, and a box of crackers. The cheese was to be spread on the crackers with the wrong end of a nail file.

"You see, the trouble with *us,*" Vicki said sardonically, surveying their preparations, "is that we try as hard as we can to live up to the standards of the Langdons. We try to make it look as though—"

"If you'd like to take them into town to a restaurant," Anne said, "you go right ahead. It's your twenty bucks."

Natalie, who had supplied the crackers and cheese and felt a maternal obligation toward them, was trying to spread the cheese on the crackers with the nail file; the crackers shattered into crumbs in her hands. "We should have gotten pretzels," Natalie said. She was still very polite and tentative with Vicki and Anne, sternly repressing in herself the constant question as to why they bothered with her at all. She could have understood their kindness in including her often on occasions such as this, inviting her to the movies, accompanying her to meals, if they had been — say — bored with one another, or needing someone to run errands for them, or amused by her, or respectful of her learning, but none of these estimates seemed reasonable — they were almost too careful of her, so complete in themselves that they needed no one and yet including her with courtesy and insistence, smiling only at her jokes, waiting for her to finish speaking before they began, indifferent to her quotations and yet seeking her company. If they liked her, then, it was for no reason. She had not found yet in them anything to excuse.

"*Any*way," Anne said, "you give Lizzie a drink, and she doesn't care if you spread the cheese with the bottom of your shoe."

"Look," Vicki said, turning from Anne to Natalie. "What *about* Lizzie drinking? Shall we make her take it easy?"

"I really think she'll behave herself since she's not in her own house," Natalie said.

Vicki laughed. "If she's within reaching distance of a bottle? 'They're all so jealous of my catching Arthur,'" she said in a high whining voice. "'No one understands that I *only* want everyone to *love* me.'"

"I don't think it's any of our business," Anne said in her sweet voice. "After all, *we* can't presume to judge her behavior."

"Well, if Arthur doesn't care, *I* don't," Vicki said. "Listen, there's the doorbell."

She ran out of the door and down the stairs. They were entertaining in what might be called Vicki's room, which made her nominal chief hostess; Vicki's room and Anne's were on a corner of the second floor of the house, and were prized by all students as the most desirable location on campus. Vicki and Anne had kept the corner rooms for two years; they had lived here together through two years when these rooms must have been more intimately home to them than the island Elizabeth Langdon despised, or the other homes they knew where the rooms were larger and the service better. The room which was listed as Vicki's in the college offices had been made into a study, and Anne's room a bedroom; they entertained, naturally, in the study. This room proudly held less of the college furniture than any other room on the campus; the bookcases were recognizably institutional furniture, but then, as Anne had told Natalie reluctantly, bookcases that size were so difficult to transport, and the wastebasket was an undeniable college wastebasket. There were, besides, a studio couch, and a coffee table, and a modern lamp. The pictures on the wall had been painted by Vicki in her second-year art class, and were beautifully framed; the books in the bookcases showed precisely which classes Vicki and Anne had attended during their college years, and gave an occasional sense of their having sampled all the possible courses given at the college in order to learn the names of the textbooks. The blockprint on the curtains had been especially designed for a whimsical sort of person by someone who could afford to do so, the rug was softer than most college beds. How this room could exist not more than one floor and half a dozen doors from her own bare small room on the third floor was a matter of continual surprise to Natalie, and it seemed to her frequently that Vicki and Anne had moved in here, and stayed here, only as some kind of a concession which they made with their usual courtesy to the college authorities.

Possessed tonight of a part-interest in the room, by right of the crackers and cheese she had supplied, Natalie rose with dignity from the studio couch and came to stand in the doorway with Anne, careful not to come too close. They could hear Vicki greeting the Langdons downstairs. “So glad you came,” Vicki was saying, and “Come on upstairs, Nat and Anne are waiting.”

They could hear the Langdons coming up the stairs before they could see them rounding the turn halfway. “I wish...” Anne said, and then was silent. What would she have said if I had been Vicki? Natalie wondered, and felt Anne sigh and saw Elizabeth Langdon coming up the last part of the stairs. She was dressed up, perhaps more than the occasion demanded. She was wearing a dark-blue dress, very tight at the waist and full in the skirt, with a low-cut neck and much heavy jewelry; it was a dress more fitting for a student than for a faculty wife, with its pretty cut more suitable for a date with a college boy than a cocktail with three college girls. Perhaps Elizabeth had felt this when she dressed, because she had added to her costume a most mature hat, with a caught-up veil and a frill of small feathers, not at all the sort of hat which might be worn by anyone who described herself as a “pretty girl” rather than “an attractive woman.” She looked, altogether, very handsome, and would have looked far handsomer if Anne had not been wearing a soft rose wool dress which touched up the highlights in her blonde hair. Natalie had spent some little time over her own clothes and felt more gaunt and ungraceful than ever, standing in a small circle with Elizabeth and Vicki and Anne; but, she thought to console herself, no one is looking at me anyway.

For a minute they hesitated in the doorway, Anne's excessive good manners not adequate to induce Elizabeth to forgo an entrance and come into the room normally. At last, by judicious edging backward by Natalie and Anne, and tactful urging from behind by Vicki, Elizabeth was subtly introduced into the room and seated in an armchair; she tried to go to the couch to sit in what was most closely approximate to her own spot at home, but was forestalled by Vicki, who insisted upon the armchair. Elizabeth sat, then, uneasily, with the two bookcases meeting behind her back and the open windows across from her. Anne sat on the couch next to Arthur Langdon, who had entered the room last, and quietly, as though he had only come along unwillingly with his wife, and Vicki and Natalie hovered uncomfortably over the small table at the side of the room, the one over the tray of liquor and glasses, the other over her cheese.

"You've changed things around," Arthur said to Anne, thus committing with a grand unconsciousness his first magnificent blunder of the afternoon.

"Only the couch and table," Anne said sweetly. "How do you think it looks, Mrs. Langdon? We find it maddening to make these college rooms look civilized."

"If you used the college furniture you wouldn't have so much trouble," Elizabeth said, moving in her chair. "It looks nice, though."

"Like a warehouse, actually," Anne said. "You know, everything piled up together. If we only had some space."

"Very pleasant place to work," Arthur said.

"Writing papers for Langdon's class," Anne said. Everyone laughed gaily.

“I may think I’m making something here,” Vicki said, over their laughter, “but actually it’s more mudpies than anything else — heaven only knows what I’ll have when I’m through.”

“May I help you?” said Arthur immediately.

“I’d be ashamed,” Vicki said. She lifted the vase they had decided looked just enough like a cocktail shaker to pass if no one examined it too closely, sniffed at it, shook her head dubiously, and said, “Well, how wrong can you *go*, with just gin and vermouth?”

Arthur closed his eyes in pain, and Anne said to him, “*You’d* better make the next round.” Vicki began to pour the cocktails carefully into the two good glasses, and Anne said politely to Elizabeth, “You look so well, Mrs. Langdon; that dress is so becoming.”

“You look well, too, Anne.” She has promised Arthur to be civil, Natalie thought with sudden pity; she is pretending to be Old Nick being gracious.

“You look as though you’d been out in the sun all day,” Anne said to Elizabeth.

Elizabeth smiled deprecatingly. “I’ve been doing housework.”

“I sometime think,” said Anne, who was perhaps imagining that *she* was Old Nick being gracious, “that housework must be really the *most* satisfying work of all.” Elizabeth stared at her incredulously, and Anne smiled shyly at her and added to Arthur, “It must be *wonderful* to see — well, *order* out of *chaos*, you know that you’ve done it yourself.”

“I suppose you’ve never scrubbed a floor?” Elizabeth asked. She was still sitting very stiffly in her chair, her hands folded in her lap over her suede pocketbook and her gloves. She turned her head to watch whomever was speaking, and when Vicki brought her a cocktail in the first good glass, she accepted it with an unsmiling bow of thanks, and sat holding it poised in her hand. Arthur got the second good glass, of course, and sipped at it immediately in order to nod to Vicki and say, “Very good indeed,” with a faint air of surprise.

“Is it really?” Vicki said. She nodded her head proudly. “I always *knew* I could do it if I tried.”

Natalie had achieved several unbroken crackers with cheese on them, and she passed the plate to Elizabeth. As Elizabeth took a cracker she looked up without expression and said to Natalie, “And how are *you*, my dear? Studying hard?”

“Not hard enough, I’m afraid,” Natalie said. You ought to meet my mother, she was thinking.

“What accomplished hostesses you all are,” Arthur said, when she passed the plate to him.

“There’s a real art to getting cheese on crackers,” Natalie said.

“It’s a talent every young girl should have, making and serving a good cocktail,” Arthur said.

“I’ll have to take lessons, then,” Anne said.

There was a small silence, and then Elizabeth said, “Arthur dear, do you realize that these girls have gone to a vast amount of trouble and expense just to entertain *us?*”

“I think it extremely kind of them,” Arthur said gallantly.

“You were very kind to come,” Anne said, and Vicki said, “It’s a pleasure to us, too,” and Natalie said, “Yes, indeed.”

“I am sure we were both delighted to come,” Elizabeth said. She sipped daintily from her glass and said, “Quite a good cocktail, Vicki.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Langdon,” Vicki said.

“What do you hear from your father?” Arthur asked Natalie.

Natalie laughed. “He said if you hadn’t read his piece in the latest *Passionate Review*, I could use its arguments to confound you.”

Arthur was delighted. He laughed, and drank deeply from his glass, and put the glass down, and laughed again. “Splendid,” he said largely. “As a matter of fact, I haven’t gotten to it yet, so you would have a real advantage over me.”

“I haven’t read it either,” Natalie confessed, and this further delighted Arthur.

“I don’t think Natalie ever reads Daddy’s articles,” Anne said in her soft voice. “Vicki and I got the *Passionate Review* from the library and frankly I —” she smiled, managing an unexpected dimple “ — couldn’t understand a *word* of it. *I* could no more manage to confound anyone...” She moved her hands helplessly. “Nat is so *smart*,” she said.

“We’ve been *dying* to meet him,” Vicki told Arthur, “but Nat is ashamed we’ll disgrace her by looking like fools.”

“Which we *would*,” Anne said. “Can you imagine me telling Daddy I couldn’t understand a word he *wrote?*”

Natalie, who could precisely imagine Anne telling her father she could not understand a word he wrote, said with amusement, “I think he’d be flattered.”

Anne said to Elizabeth, “We’re all afraid of Nat anyway; do you know she writes the most *wicked* descriptions of all of us to her father? I positively *dream* sometimes of what Nat is telling Daddy about me.”

“Is that so?” Arthur asked with interest. “*I* never saw any of this.”

“What sort of thing do you write, for instance?” Elizabeth asked with sudden real curiosity. “All about everyone you know?”

“That’s not a fair question to ask *any*one, my dear,” Arthur cut in smoothly. “Natalie and I have discussed her writing very conscientiously,” he added, and Natalie, remembering their conscientious discussion of her writing, was tempted to describe it to Elizabeth. “And,” he continued, “believe me, I have the *greatest* faith in Natalie’s talent.”

Elizabeth turned her eyes from her husband to regard Natalie for a long minute. Then she said, “I suppose that sort of thing is all right to do until you’re married.”

“And *after* you’re married,” Anne said lightly, “you’re too busy doing housework.”

“May I pour anyone another drink?” Vicki said. There was a silence while they all consulted the contents of their glasses. “Thank you,” said Arthur, and, “*I*’d like one,” from Anne.

“Mrs. Langdon?” said Vicki. Everyone avoided looking while Elizabeth glanced down at her glass, barely touched. She shook her head, turning slightly to her husband. “No, thank you, my dear,” Elizabeth said.

Everyone had another cocktail except Elizabeth and Natalie, who was beginning to feel that she had seen more drinks than books in her first few months of college. In one of her letters to her father she had told him, “I am beginning to think that the symbol of college, at least for me, has been a kind of drink I never remember seeing much before. Martini. What do you suppose the name means? I know the names of most drinks have no sense to them anyway, but this one sounds like it had been named after someone; do you suppose he could have been a college president?”

Her father had written back: “A martini is a sort of cocktail (which I do not, myself, regard with great enjoyment) served exclusively and drunk exclusively by a clearly defined type of person. As far as my experience makes it possible for me to judge, this person is usually volatile, high-strung, and excitable. All of these are qualities shared by good vermouth, which is one of the ingredients of a martini. Another ingredient is gin, which is feminine and appears more harmless than it is: another characteristic of your martini-drinker. The third ingredient of the martini is bitters, and I need labor my metaphor no further, I hope. I will add that the drink is served ice-cold, that some people prefer to have the ingredients shaken, some prefer them stirred, that it is possible to refine one's position with regard to the martini by discarding the traditional olive, and passing along further stages of refinement through the black olive, the twist of lemon peel, to the final, most effete, pearl onion. It is thus possible, you will perceive, to express the most exquisite shadings of personality — but I believe I have made myself more than clear. From this you should be able to believe without taxing your forming critical mind that by definition the martini is a natural college cocktail."

"We have to be at the Clarks' at six," Elizabeth was reminding Arthur.

Arthur nodded. "Plenty of time," he said.

"I'm so sorry," Anne said to Arthur. "We hoped you'd go into town later and have dinner with us."

"Our engagement for tonight is of several weeks' standing," Elizabeth said grandly, sipping then at her drink with her eyes on Anne. "Naturally we can't disappoint the Clarks, but I told Arthur you girls would be so unhappy if we didn't come here first, even for just a few minutes; I really had to persuade him to come."

"So glad you did," Vicki said. "Another drink?"

Elizabeth looked again into her glass, and again at Arthur.

"I thought I'd *never* stop laughing, this morning in class," Anne said to Arthur at that moment.

Vicki said quickly to Elizabeth, "They're terribly weak."

"Weak?" Elizabeth said. "Weak. They *are* weak." She made the word sound comic, and she handed over her glass. Vicki filled it quickly and brought it back, and then sat down next to Elizabeth, on the floor with her legs crossed. Natalie, who was sitting on the floor with her legs crossed on the other side of Elizabeth's chair, moved to sit at precisely the angle Vicki adopted, and Vicki clearly and deliberately nodded at her, as though to say: We're doing beautifully; good work.

"I *love* that pin," Vicki said to Elizabeth lavishly.

"Thank you," Elizabeth said coldly; it was to be clearly understood that she did not like Vicki and she did not court flattery.

"Will you *look* at the colors in that pin?" Vicki said to Natalie. "Have you ever seen anything so *lovely?*"

"Beautiful," said Natalie. "Enamel, isn't it?"

"I believe it is," Elizabeth said to Natalie. It was to be clearly understood that while she did very likely regard Natalie with some favor, she was not prepared to commit herself until she found out exactly how far Natalie was in turn committed to Vicki.

"I wish I could make you understand how much we all admire you," Vicki said to Elizabeth. "All the things you do — taking care of your husband and your house, and keeping up with classes, and still somehow managing to look so lovely all the time, and everything."

Natalie, thinking, She surely cannot accept this seriously, heard with surprise Elizabeth saying with modesty, "Well, of course, I don't really..." and Vicki interrupting smoothly, saying, "Another drink?"

* * *

At six-thirty, then, Elizabeth sat up suddenly in her chair and said, "Arthur, what time is it? We have to go to the Clarks'."

"Plenty of time," Arthur said.

"We have to go the Clarks' for dinner," Elizabeth explained to Vicki and Natalie. "They must be expecting us because they're expecting us for dinner."

"It's very early," Vicki said.

"Plenty of time," Natalie said.

"Have another drink," Anne said, and giggled.

Natalie was reciting to herself, softly, "Around the campus and double quick, Have a drink with Annie and Vick; Vick's the butcher, Anne's the thief, And Langdon the boy who buys the beef." She thought she had better not copy this out to send to her father; she was not, at this point precisely sure of the metre. It seemed to her that she had spent too long sitting in one position, and she got up and stretched lazily.

"Where *you* going?" Elizabeth demanded immediately. "*We've* got to go to the Clarks'. Arthur?"

He turned. "Plenty of time," he said.

"No," Elizabeth said insistently. "What time *is* it? Anyone know what time it is? Because we've *got* to go to the *Clarks*'."

"I know," Arthur said. "We've got to go to the Clarks'. But we can be a little bit late, can't we?"

"Are we *late?*" Elizabeth said. She appealed to Natalie, "Are we late for the Clarks'?"

"Not at all," said Vicki. "You have plenty of time."

"Time for another drink, anyway," Arthur said. "Only across campus, after all," he told Natalie.

"You've had too much to drink now," Elizabeth said. "You can't go to the Clarks' drunk, Arthur darling. You know," she said to Natalie, "we shouldn't have come here at all. I wanted to call you and say we couldn't *possibly* make it, but he told me, 'Elizabeth,' he said, 'they've gone to great trouble and expense just for us,' he said. And so we came here first, but now we've really *got* to be getting along to the Clarks'."

“Suppose I call them and say you’ll be a minute or so late?” Vicki asked brightly. “That way they surely wouldn’t mind.”

Elizabeth looked at Vicki and then uncertainly at Arthur. “Will we be late?” she asked. “Because the Clarks have gone to great trouble and—”

“Only a minute or so late,” Vicki said.

“Time for one for the road,” Arthur said.

* * *

At about eight-thirty it became pressingly necessary to dispose of Elizabeth. Arthur Langdon, who seemed to notice only suddenly, got up from the couch and crossed the room to where Elizabeth had been sitting ever since she first came in, and, looking down at her without expression, said, “Why in God’s name does she *always* have to do this? Can’t we ever go *any*where?”

“She’s probably just tired,” Anne said tenderly. “Should we take her home?”

“Nothing else *to* do,” Arthur said. His voice had become a little bit shrill, and Natalie, watching him as he stood between Vicki and Anne, wondered how she could ever have admired him, or thought of him together with her father. “*Why* does this *always* happen?” he demanded.

“We can see that she gets home,” Vicki said. She glanced at Natalie and Natalie nodded, and said, “Certainly.”

“*Would* you?” Arthur said, relieved. “Because I’m really *too* angry with her to care.”

“I’m sure she’d go with Nat,” Vicki said. “She’s very fond of Nat.”

“Who isn’t?” Anne said fondly. “Nat, see if you can get her to stand up.”

With the infinite superiority and tolerance that comes to a moderately sober person addressing a very drunken one, Natalie said to Elizabeth,

“Elizabeth, are you ready to go home?”

It is really an instinct, the knack of dealing with irrational people, Natalie was thinking; I suppose that any mind like mine, which is so close, actually, to the irrational and so tempted by it, is able easily to pass the dividing line between rational and irrational and communicate with someone drunk, or insane, or asleep. “Elizabeth,” she said severely, “wake up, Elizabeth.”

“Why does she *always* have to do this?” Arthur said. He appealed to Anne. “Why?” he insisted.

“I think she just has no head for liquor,” Vicki said wisely. “It affects some people that way, of course.”

“But *always*,” Arthur said, looking as though he were about to cry. “I *never* have a good time because she’s always doing *some*thing like this.”

“Elizabeth, wake *up*.” (... and, bending over the maniac, writhing in his bonds, Natalie spoke softly, only a word or two, and he, ceasing at that moment his struggles, opened his eyes and looked lucidly and gratefully up into her face...) “Elizabeth, *wake* up.”

“Golly,” said Anne. “She could sleep here. I mean, she could have my bed, and I could take the couch.”

“She doesn’t *deserve* a bed,” Arthur said. “She ought to be in a gutter somewhere.”

“Arthur!” Anne said reproachfully. “Please don’t be so bitter; remember who she is and—”

“Let’s be sensible,” said Vicki quickly. “If we can’t wake her or get her home, she’s got to sleep here, that’s only common sense. But I really think we can wake her and I know she’ll go home with Natalie because she’s really *terribly* fond of Natalie.”

“I don’t remember ever seeing her do *this* before, after all,” Anne said.

"Elizabeth," Natalie said, and Vicki said, "Elizabeth," and Arthur, his voice at its firmest, repeated, "Elizabeth."

Finally, stirring, Elizabeth muttered, and moved, and opened her eyes. "Arthur?" she said.

"Listen," Arthur said, leaning down to speak more forcefully. With his face close to hers, he said, "Elizabeth, we're going to take you home. Now wake up and behave yourself, because we're going to take you home."

"I'm awake," Elizabeth said crossly. "What's the matter?"

"You're going home," Arthur said.

"All right," Elizabeth said contentedly. She held up her arms to him, and he stepped aside and let Natalie take her. At the touch of Elizabeth's full, fumbling hands on her arms Natalie recoiled for a minute, but Arthur gave her an ungentlemanly push, and she took Elizabeth around the shoulders and with Vicki's help hoisted her out of the armchair in which she had sat all evening. Elizabeth stood, speaking incoherently, and reaching her hands toward Arthur. Vicki took one of Elizabeth's arms and swung it over her shoulder; Elizabeth's whole weight fell against Natalie, and Natalie, shivering under the pressure of Elizabeth's legs against her, began half to pull, half to carry Elizabeth.

"I'd help you," Arthur said nervously, "if I didn't think she'd make a scene when she woke up and saw I was here."

With Arthur and Anne helping from behind, where they were sure they would not be seen, Vicki and Natalie got Elizabeth out the door and down the stairs. How inglorious, Natalie thought, going down the stairs with the heavy weight of Elizabeth against her, how perfectly abominable it is to be the receiver of such a thing, how dreadful and horrifying it is to have no choice at all about the swinging arms and legs that enwrap you, how sickening to be aware and to know that the unconscious one does not even see that it is you she is embracing, how horrid, how nauseating, how weak... Could I let go of her now? Natalie wondered, rounding the curve in the stairs, could I let her fall and kill herself, die perhaps, because I could not bear the holding of her? What obligation do I have toward her, what call has she upon me, that she should be leaning intimately against me, and never knowing it? How does she think I can bear it? Will I ever lean so upon her? Would she care, then, or let me fall?

"*There* we are," Arthur said, at the foot of the stairs. Elizabeth was draped, half-conscious, over the stairpost. "Can you get her home?" he asked Natalie. "I know how fond of you she is."

"I'm sure I can," Natalie said. "She seems to recognize my voice."

"She heard Nat when she didn't even move for the rest of us," Anne added.

It was suddenly apparent to Natalie that she was, alone, to get Elizabeth home. "Listen," she said anxiously, "I'm not sure I can do it without—"

"She'll listen to *you*," said Vicki over her shoulder; she did not smile, but she was following Anne and Arthur up the stairs. "She *likes* you," Vicki said, and disappeared around the turn in the staircase.

It was obviously impossible to leave Elizabeth. Even as Natalie turned in dismay to look at her, Elizabeth sagged, and began to slip gracefully to the floor. "Elizabeth," Natalie said, wanting to cry, "oh, *damn* it." She remembered, or tried hard to remember clearly, how Elizabeth had been the first person to speak to her kindly on this campus, and how it would be impossible in any case to leave Elizabeth here and join the others, because they would surely ask where Elizabeth had gotten to; and how Elizabeth had told her unmentionable, or almost unmentionable, secrets alone in her house in the afternoons, and how everyone owed it to Vicki and Anne to get Elizabeth home and out of their way, because Vicki and Anne were friends too, and it would be hardly kind of Natalie to ignore such an obligation they had left her, and if she left Elizabeth here it would mean possibly never seeing Vicki and Anne again, and surely not going back to them tonight, and so she might go alone to her own room if she chose, and, after all, she told herself, everyone was mortal and everyone was faulty and everyone was all together in one great world where only one life was vouchsafed to any of us, and there was never enough time to reflect on whether to do a thing or not to do a thing, because when you looked at someone it was someone no more or no less than another mortal, and, after all, who could deny another mortal some small solace in a life on this world, and, in the last analysis, Elizabeth...

"Arthur?" Elizabeth said.

"It's me, Natalie," Natalie said, thinking at last how she should describe this to her father and tell him not to tell her mother.

"Natalie?" said Elizabeth. She moved a little away, and said again, "Natalie?"

"Elizabeth," Natalie said gently. She put her arms around Elizabeth, and Elizabeth's head fell against her shoulder and Elizabeth said, "Natalie," softly, and Natalie was jubilantly glad that she had not said, "Arthur," again.

"Natalie, I want to die," Elizabeth said.

"We're going home," Natalie said.

"I want to die," Elizabeth said.

"I know you do," Natalie said tenderly. "Come along home."

"Home?" said Elizabeth.

She was able to walk by herself, although Natalie had to guide her. As they went through the doorway out onto the campus Natalie was thinking, for some reason she never knew, of the trees ahead, of how she and Elizabeth could go from tree to tree across the campus, holding onto each one until they recovered themselves. Once out in the open air, however, Elizabeth recovered amazingly and walked alone, without even help from Natalie.

"I want to die," she said once.

"Don't be silly," Natalie. said, and added, "we all want to die, I suppose, from the minute that we're born."

"No," said Elizabeth, "*I* want to *die*."

It was difficult for Natalie to think clearly, walking across the dark campus under the trees with Elizabeth. For one thing, it had suddenly come to Natalie that when people were sober they repudiated everything they had done when they were drunk, and when they were drunk they repudiated everything they had done when they were sober. Natalie felt this to be very profound, and she worried over it, thinking, How silly I was to be frightened before, talking to Arthur, and what I should have said was...

"I want to die," Elizabeth said. "I wish I were Anne."

"I wish *I* were Anne," Natalie said, and thought, *That,* I hope, is not true — except that she *did* wish that she were Anne, and the recollection of Anne bent over, listening intimately to Arthur Langdon speaking, had everything to do with the desire.

"You know," said Elizabeth wanderingly, stopping under a tree to point at Natalie, "Anne is a bitch and I used to be a bitch and now I'm not any more." She began to cry; Natalie could hear her, although it was too dark to see. "Goddam little bitch," Elizabeth said.

The Langdons had left a light on in the foyer of their apartment. Natalie could see it and recognize it from halfway across the campus, and she blushed in the darkness to think of how often she had gone past the apartment and thought that Arthur lived there. "Six proud walkers," she said obscurely.

"Bed," Elizabeth said.

"Bed," Natalie said. As they approached the apartment Elizabeth began to sag again, and Natalie had to put an arm around her to support her. Suppose I were Arthur, she thought, unwillingly, and suppose I *wanted* to do this...

"Dark," Elizabeth said.

And suppose she were one of my students and I wanted badly to marry her, and suppose we were walking in the darkness just like this and I thought *now, no,* and suppose just the touch of her shoulder under my arm, so strong and firm across the weak flesh, suppose just that touch and that feeling, and suppose in the darkness she turned slightly toward me so that...

"Natalie?" sid Elizabeth. "Are we nearly in bed?"

"Nearly," Natalie said. "Only a little way now."

And suppose, suppose, only suppose, that in the darkness and in the night and all alone and under the trees, suppose that here, together, without anyone ever to know, without even so much as a warning, suppose in the darkness under the trees...

"I want to die," Elizabeth said.

* * *

Natalie did not, mercifully, have to undress her. Once in her own home where she had gone staggering to bed alone so often, Elizabeth seemed to know by a molelike instinct what to do, and while Natalie worried in the brightly lighted kitchen over coffee and which burner to use on the stove, Elizabeth disappeared silently into the bedroom and took off her clothes. "Natalie?" she called at last, and Natalie came running, to find Elizabeth, in her own nightgown, in her own bed.

It was the first time Natalie had ever visited the Langdons' bedroom, and, while she had never been shocked at the twin beds in the bedroom of her mother and father, she was at this time grieved over the understanding that Arthur Langdon insisted upon — so young, so pretty — maintaining at night a space of floor between himself and Elizabeth.

"Are you comfortable?" Natalie asked. "Is there anything I can do for you?"

"Good night," Elizabeth said, and held up her face for Natalie to kiss her.

Hesitantly, Natalie moved around the foot of Arthur Langdon's bed and to the side of his wife's bed and femininely kissed Elizabeth upon the forehead.

"Good night," Natalie said. "Sleep well."

"Good night, darling," Elizabeth said.

"Good night, darling," Natalie said. She tiptoed around the foot of Arthur's bed and stood for a minute looking at Elizabeth already asleep in her bed before she turned out the light.

* * *

On her way back across the campus she did not find anything particular in her mind to identify this evening beyond others marked in other ways. There was a strong feeling of triumph and an odd feeling of vengeance, and once when she stopped under a tree and leaned her head against its firm rough trunk she whispered softly, "I know, I know." But that was all; beyond that she seemed to have nothing to say to herself. Without question she left the tree, satiated with the night and the stars indistinctly seen, and went on to the house where she lived, without ever troubling herself to look back at the light from the foyer of the Langdons' apartment, which she had left on, after some thought, for Arthur to find his way home again.

She went back into her own house, and quietly up the stairs, realizing with a shock from the sounds of voices in other rooms that it was still very early, perhaps not more than ten o’clock. She went immediately to the rooms which Vicki and Anne shared and found — as she had known without question, coming up the stairs — that they were dark.

She went on up the stairs to her own dark room with its locked door, the room which she had left, carefully dressed, at some time in the late afternoon, her own safe dear room, where she might sit by herself without interruption, and, as she entered with her key in her hand, she saw even in the darkness the white paper of the note on the desk.

“Thanks very much,” it said. “How was Lizzie? V.”

Tuesday

My dear captive princess,

It is as much as any knight can do, these days, to keep in touch with his captive princesses, let alone rescue them. For one thing, I find my armor much too tight; it has rusted since I last wore it in combat, and I cannot for the life of me remember where I last saw my sword. I think of you, princess, languishing in your tower, peering anxiously forth from the narrow windows, wringing your long white hands and pacing the floor in your long white gown, looking constantly out at the long winding road below, out to where it disappears among the mountains far beyond your tower... I keep thinking of you looking, and waiting, with no knight coming. And of course I *shall* come eventually, with or without armor; perhaps I can find me a reputable tinsmith (although the tinsmiths themselves are not at all what they used to be) who will fashion for me some snow-white armor and a helmet to which I can attach some small insignia of yours — your old hockey stick, perhaps, with which I can also defend myself if need be. Or half a dozen pages from a learned quarterly, which might not prove so fine a means of defense, but would certainly mark me unerringly as a knight errant. (This last is a joke depending entirely upon your knowledge of word roots. I have wasted too many jokes on you to let them pass now without identification.) I am not quite sure, moreover, how to attack the dragon which guards your towers; does he ever sleep? Can he be bribed? Drugged? Enticed away? Or must I fight him, after all? Or, worse still, *is* there a dragon? You are surely not confined only by magic? I positively will *not* battle a sorcerer.

Your mother insists that I include in this letter the statement that she has sent you a black evening dress with, I believe she said, off-the-shoulder-sleeves. She remarks sadly that that was what *she* always used to want, and I truly believe that it was an entirely goodhearted and unselfish gesture, that your mother honestly has sent you a black evening dress with off-the-shoulder-sleeves because, considering more than she usually does, she thought it the most wonderful gift a mother could possibly send her daughter.

You have probably found easier ways of evading enchantments than I shall ever learn. It has always been my opinion, you know, that princesses are confined in towers only because they choose to stay confined, and the only dragon required to keep them there was their own desire to be kept. And I further believe, now, that if you erect a tower, princesses will flock to it demanding to be locked up therein. So why do you not gratify your mother and myself, and, I believe, even your brother, by spending a weekend with us soon? If you let me know when you choose to escape the dragon's ceaseless vigilance, I shall send you train fare, operating upon your mother's theory that it would be the nicest thing anyone could send *me*.

Your devoted,

Dad

Saturday

Dear Sir Knight,

It was not you, then, caroling lustily under my window these three nights past? Nor one of your emissaries? I fear me that the enchantment surrounding my tower is too strong for you, and that my rescue will not be effected for a thousand years — by which time, I wot, I shall be somewhat older and grayer than I am now. At any rate, if it is not a dragon guarding me, it is something very like, something called a Maiden Lady (and, her name being Miss Nicholas, she is of course also yclept Old Nick) which, breathing fire, stamps around at the end of its own chain restraining more adventurous damsels from the straying.

I mean, I can't come home for a while yet. If there is any enchanter it is Arthur Langdon, who confidently expects that I will write him a thousand words about Milton by next Wednesday. What is there to say about Milton? I thought of comparing him with King Lear but it looked too hard.

There is a very strange character around here who would interest you very much. She is always off by herself somewhere, and when I asked someone about her they laughed and said, "Oh, that's that girl Tony Something." I keep seeing her around and I think I would like to meet her.

Tell Mother I got the dress and it's beautiful. Don't tell her I have no place to wear it. I didn't get invited to the Tech Dance, which is Friday night, but then neither did most of the girls I've met around here. Apparently you have to know people here before you come, so that you don't start out fresh making friends. Anyway, I feel sort of crestfallen about it, but when I watch the other girls who were not invited, and listen to them talking, I feel better because at least I haven't managed to think of an *excuse*. They all say things like well, they didn't *want* to go anyway, and they were *asked*, of *course*, but the boy was such an awful dancer they turned him down... and so on. I don't have any excuse except I wasn't asked. Anyway, tell Mother thanks very very much for the dress; I tried it on and it was lovely. Everyone said it was very becoming to me.

Speaking of magic, I figure that now I have once mentioned that I would like to meet that girl Tony, I will certainly meet her soon. I have discovered that all you have to do is notice a thing like that concretely enough to say it, as in a letter like this, for it to happen. I suppose once I meet her I will be disappointed.

As soon as I can write a thousand words of counter-enchantment, I will come home for a day or so. The sorcerer has a way of casting further spells on young women who ignore his simple ones. And I don't really *like* Milton — do you? Write and tell me what is good about him.

Lots of love to you and Mother,

Natalie

It had the feeling of middle-of-the-night when Natalie was awakened, and she thought for a minute, not coherently, that perhaps she was never to get a full night's sleep again, and wasn't it fine that she didn't mind being awakened if it was exciting, and then she opened her eyes into actuality and heard the urgent soft voice in her ear. "Wake up," it said, "oh, please, wake up." It was a whisper and without personality and, saying over and over again, "Please, please wake up," it was terrifying.

"What?" said Natalie, hearing her own voice loud in the room.

"Wake up, please, and be quiet — and *hurry*."

"I'm awake," Natalie said. It was unusually dark and the figure beside her bed was unidentifiable; this then is the time, Natalie thought, the time is upon us, this is the occasion I have been living until, when crisis and danger and terror are upon us all, and we are awakened in fear and run for safety;

who has been thoughtful enough to remember me in the general flight? Fire? she wondered as she had before, and, War?

"What is it?" she whispered.

"Hurry."

"I'm *hurrying*," Natalie said, reaching in the darkness for her bathrobe, feeling with her feet for slippers; then, suddenly, she heard through the darkness the soft giggle and with it felt the first cold actual fear. War, at least, and fire, were possibilities. This, the giggle, was here in her own room.

"What is it?" Natalie said again.

"Come *on*. And *hurry*." Again the giggle. "You don't need your *bath*robe, come *any* old way. I'm naked — but hurry."

"Listen," Natalie said, fumbling her hand for the light cord, but her hand was taken in another hand and she was pulled firmly, and the vague figure and the faint enduring giggle led her to the door. Natalie was without her slippers and without her bathrobe and in the cotton pajamas her mother had chosen for her, and on the pajamas was a pattern of black-and-red scotty dogs, and the door into the hall showed further darkness instead of the usual night lights from the stairways and the bathrooms.

"I turned them out, the lights," said the voice ahead. "But *hurry*."

"What for?" said Natalie, following down the dark hall.

Again the quiet giggle. "*You* needn't think you're the only one," she said. "Wait till I show you what *I've* got." They were passing rooms in the darkness, Natalie knew, where girls slept peacefully, with their eyes closed and their hands relaxed against the pillows; why, she thought almost hysterically, why don't I just *scream?* and knew with humor that she did not know how; screaming was in itself an act perfected by few, a sort of coloratura not given to the many; screaming was not something the Natalies might do unprepared. If I were really very frightened, Natalie thought, following barefoot the naked figure ahead, I might yell, or shout, but never deliver a telling scream; then I am not really very frightened, she thought, since I am not able to make any kind of a sound at all, but only follow blind and dry through these black spaces and of course I am dreaming, of course, of course; how profoundly interested I am in all this, she thought. "And," the voice was going on ahead, "you can lie very still and not move and not say anything and you can hear everything and even though they think you're there they don't know who you are and they go right ahead. And even when they come right into my room I just look at them and I say, 'Go ahead with what you were saying because *I* certainly don't care,' and then they go away because of course when they are right in my room they certainly can't, can they? And there's this little girl and she came into my room and she said, 'May I please sleep with you tonight?' and I said, 'Of course you may only I have to get up early in the morning but it's four hours before I have to get up so you go right to sleep,' and she got into my bed and she fell right asleep and she had these lovely little animals with her, like birds, or squirrels, only they had no tails, and she set them in a row at the foot of the bed and there were six of them all in a row and she made the most beautiful pictures on the wall, this *little* girl, and wait till you see them and when you hear them you'll know what I mean." Down the stairs, in the darkness, feeling barefoot for one step after another, and the voice ahead continuing, "And of course her mother and father are leaning up against the window and they're listening too and they can't hear a thing because we talk so softly and they try and try to listen and we only whisper and you know this is the same little girl who came before and who comes all the time and she sleeps in my bed."

After they had gone down the stairs and turned, a door ahead of them showed light in the small space of its opening; it was very late, because there was no other light from any room along the hall, and the hall and bathroom lights were turned out down here as well as upstairs. Natalie thought without wishing to at all of the cautious giggling thing that had gone soundlessly from one light to another, turning off each, for whatever dark reason, before coming unerringly in the dark to Natalie's bed. "Here now," the voice said, still with that flat giggling undertone, "now we can all listen together, and sit tight next to the wall and then we can hear what they are saying, only be very careful when you laugh to put your hands over your mouth. Little girl? Little girl?" It was a loving call and Natalie, waiting and held outside the lighted doorway, wanted to call too, "Little girl?" Then, "She's fallen asleep again, they're always like that. Leave them for a minute and they're gone asleep. Little girl? Come on, we've got to *hurry*."

She pulled Natalie violently in through the open doorway into the lighted room, and then closed the door very carefully behind them. "Little girl?" she said lovingly. The bed was rumpled and she went over, still calling, "Little girl?" and giggling, and turned the blankets back, lifted the pillow and looked under it, and then, giggling, looked under the bed. "Little girl?" she asked. "Little girl?" Then, saying, "Come *on*, please hurry, we'll never be able to hear a *thing*," she looked quickly into the closet and then into the dresser drawers, pulling out the angora sweater, the real lace slip, and cartons of cigarettes and unassorted shoes, the money carelessly thrown inside. "Little girl?" She turned to Natalie and said helplessly, "She was here a minute ago. I can't imagine where she went — I told her to *wait* for me. Look, she left her coat." Natalie, staring at the jacket that had been reported stolen a week or so before, was still not able to speak. "Little girl? Where do you suppose she went? Little *girl*."

Natalie opened her mouth, still not knowing what she was going to say.

“Well, come *on*, then, *any*way, it will serve her right if we start without her, only remember they’re listening and don’t make a *sound*. Hold your hands over your mouth when you laugh and don’t run around the floor because they’re right outside, and they hear *every*thing. Little girl? Come on over here, right down on the floor next to the wall and do what I do — anyone could *tell* you’ve never been here before but we’ll excuse you this time and whatever you hear don’t make a sound because then *they*’ll hear *you*. Listen to her... she’s singing.”

Very quietly, in acute fear, Natalie was backing to the door. When she felt the panels behind her back, she opened it without a perceptible sound, her hand behind her, and opening it still behind her, backed farther into the hall and closed the door in front of her face, shutting out all the light in the hall but feeling more at ease in the darkness; she was on the first floor of the house, she knew, and up two flights of stairs — oh, interminable! — was her own room again and a safe light she might turn on.

Backing away from the doorway, she stumbled over nothing and almost fell against the opposite wall. I must be very calm, she told herself; it is only, after all, a question of finding my own room in the dark, and if on the way I can find a light switch for anywhere, the halls, the stairs, the bathrooms, so much the better, and if I do not get frightened and try to run I will not fall on the stairs, and if I do not fall on the stairs she will never hear that I have gone, and why doesn’t anyone wake up and come and help me?

Then, of course, she heard again, “Little girl?” and the door opened and the light came out into the hall, and Natalie, turning to run in any direction, realized too late that she had come the wrong way and in the darkness was pursued by sly brushing footsteps not on the way to the stairs and her own room but on the way to the front door. In the darkness, the light from the room left far behind her, she heard the soft giggle and felt almost the seeking hand brush her face and heard very close, and softly, “Little girl?”

And then mercifully she found the latch to the front door and it opened more easily than she had even prayed it would, and as it swung before her she thought, This will set off the burglar alarm, and almost laughed as she slammed it tight behind her.

It was incredible and of course still a dream to be running freely and in her pajamas with the shameful black-and-red scotties on them, barefoot first over the gravel of the walk, and then primitively over the wet grass, and to be under the trees with everything dark around her. She thought then, I will go back when the sun is out and they are all awake and I can tell them about it, and then she thought she heard wailing from the house behind her, “Little girl?” and knew a sudden horrible shock when, going across the grass under the trees she saw in the moonlight a figure coming toward her.

Standing helplessly, thinking, Now, I cannot run, this is the time, she said, “Who?”

“Is there something wrong?” asked the girl Tony.

Wednesday

Madam:

Unless you comply with the following conditions, and without fail, I shall have a black vengeance to wreak upon you:

1. Enclosed find check for twenty-five dollars. (That is a condition I deem it not overdifficult to meet.)

2. Cash this check. (Any rich acquaintance will do.)

3. With the money thus secured, buy yourself a round-trip ticket to this place. (Try the bus station for this.)

4. Pack a toothbrush, whatever books you need, a pencil and paper, and two chocolate bars in a small valise, put on your coat and hat, and go

directly to the place where buses congregate. (This is the most complicated of all, but if you do these things one after another, in the order in which I have stated them, you should have little or no trouble; I recommend, however, that you do them in *strict* order; it would be most unorthodox for you to go first to the place of buses, for instance, and *then* try to pack your bag.)

5. Get on the first bus that will bring you here. (Ask the driver, if you are puzzled, or, better still, pin a label on the lapel of your coat and he will see that you are delivered.)

Meet these small conditions, sign my book in blood, and I shall turn over to you my key to all the treasures of this world, including, very possibly, some small amount of information of John Milton (1608–74) and a cordial invitation to escort you, in person, to any and all future dances. Fail, as I say, to meet these my conditions, and upon you shall fall the wrath of one who has never yet feared to make his presence known. Did I remember to put in the check? Yes. Good.

Dad

Sir:

I hear and obey. Arrive Saturday afternoon 2:30. Thanks for the check.

Love,

Natalie

Tomorrow morning was Friday and biology lab, and it was past eleven now; anyone desiring to get up at seven and yet have eight hours' sleep should be at least ready for bed: teeth brushed, hair done, clothes for the morrow set out. And, leaning forward, her face terribly bright and alert and terribly terribly interested in what Arthur Langdon was saying, Natalie sought hopefully for a state of frozen unconsciousness, perhaps drunken, perhaps only the little swift precious moment that slipped her from a dull world into a bright one; she nodded intelligently at what Arthur was saying, and thought, People have had heart attacks and died without realizing anything more than what is probably that brightly flashing second of knowing you are dead. People have managed to do it.

“I’m not at all sure what I really do believe,” Arthur was saying, and, “When you consider that art itself is a process of...”

“Dearest,” said Elizabeth Langdon, who had almost overnight, it seemed, adopted a dogged persistence of displayed affection, and a hearty, throaty-voiced sort of intelligence, in order, it seemed, to give the impression that she and Arthur were still newlyweds and insanely in love, “dearest, couldn’t it be said, actually, that with reference to — oh dear, I sound so stupid — but *any*way...”

I could slip right away, Natalie thought. I could die here, with my eyes wide open and my mouth parted admiringly, and my glass poised in stunned admiration halfway to the chair arm; I could die right here. Or I could pretend I was going to be sick and sneak off home to bed. Or I could even speak, say something so very unkind that they would all listen, and nod at me the way I nod at them.

“Although, actually...” Arthur said. He frowned, weighing his glass as well as his words, while his wife leaned forward breathlessly, and Natalie, embarrassed at having been thinking while other people were talking, closed her eyes briefly and said, “Someday someday someday,” to herself.

“I have never been able to come round to the way of thinking that would...”

Is something going to happen? Natalie wondered. Has he gone too far, and will someone be witty at his expense? Oh dear, she thought, I wish I’d been listening and watching, instead of closing my eyes; something has led to something else, and I've missed the beginning and shall have to smile vacantly; is something going to happen?

She thought sadly of how empty lives must be where something was not going to happen. No one seemed to be particularly witty at Arthur's expense, and so whatever was going to happen was apparently still on its way, choosing its own moment, building for its own effect, so that it should be neither too soon nor too late, neither an anticlimax nor a cause.

Is it just that something is going to happen to *me?* Natalie wondered. She closed her eyes again experimentally; was she falling asleep while Arthur Langdon was talking and while the Langdons' guests, students and faculty members sitting together as though in social pleasure, listened with civility? I shall walk out onto the porch, Natalie thought. As a penance for closing my eyes twice, I have been directed to stand up in my chair, dislodging the ashtray that sits on the arm, I have been directed to move, trying to be unobtrusive but watched with gratitude by everyone in the room, I shall go to the door and someone will say, "Natalie?" and I will turn around and smile vaguely and pass quietly through the doorway and out onto the porch. Later I shall find that I have to come back, and again, the only large movement in the room, I shall find everyone watching me while Arthur pauses in his sentence, regarding me thoughtfully and testing, in a fraction of a second, ways of using me as an example. "Take Natalie, now; she has been gone, and come back, and did anyone...?" "If Natalie had not entered the room at that minute, then, would the thought of her...?" "Natalie is wearing light blue; now, if we assume that the color we believe to be light blue..."

Now, she thought. I shall move now, but she did not. No one looked at her at the moment, and the thought of the strength required to draw every eye in the room to her direction wearied her for a moment, so that the order to her muscles to arise, counteracted halfway, brought her convulsively out of her chair in an abrupt movement that spilled the ashtray onto the floor. Then, while Arthur waited patiently in mid-paragraph, she collected the cigarette butts and the burnt matches, thinking as she did so, Ungainly, awkward, clumsy — and she left the ashes. Elizabeth Langdon watched her without expression; she needs some more positive explanation of what I am doing, Natalie decided, before she estimates it and decides on a reaction, particularly in this new personality of hers, which still does not fit her very well. Perhaps she wants to be angry at someone and is trying to see if I am the one; I could so easily be a good person for Elizabeth to hate, and also I am the only person now standing in this room, and Elizabeth is usually angry at the largest moving target; Arthur cannot mention me now because the course of his argument is planned out for the next paragraph and it does not include me; he is probably, however, going ahead with the other parts of his mind to construct a new paragraph for use when I come back.

She set the ashtray back on the arm of the chair where she would be sure to knock it off again when she sat down after coming back, and threaded her way tactfully and gracelessly through the people sitting on the floor, excusing herself to those in chairs as though they were a higher order of being; she avoided spilling a drink that sat on the floor, and stepped in an ashtray. Someone took advantage of her movement to begin a paragraph of his own. “On the other hand,” his voice began from another part of the room, “while this is all very true, you can hardly call it a complete picture of the problem. Take Kafka, for instance — I think you mentioned him as an example, and—”

There were never any real silences in this conversation, except for the involuntary secret moment of dismay everyone felt at seeing Natalie move; these people — although there seemed to be so many of them, there were only nine or ten — all carried with them, seemingly, arguments of their own, arguments against the invisible, always-defeated antagonist who mocked ineffectually from the darkness of the bedroom at night, the bathroom wall, the window beyond the typewriter. They all carried their arguments well, and spoke when they could, and laughed occasionally, and sometimes found themselves in agreement with one another, although always the mocking antagonist needed to be conquered again, and, conquered, returned, in the face in the mirror, the logs in the fire, with his ceaseless nagging.

"I was just about to explain that point," Arthur Langdon said, his voice overriding the other. "When, for example, we consider the whole question as one purely of..."

Natalie sighed as she reached the small foyer, and found the door ahead, and the porch beyond, and the cool night air awaiting her; with the door shut it was not possible to hear Arthur's voice.

The porch was actually only a miserable excuse for a place to sit; it was no more than a step up or a step down, so that sitting on the porch steps at the Langdons' house meant the knees under the chin and the feet awkwardly placed and the back twisted, but the same trees were outside, living in the ground without curiosity about the insides of houses, and growing toward death as surely as Natalie. When one tree demonstrated that it was not rooted and perhaps not completely indifferent by disengaging itself from the others and coming toward Natalie where she sat on the porch step, she was not surprised — it was an odd night, anyway, and the day after tomorrow she should be going home for a while — and said only, with some crossness, "I don't want to talk."

"All right."

It was almost companionable, and Natalie without intention moved over on the narrow step to leave room. “It’s so cool out here,” she said.

“Then you *do* want to talk?” said the girl Tony.

“They’re all talking, inside,” Natalie said.

The girl Tony had not been invited within, Natalie knew wisely, and thought, She doesn’t care whether she sits on the steps of people who don’t invite her or whether she stands around with trees or whether she talks to me or not. She knew she ought not to talk because she had said she was not going to and because she knew this calm girl Tony calmly expected her to do what she said she was going to, but she said anyway, “You weren’t invited?”

“No.”

“Would you go if you were invited?” Natalie asked.

“That depends,” said Tony carefully, “on where I was invited to go.”

“This damn place,” Natalie said, “it always turns out not to have the things I want, after all. I get up inside and I knock over an ashtray and everyone looks at me and here I come rushing outdoors because I think it’s where I want to be, and then when I get out here it turns out to be the same old place I passed coming in.”

“That’s because you came out the same door,” suggested Tony.

She stood up, and Natalie thought quickly, She’s bored with me, and said, “You going away?”

“I’ll see you again,” Tony said. “Good night.”

It was not pleasant sitting on the porch after Tony had gone; a spot where two people have been talking, however briefly, is not after that a spot for one person to sit alone. Natalie got awkwardly to her feet and turned to go inside.

In the brief foyer she met Elizabeth Langdon; the space was so small that they almost touched standing together, and Natalie crushed herself back against the door.

"I came to look for you," Elizabeth said. "I wanted to make sure you were all right."

How she would love to help her fallen sisters, Natalie thought. "I was all right," she said.

"I saw you with someone," Elizabeth said.

For a minute Natalie was surprised at Elizabeth's tone; does she think I made an appointment with the girl Tony to meet her during Elizabeth's party? Natalie wondered; does she think I intended to invite her inside? or does she think we meet outside in the darkness, as though we had been outlawed from meeting in the light? For a minute Natalie wanted poignantly to ask Elizabeth what she thought she had seen through the eyes which for Elizabeth registered what Elizabeth's brain recorded, and then she said instead, "Let's go back inside."

Arthur seemed hardly to have stopped for breath, although his glass had been refilled, and he was saying, "It is not impossible to imagine a situation in which..."

Saturday morning

Dear Dad,

I'm terribly sorry that I can't come home, and I'm sorry too that this letter won't reach you in time. I would have called you except I didn't know until a little while ago that I couldn't make it. You see, Arthur Langdon has given us this paper to do, and I've simply *got* to get it in by Monday, so of course I can't come home, because the paper has to be very long and detailed and I'll probably spend all weekend working on it. And even if I did come home, of course, I'd have to work all the time. So I'm really terribly sorry.

By the way, you remember Tony? The girl I wrote you about? Well, I finally met her and I like her a lot. She lives in a house on the other side of the campus and yesterday afternoon we walked about four miles through the country just beyond the campus. I think she's terribly interesting. Well, I'm sorry about not being able to come home. I'll keep enough money from the check for my train fare home at Thanksgiving. I'm sure I can make it then. Hope Mother's not disappointed. Give her my love.

Natalie.

Perhaps — and this was her most persistent thought, the thought that stayed with her and came suddenly to trouble her at odd moments, and to comfort her — suppose, actually, she were *not* Natalie Waite, college girl, daughter to Arnold Waite, a creature of deep lovely destiny; suppose she were someone else?

Suppose, for instance, that all of this, from the day she could first remember (running through the grass, calling, "Daddy? Daddy?"), suppose it had all been no more than a split second of time, as in a dream, perhaps under an anesthetic; suppose that after this split second when her wandering mind fancied she was someone named Natalie Waite, that then she should wake up, bemused at first, and speaking thickly, and not really quite sure of her surroundings and the nurse bending over her and the voices saying, "There now, it wasn't so bad, was it?" and suppose, waking, she should turn out to be someone else, someone real as Natalie was not? An old woman, perhaps, with a year or so to live, or a child having its tonsils removed, or a woman with twelve children having a charity operation, or a man. And, waking, looking around the white room and at the clean nurse, she could say, "I had the funniest dream all this time; I dreamed I was Waitalie Nat"

— the dream already fading, and not complete — and the nurse could easily say, “*Everyone* has dreams under ether,” moving capably forward with a thermometer.

Or even suppose, imagine, could it be true? that she was confined, locked away, pounding wildly against the bars on the window, attacking the keepers, biting at the doctors, screaming down the corridors that she was someone named Watalie Naite... suppose, during the time she thought she was eating in the dining room and going unwillingly to classes and sitting in her room reading... suppose these things were not real? Could it be that some sudden lucid horrible moment (a new treatment, perhaps? An inevitable return to actuality?) should show her brutally that the dining room and the professors were not at all there, but existed far away in her mind, provoked into life only by her mania? “I’m not prepared today,” she could be saying to her music professor, and the doctor, turning back her eyelid to look at her cornea, would murmur, “How long has she been in this particular stage?”

But then, perhaps she was not dreaming, not mad, but alive and sound — living in this caught second of life only in the musing mind of some salesgirl or waitress or prostitute or some drab creature to whom the life of a girl in college named Naitalie Wat seemed romantic; suppose somewhere a murderess slept lightly, dreaming for a minute that she was young again and had a life to live; suppose that some minute, any minute, she should suddenly turn, move her head, speak strangely, and find herself not at all real?

It was this that made her write her name crazily on everything, knowing and yet forgetting that her books and her clothes and her written sheets of paper would be gone with Natalie Waite, were only part of a larger dream; it was this which gave her the sudden sense, in conversation perhaps, that this particular portion of her dream might be condensed, only a fleeting shorthand scrap of words to be remembered later as a whole conversation; it was this which brought her abruptly to a perception that if she were dreaming her room and her words, she might well be dreaming her world, and so when she awoke she might say, amused, to the nurse, to the girl in the room next door, to the police, "Listen to what I dreamed; I dreamed there was a war; I dreamed there was a thing called television; I dreamed — listen to this — that there was something called an atom bomb. An *atom* bomb — *I* don't know; I tell you I *dreamed* it."

Beyond this sense, however, of swift transient passage, was the worse, the frightful, conviction, of perhaps being in reality no more than Natalie Waite, college girl, daughter to Arnold, and unable to brush away the solidity of this world but forced to deal with it as actual and dreary. Yet then — why, if this were true, the sudden sharp sympathetic picture of the white walls and the nurse coming closer? Why the graphically remembered room with the iron bedstead, the sure knowledge of the moment to slip the poison into the cup, the remembered pain? Why, above all, the constant unusual shock of the sound of her own name said aloud?

It must be assumed that at one point, to be known as *there*, was the college, dark and drowsy under Natalie's absence, and that at another point, known as *here*, was the home where her mother and father and brother lived, and to which she had been brought during a passage of time that in retrospect seemed nothing, so that her transition from there to here seemed no more than a fading in of one place upon another, a travel between points in time rather than in space.

When her father met her at the bus stop late on Wednesday night Natalie was embarrassed, thinking of the seventy-five days, the ten and a half weeks, the two and a third months, since she had seen him or her mother or her brother or her home; he did not look different in that he still as always resembled the various pictures of him in so many different places, but before he had a chance to speak to her, Natalie said quickly, “I’ve got to go back on Friday—” before he had a chance, that is, to spoil everything by expecting too much of her, and he, after a long and surprised look, nodded and said, “It’s nice to see you again.”

Once in the car, she asked, “How is Mother?”

“Fine,” he said.

“And Bud?”

“Fine.”

“*You* look well.”

“I am, thanks, quite well.”

Natalie thought then, He expects some embarrassment; he expects to even it off when we can sit and talk as usual. “How is everything?” she asked.

“Much the same.”

“I’m sorry I couldn’t come home before.”

This was such an extraordinary statement that he obviously felt it impossible to answer. It was strange being close to him again in the car, just as they had been many times before, when for so long (seventy-five days, for instance) he had been a signature on a letter, a name she had used speaking to people, no more than the absent father of Natalie Waite.

“Have you been well?” she asked to console him.

“Very well, thank you,” he said.

On the bus, in the hour and a half it took her to reach the bus stop where he met her, Natalie had conscientiously tried to plan out a suitable greeting for him. A theatrical “Daddy!” shouted while throwing herself into his arms was probably undesirable, considering that Mr. Waite could most likely not be counted on to stand agreeably and catch daughters hurling themselves at his head; no more could she consider seriously a brief handshake and a meaningful look, a caught breath, and a murmured “Father”; her favorite greeting, which she saw vaguely as taking up and carrying on a conversation as though they had just left it off, was impossible because she could not think how to start a conversation which might not have been finished; not, at least, a conversation with her father, who might leave many things undone but never a word unsaid. Because she had not quite made up her mind by the time she alighted from the bus, what had happened was what she had never stopped to consider, which is that her father — perhaps phrasing impossible greetings in his own plan of action and had with wisdom apparently decided to pass over the whole question of greeting as a useless civility and one only to be regretted later, and had decided to do his real receiving of Natalie at some more appropriate time. When Natalie stepped down from the bus and recognized her father, with an unfilial shock of dismay, she stood and he stood, and then she said, not at all truthfully until she heard herself saying it, “I have to go back on Friday.”

“I’m sorry I have to go back on Friday,” she said again in the car.

“Your mother will be disappointed,” he said dryly.

“How *is* Mother?”

“Very well, thank you.”

The driveway to her own house came as a surprise, and for a minute she was comfortable in recognizing, with a satisfactory feeling of difference, the old landmarks, and looking with the pride of new places on the stay-at-home grass and trees and flowers, and regarding with contempt the former narrow boundaries of her world.

"It's good to be home," she said inadequately; *unbelievable* would perhaps have been a better word, or *stupefying*.

Greeting her mother was no problem at all; for a minute the air was so full of Natalie's appearance, her probable health, her shocking clothes, that there was no need for anyone to answer until her mother, accustomed again to Natalie after three minutes, subsided into her usual civil silence; Natalie and her brother greeted one another with false cordiality and endeavored heartily not to speak again to one another past necessity.

It was by then ten o'clock in the evening, and all four of them realized at once that they had from then on an evening of sorts to get through; they traditionally stayed up late, and tonight was a kind of gala evening, since everyone had been persuaded to give up other plans because Natalie was coming home, and Natalie herself had avoided appointments in order to come, and then, once Natalie had come and had turned out to be very little more entertaining or novel than the Natalie who had left seventy-five days before, there was nothing left to do except carry on the sort of formal conversation suited to the formal sort of guest Natalie had become. Seventy-five days before not one of them would have thought it necessary to address her unless they wanted to, but now it was almost obligatory to assure her warmly of the fact that she was always welcome in her own home — always welcome, with the clear implication that she was thus always a visitor there.

As a result Mrs. Waite exerted herself to say, "I have a twenty-pound turkey for tomorrow, Natalie." All such remarks as this were, too, directed pointedly and almost accusingly at Natalie by the addition of her name. "Biggest turkey I could get."

"Fine," Natalie said, with an enthusiasm she had not ever before shown toward turkeys. "It's been a long time since I've had a good meal."

“How *are* the college meals?” Mrs. Waite asked eagerly.

“Terrible,” Natalie said, trying to remember the college meals.

“How do you like it there?” her brother asked, making a supreme effort.

“Fine,” Natalie assured him earnestly. “I think it’s fine. How is *your* school?”

“Oh, fine,” he said. “Fine.”

“Well,” Mrs. Waite said fondly, and sighed, surveying her family circle. “All home again at last, and all together.”

“Studying hard?” Natalie asked her brother hastily.

“No harder than I have to,” he said, and everyone smiled.

“And Arthur Langdon?” asked Mr. Waite, who was not immune to the general convulsive emotional quality of the hour. “How is he?”

Natalie, who had been full of things to tell her father about Arthur Langdon, said, “Well, I haven’t seen much of him lately.”

“Been working pretty hard, I guess,” her father said. Too late, because she was out of practice, Natalie found the irony in his voice, but she had already answered too carefully, “Well, not as hard as I *should*.”

“*How* about we all have some coffee and cake?” Mrs. Waite asked, looking brightly around at all of them.

“Thank you,” Natalie said politely.

They filed out into the kitchen, using their tenuous family relationship as an excuse for not having cake brought to them in the living room, but each one waiting civilly for the others to go through doors first.

“It is *so* good to have my little girl back home again,” Mrs. Waite whispered when she said good night to Natalie.

* * *

At the college on Thanksgiving Day they had turkey and cranberry sauce and mashed potatoes and peas and mince pie and small candies in paper baskets; at the Waites' on Thanksgiving Day they had turkey and cranberry sauce and mashed potatoes and peas and mince pie and small candies in Mrs. Waite's best silver candy dishes. Except for the fact that if she had been at the college she would not have eaten at all, Natalie found being at home not much better. The Thanksgiving dinner was one prepared solely and lovingly by Mrs. Waite, tended and planned and rich in delicate touches, and was eaten by her family in ill humor and weariness; as though, in fact, it were an ordinary meal. It was served at three on Thursday afternoon, a time when no one was ordinarily hungry, and was preceded by cocktails, a ceremony which made Natalie and her brother stare at one another, since neither of them was quite prepared for the immoral spectacle of the other's drinking in the bosom of the family.

"Taken up liquor in your old age, Nat?" Bud asked Natalie, and she answered him childishly, "What about you? Keep a bottle under your pillow?"

Mr. Waite glanced away, and Mrs. Waite beamed at them, pleased to see her two children talking together as though, she seemed to think, they were not brother and sister at all. The two children, suddenly aware of this, fell immediately silent, and Mrs. Waite said brightly, "Well, all together again. We must drink a toast to our own little family."

Mr. Waite regarded his wife without expression for a minute, and then lifted his glass and said solemnly, "To our own little family."

Looking around, at her tall daughter and her masculine son, at her husband, at her full dinner table, Mrs. Waite said meltingly, "Where will we all be next year?"

"Dead, perhaps?" Mr. Waite suggested helpfully.

“Don’t *say* that,” Mrs. Waite told him, “I don’t even like to *talk* about it.”

“Let us flatter ourselves,” Mr. Waite said into his glass, “that *I* may be the survivor.”

* * *

On Friday morning Natalie came to her father, as usual; not knowing until the last minute that he awaited her in the study, she was only reminded of it by her mother’s fearful grimaces and gestures. As a result, when she knocked at the door and heard him say, pleased, “Come in,” she felt that she had an unworthy advantage of him in that he would be humiliated if he knew that she had forgotten when he remembered. She grinned at him when she closed the door behind her and said, “*This* is what I’ve been waiting for.”

“Natalie, my dear,” he said, and smiled back at her across the desk. This was his real greeting; neither the encounter at the bus nor the toast before the Thanksgiving dinner were communications to Natalie from her father; it was when he looked at her across his desk and saw the door shut behind her that he recognized her at last.

“Well,” she said, and sat down.

“Well, Natalie,” he said.

They sat without speaking for a minute, her father looking down at his hands on the desk, and Natalie knowing with pleasure the feeling of the study, of the books, of her father, and hearing faintly an echo which made her almost smile (“What if I told you that you were seen?”); after a minute she said, “Did I write you about Arthur Langdon?”

“No,” he said, his voice quiet so as not to disturb her possible revelations, “what about him?”

“I keep thinking of the time I went to see him in his office and it reminded me of coming in here to talk to you, and he made such a fool of himself.”

“And I?”

Natalie laughed. “I’m really glad to be back,” she said. “It’s hard to say it, though.”

“Is everything going well?”

“No,” Natalie said, considering. “Not at all well, I guess. I’m doing very badly.”

“How?”

“In everything.”

“Anything you need from me?”

“No, not right now. Later, perhaps.”

“Can you tell me about it?”

This is not going right, Natalie thought; how much he wants to know, and what shall I tell him? Daddy dear, I am a failure, I hate college and I hate everybody? Or is that just what he expects? Does he have an answer for that, even?

“I’ll tell you when I can,” she said.

“Right,” he said. “Working?”

Funny, Natalie thought, when anyone else says, “Working?” it means are you getting anything done, really — are you going to classes, passing your exams, finishing your biology notebook, have you got a job, is the plumbing business picking up any, is there a spot for you in a new Broadway production, are you earning any money? When my father and Arthur Langdon say, “Working?” they mean is anything happening inside you that might possibly interest them, like yeast working in bread. “Sure,” she said.

There was a short pause, and then her father said gracefully, “I am not so great a fool myself, Natalie, but what I can recognize foolishness in others. I can still remember the almost irresistible impulses toward melodrama which strike one at your age. Please forgive me if I say that I never expected you to be immune to ordinary impulses, although I expect equally that you will be receptive to extraordinary ones. I do, however, feel that you might reserve your sardonic impulses for your mother, perhaps, or for your friends at college, without trying them out on me. I have — please understand me, my dear — too much trouble with my own adolescent hangovers, to feel *yours* very deeply. This attitude of yours is one requiring only a slight, although basic, change in viewpoint to become a valuable and constructive state of mind, and the sooner you adopt this change in viewpoint, the sooner you may become a profitable member of society. There is — and *please* believe me — no vital change in personality involved. There is, as a matter of fact, not even any pain. You have only to shift perhaps a quarter turn to the northeast, and your problems are gone. Perhaps nothing more is required than one clear view of your situation and your present actions; it is very possible, you know, to be doing the right things and thinking the perfect thoughts for one’s position, and yet seem entirely wrong because that one faint shading of understanding is missing; perhaps you feel that you are doing badly these days because you do not perceive that you are, in fact, doing very well indeed, and only lack the perception of your own worth to know exactly how well. Perhaps, Natalie, if I remind you what a very worthwhile person you *are*, it will give you the quarter turn you need.”

“Nothing will help,” Natalie said; even after her father’s mention of melodrama, she could not help saying it, although she did not look at him as she spoke.

"Well," he said, after a minute, "I had not intended saying these things to you so soon, certainly not on your first visit home. It is of course necessary to achieve a certain solidity in one's way before taking a shift in perspective to see it clearly. I daresay that by the time I see you again — since, as you say so emphatically, you *must* go back today — you may be readier to listen to me. I should hate to deprive you prematurely of the glories of the suicidal frame of mind, since I am fairly certain that depriving yourself of the ability to feel this way would be more cruel than any sort of physical torture you might inflict upon yourself, so that I can use 'suicidal' as a descriptive adjective without really feeling that it implies any action."

"You're trying to make me say that I want to kill myself," Natalie said.

"You need hardly say anything quite so meaningless," he said tartly, "and I would vastly prefer that you confine your statements to pure descriptions of fact. I think better of your vanity, Natalie, than to believe that two months out of seventeen years could destroy you."

She was almost irresistibly tempted to tell him all about herself, to justify somehow the facts of herself that he did not seem to understand, and which, so horribly acute to her, seemed to him only to point up a statement about general personalities; she wanted to pound on the desk before him and shout, "What do *you* know?" walk wildly up and down the room, pulling words from the very air to tell him about herself, and she wanted to shout, and to stamp, and to cry, and yet before she had time to do any of these things she heard ahead of her his calm voice saying, when she had done, "Precisely, my dear Natalie, precisely what I was..." And so instead she said, "No one likes me."

"I hardly blame them," he said briefly.

When she saw that he was laughing she laughed too, and as he stood up to show her it was time to go, that he had no more, really, to say to her, he added, “I think we understand one another, Natalie, you and I.”

* * *

She had come home on Wednesday night, bringing with her a certain sense of romance, as one who could bring heartbreaking stories of haunted lands, who had seen and heard and touched and known the improbable, the unbelievable (“and in that country I saw as well an image, made of a virgin pearl, and its eyes were diamonds and its hair was beaten gold, and it was set on a block of marble and no one might worship it face to face...”) and brought back perhaps small odd things, dug from the bottom of a trunk and mused over, held in two hands lovingly... (“*This* I found at the bottom of a well, and they said it would bring death to any who touched it... and *this*, there’s a story goes with *this* one — I was lost, and wandering in the jungle, and it had been three days since I had eaten, and six weeks since I had seen a human being, and when I awakened, raging with fever, I saw bending over me... and, then, look at *this*, observe the intricate carving the cipher scratched on the handle — I bought it from an old...”)... who had seen and heard and touched and known more than might ever be found at home. Who had seen, perhaps, beasts walking like men and jewels shining like stars, and who smiled at certain remembered scenes a million miles away, and stared bewildered at old familiar sights and found the faces of mother and father and brother more strange than the face on a carving made in pearl.

Natalie had not been at home for more than twenty-four hours before she felt that her visit was complete and her purposes served; she had slept once more in the bed politely called hers, she had kissed her mother and father and been mildly surprised by the actuality of her brother, she had tried out the familiar things and found that she remembered them well enough, then it was time for her to be off again. It had rained steadily since she first set out for the bus stop at college, and the damp unkind weather filled the rooms at home with gray cold; she had worn her raincoat home from college and although she had not gone out of the house since, the raincoat still lay across a chair in the back hall crumpled and wet, the floor beneath it muddy where it had dripped all night.

Two days before the living-room fire had dried Natalie out, but even the memory of the rain to be waded through, like a dark impenetrable barrier, before she could be again at college, would not dampen her urgent excitement or soothe her. “So you’re not staying for dinner tonight?” her mother asked her softly on Friday afternoon, and the question was a statement about Natalie’s unquiet eyes, her spot before the fire, her hands moving beside her on the rug. And the question was as well a continuation of her mother’s welcome to Natalie on Wednesday evening, meaningless and full of incoherent dread; if her mother had said, “Will you stay on, then, for dinner tonight?” Natalie would have turned quickly and perhaps answered without the constant fearful check she had been keeping upon herself at home, would perhaps have answered, an answer being required, with the sublime impatience which had possessed her while she was with her family these days. If her mother had asked her any question at all, anything to make Natalie speak, the whole quiet forward movement of the day could easily have been impeded, the extra moments consumed might have made Natalie later at the college, and so in some way deprived of something, her mother might have had her answer and not have been the better for it.

Stirring uneasily before the fire, Natalie said, as softly as her mother had spoken, “I’d better get on back.” She knew that behind her, her mother had set her needle down soundlessly in the cloth and was resting her hands on the arms of the chair, staring over Natalie’s head into the fire; Natalie felt rather than heard her mother draw breath to speak, and then resign it. No point in speaking, no reasonable thing to say. It had all been debated endlessly in the second between her mother's drawn-in breath and Natalie's involuntary movement that checked it. Her mother had almost said, "Natalie, are you happy?" and Natalie had almost said, "No"; her mother had almost said, "Everything seems somehow to go badly," and Natalie had almost said, "I know it and I can't help it"; her mother had almost said, "Let me help you," and Natalie had almost said, "What can *you* do?" and that had been the nervous movement of her head that her mother had recognized and which had silenced her before she ever spoke.

After a while, at work with her needle again, Mrs. Waite said, as though they had been discussing lesser matters all the afternoon, "Dear, are you trying to settle down to work?"

"Sure," said Natalie, because this kind of spoken conversation could be carried on easily without thinking, or truth.

"I've told you this before," her mother said, and her voice added, *so many, many times*, "I've said it before, Natalie, and you know I hate to keep dwelling on it — but you *do* know that the money sending you to college is really more than your father can afford. We have deprived ourselves of many things."

Natalie perceived that she was supposed to come to her mother in gratitude, as she had been invited to do many times before, so that between them they might make many false promises, and sketch out brilliant unreal futures, and console one another with imperfect emotions; in all her travels Natalie had not learned how to come to her mother in gratitude, and so she merely turned her head and said, "I know it, and I do remember it. I'll try to keep out of trouble."

"Not *trouble*," her mother said, as though trouble were murder or robbery or arson, something she could understand and possibly find among her own temptations, "not trouble, Natalie; just try to do better with your studies and with the other girls and even with your professors."

Strange, Natalie thought, in all his wisdom my father never found from my letters that I get along badly with people; I suppose it's the first thing my mother fears, just as she is afraid that I have been visited with all her sorrows, because those she is better able to heal in me than she could in herself. It seemed that perhaps her father was trying to cure his failures in Natalie, and her mother was perhaps trying to avoid, through Natalie, doing over again those things she now believed to have been mistaken.

"Everything's really fine," Natalie said to her mother. "I'm really doing very well. Everyone says so." She decided that this last statement smacked too much of eagerness, and turned her head back abruptly to stare again into the fire.

"I haven't told your father," her mother said surprisingly.

"You haven't?" It was the weak, the completely wrong and unnecessary thing to say, but for the moment Natalie was not able to think of any right thing. Her mother was silent for a minute, perhaps to give Natalie a chance to say something intelligent, and then with a little rustling sound she folded up her sewing. The small sounds of her mother's breathing nearly put Natalie, suspended in the silence her mother did not seem inclined to break, to sleep before the fire, but the realization that her father and brother would soon be home prevented her from relaxing completely. Before they came back she must have her coat ready and her mind made up and be standing near the door, ready for farewells; she hoped that her father would not want to drive her to the bus stop, and was resigned at the same time to the fact that he would not possibly allow her to take a taxi, or, better still, to walk.

"Natalie?" her mother said helplessly, looking at the back of Natalie's head, and as if her mother had been warning her, Natalie rose effortlessly, proud of the swift movements of her own long body. "You're getting so big," her mother murmured. "I can hardly recognize my little girl."

"Better get ready to go," Natalie said hastily, moving toward the door and twisting involuntarily as she went past her mother, as though to avoid clutching hands. "Bus leaves at four."

Her mother started to speak again, but Natalie hurried, and could safely pretend not to hear by the time her mother was ready to say anything. The wet raincoat smell was exciting, carrying with it remotely the institutional smells of the college, a faint echo of a cologne Natalie had never worn in her life; near the pocket was a cigarette burn she had not made; the raincoat was in itself a symbol of going and coming, of wishing and fearing, or, precisely, the going out of a warm, firelit house into the heartbreaking cold.

She tied a scarf over her head and thought that now she would not be able to hear her mother's last admonitions; when she went back to the fire her mother had risen and was standing where Natalie had been lying, and her father stood next to her mother by the fire. I didn't hear him come in, Natalie thought, and thought again, I suppose by now I'm out of practice on his coming and going; he and her brother had been to call on people she did not even know, and although they had asked her to go along, she had been able to decline without minding very much; her new acquaintances were all at college and a new acquaintance at home was, after all, so much time wasted.

An uncomfortable thing happened: her father spoke and for a minute Natalie thought it was her mother. "Well, my dear," he said and again the conversation between him and her mother while Natalie was getting her raincoat became suddenly explicit; he had not believed that his wife was letting Natalie go, had perhaps been surprised at the exertion necessary to keep Natalie, had wondered over and abandoned as unworthy the notion of himself asking her to stay, had been then incredulous that his wife should ever have expected Natalie *not* to go.

"Did you have a nice time?" asked Natalie formally.

Her father bowed ironically. "No better than I expected," he said, "I believe we keep better company at home."

"We have been very quiet here," Natalie said. She went over and put her arms around her mother; a little of this affection was surely not out of place at leave-taking, and did not commit Natalie to any certain course of action except going. Until this moment her going had been no more than a wanton impulse, but of course saluting her mother made it definite, and her father stirred, moving the car keys in his pocket.

"Bus at four?" he asked.

"Better get going," Natalie said, disengaging herself easily from her mother and stepping back to nod at her brother, who nodded back and said, "See you sometime."

Natalie and her mother and father stood then uncertainly together in the middle of the room, each of them with something to say to the others ("Will it always be the same?" "Will we any of us change by the next time?" "Has it always been like this?"), and involved themselves in a sort of dance, maneuvering one another into the most favorable position for a gesture whose extreme simplicity, that of departure, had become a sudden awkward thing. Natalie, finally, moved first. She found that as she went toward the door she was saying, "Goodbye, goodbye," as though to confirm her going, and that her father, following her, was still rattling the car keys in his pocket. "Goodbye," Natalie said at last, actually hesitating again in the doorway, looking beyond the solid coated figure of her father, past the expectant figure of her mother, to her own spot by the fire, untenanted and probably of no interest to anyone save herself, to remain empty of her until the next time, still optimistic, that she came home. “Goodbye,” she said again, directly to her mother, and went outside into the rain.

Once in the car with her father, but out in the rain nevertheless, she looked with interest on the street light at the corner, ornate and suburban, belonging undeniably to the home where her mother and father lived, and she saw with satisfaction the rain slanting brightly against the light; it was already dark on this rainy afternoon and this was the last outpost belonging to her father. Beyond here the people she might see were less familiar, less the exclusive property of her father, more the potential shining world of her own.

“Seems like I hardly had a chance to say hello,” she said politely to her father, her voice warm with the excitement of leaving.

“I expect you’ll be home again,” her father said. “In any case we have heard you say hello in the past.”

“Has Mother really been well?” Natalie asked.

“Very well, thank you. Very well indeed.”

Once in the bus, cradled in the deep heavy seat, her father waved away through the thick window, the movement of great wheels under her, her family behind and the college ahead, Natalie leaned back comfortably; there was no time now for remorse over the perfunctory way she had treated her loving mother and father and even her brother — what was important at this moment was the quick control of muscles all up and down her leg, bent now, but potentially straight, the narrow solidity of her fingers, bare and still wet with the rain, the unity that began with her eyes and forehead and tied to her back and into her legs again, all of it bound together into a provocative whole that could be only barely contained within the skin and sense of Natalie Waite, individual.

She wanted to sing and did so, soundlessly, her mouth against the fogged window of the bus, thinking as she sang, And when I first saw Natalie Waite, the most incredible personality of our time, the unbelievably talented, vivid, almost girlish creature — when I first saw her, she was sitting in a bus, exactly as I or you might be, and for a minute I noticed nothing of her richness... and then she turned and smiled at me. Now, knowing her for what she is, the most vividly talented actress (murderess? courtesan? dancer?) of our time or perhaps any time, I can see more clearly the enchanting contradictions within her — her humor, her vicious flashing temper, so easily aroused and so quickly controlled by her iron will; her world-weary cynicism (she has, after all, suffered more than perhaps any other from the stings and arrows of outrageous fortune), her magnificent mind, so full of information, of deep pockets never explored wherein lie glowing thoughts like jewels never seen...

She thought too of worlds that lay ahead for Natalie Waite, and tried to estimate them by a secret formula of her own: one hundred, for instance — one hundred years, one hundred dollars — was a summit which had achieved and passed unachievable and unpassable reaches like fifty-nines and seventy-fours; seventy-four is, after all, a point so vastly beyond one, or two, and even beyond three; the month of May (reflecting further, Natalie thought that she had never in her life lived through the month of May; it was a fable, a month non-existing, a month for maying and greenswarding, not an ordinary month full of weeks and days and probably Tuesdays and Sundays like any other month) was something that might or might not happen long after the unthinkable barriers of January and March and Valentine's Day and Lincoln's Birthday had been gotten past somehow.

Before her, then, lay a hundred years, each one gleefully passing without hesitation seventy-four and February, and perhaps a hundred Mays, each one to be welcomed and duly decked. A vague and voiceless yearning filled her, to take these days and force them to solid rich tangible form, to hammer at this foolishness of time and make it into... into... She fell asleep here, and slept until the bus stop before the college stop, when complimenting herself upon her unerring accuracy and supernatural sense of time, she awoke and recognized where she was.

* * *

In the regular and offensively straight line of windows across the third floor of the house where she lived at college, Natalie found the one dark one which was her own, and a little thrill of anticipation followed her up the absolutely even walk to the door; inside the dark window was her own sure place, and she had been away from it. She lingered going up the walk, prolonging the last few minutes before she entered.

When she opened the door of the house and came into the hallway where the mail pigeon-holes dominated the graceful lines copied approximately from an eighteenth-century town house, the peculiar atmosphere she had somehow forgotten in two days swept down on her and left her almost breathless for a minute. First, and overpoweringly, there was the smell of the cheap dark wood used for the furniture, and the smell of the noon's soup from the kitchen — it was a student joke that the furniture polish and the soup were made from the same basic substance — and then, strongly reminiscent of the furniture polish and a little of the soup, was the scent Old Nick, who had rooms on the first floor of the house, used on herself, her room, and her clothes. This scent swept up the hall from Old Nick's apartment halfway to the dining room, trailing up the stairs and through the halls even of the third floor, identifying the transoms where Old Nick listened, clinging to the doorknobs she touched, a stronger and more pervasive influence than any of Old Nick's advisory remarks.

From where she stood in the eighteenth-century foyer Natalie could see, on her right, the hall that led to the dining room, past the half-open door to Old Nick's rooms — this doorway, by the way, was subject, due to its nearness to the kitchen fires and the fact that it was inhabited by Old Nick and the additional fact that it was on the bottom floor, to a series of student jokes Old Nick had undoubtedly heard and probably fostered — and the long row of slim doorways on the eighteenth-century wallpaper, opening onto nothing. On Natalie's left were the stairs, curving up and over her head and going past the rooms on the second floor and going past the rooms on the third floor — on the third floor was Natalie's room, and it only took mounting the stairs to reach it. Beyond the stairs, farther down the hall to her left, lay the living room where she had been called upon to name herself her first night in college, a room she had entered perhaps twice since, although there were girls in the house who used it regularly, as though it were their own.

There was no one in sight, but from beyond the door to Old Nick's rooms came the sound of voices, in the tones of two old friends complimenting one another and drinking sherry before dinner. Natalie, her moccasins making no sound on the linoleum floor that duplicated the black-and-white tiles of an eighteenth-century entrance hall, went to her mailbox, but it was empty; without looking into any other, she turned abruptly and was about to start up the stairs when she was caught, helplessly and suddenly, by the sound of the dinner bell and the lunatic rush of the girls down the stairs. Rather than be trapped halfway up the stairs she retreated quickly, annoyed at herself for not having timed things better; she started down the hall but was cut off by the further opening of Old Nick's door and Old Nick's large voice urging her friend into the dining room. Natalie moved toward the front door and stood finally in the shadows under the stairs, listening to the pounding feet coming down over her head. Their voices were shrill and excited; you would have imagined, Natalie thought with disgust, that it was worthwhile getting to dinner, the way they ran. After a minute or so the footsteps began to slacken off, and the burden of the voices swelled from the dining room. There was a polite rattle of silverware and a constant urging questioning to the voices, as of three hundred girls together asking one another, "What's for dinner?"

When the last footsteps were gone from the stairs, Natalie came out of the shadows and went quickly past the open hall to the stairs. No one had noticed her, seemingly. The last time she had gone into the dining room she had been shy, and had come in alone and sat down at a table near the entrance; the three girls already sitting at the table had waited, watching her until she sat down, her napkin in her lap; then they had risen, all three, and had gone without gesture to another table. Dinner in itself was no temptation to Natalie — there was no food in the world could get her into that dining room again.

She went upstairs quickly, her wet feet soundless on the linoleum steps. She did not hesitate, but went directly upstairs and ran down the hall to her own room; she always carried the key with her instead of leaving it in her mailbox as as she had been told to do, in case Old Nick wanted to come into her room, and had lost her passkey and could not find the maid's and for some reason was not able to get one of the master keys from the main college office and could not locate any of the other girls — the ones who lived in seventeen, or thirty-seven, or seven — whose keys would open Natalie's door. Inside, the room was hot and airless. Without turning on the lights, she dropped her raincoat on the floor and went over to the bed, which was pushed hard against the window. She sat on the bed, opened the window and, dropping her head onto the windowsill, rested quietly with her eyes closed.

There were noises again in the hall before she felt refreshed and could lift her head; the girls were coming up from dinner and the dark night air had filled the room; she could see her desk and her typewriter in the dimness, the line of books all around the room next to the baseboard, the one straight chair next to the desk. One night, in a fury at not being able to turn freely in her own room, she had taken her clothes from the dresser and crushed them into the suitcases in her closet, and shoved and tugged the dresser out into the hall, along with the maple armchair and the bookcase the college provided. The college handy man had been petulant about the furniture in the hall, but eventually it had been taken away and now Natalie, with her bed under the window and her desk and chair crammed into a corner and her door eternally locked and — this was a month-old whim, which no longer surprised her by its convenience — her wastebasket hanging just outside the window by a string fastened to the head of the bed, was able to move about in her small square room undisturbed. It was necessary, of course, to keep the transom shut always, and the key securely in the keyhole while she was inside the room.

She was very lonely here. So much so, in fact, that tonight after a few minutes when the sounds in the hall had quieted down, she found a cigarette in the pocket of her raincoat and holding it in her hand unlocked the door cautiously and went out into the hall. There were voices coming from lighted rooms farther down the hall; several doors were open, giving a sense of girls running in and out, from one room to another, so that Natalie slipped softly to the stairs and down them to the first floor, and along the hall to a doorway where, standing as much as possible in the shadows, she knocked as though her knock were distinguishable from all others, and waited. After a moment spent crushed against the doorway, staring into the panels on the door and wondering at them, she thought she heard, "Come in," and she opened the door and slipped inside, shutting the door quickly behind her.

"Hello," she said.

"Yes?" said Rosalind. She was lying on her bed holding a movie magazine and she looked up in polite surprise. Natalie, looking at the bright-orange pajamas Rosalind was wearing, thought that these days Rosalind was gay in the center of a group, admired and appreciated, one of the girls whom other girls wanted to meet; so small a change, Natalie thought, so slight a variant; all she would ever remember someday of Rosalind, she knew, was the quick bright picture of Rosalind walking down a campus path with a girl on either side of her; "Yes?" said Rosalind.

"May I borrow a match from you?" Natalie asked; she kept her voice light, as though the request were trivial.

"Certainly," Rosalind said. She tossed over the book of matches that lay on the table next to the bed, and added, "Keep them, I have plenty." Without looking again at Natalie, she raised her magazine expectantly.

"Mind if I stay and talk for a minute?" Natalie asked, as though this request, too, were trivial. "You busy?" she asked. "I don't want to interrupt."

"Well, I *was* reading," Rosalind said, and glanced down at her magazine.

"Of course," Natalie said. She was thinking, I know, I know, I'm the only one who knows, and she isn't a bit afraid of me, and I could tell if I wanted to and she doesn't believe anyone would listen, but *I* know. She tumbled in her hurry to be out of the room.

With the door closed behind her, she thought soberly that it was two flights of stairs back to her room and so little space to cover before she was outside, and she knew where she was going even before — with a gesture of contempt she wished she had been able to do two minutes before — she tore Rosalind's matchbook in two and threw it on the floor outside Rosalind's door. The door of her room upstairs was locked, because she locked it even if she went ten paces out into the hall. She had cigarettes with her, and her own matches, although her raincoat was still in her room. Moving lightly, without sound, she ran swiftly down the stairs and out into the campus, stepping with gratitude onto the grass.

The rain had stopped, but every sign of continuing after a breathing spell. Drops of water slid off the trees onto Natalie's hair and although she wished she had brought her raincoat the thought of going after it, back into the lighted house, was untenable. Long before this hour late in November it was dark; Natalie knew by now how to find her way along the campus paths almost without looking, and the thought of the taut lighted square of her room behind her was disgusting, out here where she was able to take long steps and move as far as she wanted. Ahead of her she could see lights in the Langdons' home, and there were voices coming indistinguishably from the houses she passed, and somewhere a radio; although she could not have identified the tune it was playing, she could have narrowed the possibilities down to half a dozen tunes she heard girls whistling in the hall or singing in harmony in their rooms.

She was not the owner of this land, and as she turned to go along the narrow path that would take her behind the main lecture buildings and around again to the campus houses, she thought, I am walking around my country, I am telling its boundaries, describing its edges, enclosing it. The beautiful clarity of all marked outlines occurred to her — there would be a deep satisfaction in strengthening fences, for instance, going along on the inside of a strong fence enclosing a large land, leaning outward to push toward the extreme limit of property; too, what about the lovely definition of a sheet of white paper alone on her desk, oblong and complete, the tightness with which the sky fitted onto the earth at the horizon, the act of caressing the spine of a book? Irresistibly, she thought with a shiver of a razor-sharp edge slicing horizontally through her eyes, into her mouth, and then coming around the hard corner of a building, saw again the campus and its lights and heard its sounds. She stopped for a minute, surveying her country with interest and with tolerance; she was infinitely tall and these tiny buildings — although scaled to exact measurements: a tenth of an inch, perhaps, to a foot — had been set up by her own hands, furnished, and peopled with the small moveable dolls she had herself created, planning with care and perhaps not entirely wisely the numbers of their arms and legs and the location on their heads.

Perhaps tomorrow, she thought, when it is light, I shall consider moving all the trees together to make a real forest at one end of the campus. It might on the whole be better to take the houses out of two straight lines facing one another and put them at random, so that no homunculus coming out of the doorway of one house could find the doorway to another house. Perhaps I shall move the Langdon dolls to the steeple of the Commons building, and leave them there for a week, while they sob and beg to be released and I look down, so large they cannot see me, and laugh at them.

Perhaps tomorrow I shall pick up one of the houses, any one, and, holding it gently in one hand, pull it carefully apart with my other hand, with great delicacy taking the pieces of it off one after another: first the door and then, dislodging the slight nails with care, the right front corner of the house, board by board, and then, sweeping out the furniture inside, down the right wall of the house, removing it with care and not touching the second floor, which should remain intact even after the first floor is entirely gone. Then the stairs, step by step, and all this while the mannikins inside run screaming from each section of the house to a higher and a more concealed room, crushing one another and stumbling and pulling frantically, slamming doors behind them while my strong fingers pull each door softly off its hinges and pull the walls apart and lift out the windows intact and take out carefully the tiny beds and chairs; and finally they will be all together like seeds in a pomegranate, in one tiny room, hardly breathing, some of them fainting, some crying, and all wedged in together looking in the direction from which I am coming, and then, when I take the door off with sure careful fingers, there they all will be, packed inside and crushed back against the wall, and I shall eat the room in one mouthful, chewing ruthlessly on the boards and the small sweet bones.

And then, taking another house (the small unfortunates, looking up and not daring to wonder which house will be next, seeing the inevitable hovering hand hesitate over one house, choose perhaps another, or descend awfully and with decision upon the one where they hide), I might be amused by violating all the inhabitants; perhaps — and this might be the funniest of all — set fifty mannikins naked crammed into one room with Arthur Langdon in the center, and poke and prod at them and laugh when they sobbed and tried to move where they were packed in so tight. Or take the Old Nick doll and drag it by one foot up and down the campus paths, banging it gently against the door of every house and against the heads of any dolls who look out. Or, undressing one of the dolls with infinite care — although the dolls are so small it is almost impossible, surely, to undress one without tearing the tiny clothes and sometimes even snapping the thin arms — I might wind a long strip of cloth about it and stick the cloth to the doll with a pin in back and set the doll on a tiny chair on the roof of one of the houses and shout in my ringing voice from the heavens that this is a queen and they must all climb up to the roof and kiss the queen's toe.

Or take all the houses and stack them crazily one on top of another with the dolls inside and then on top of the teetering stack of houses set the Arthur Langdon doll and turn it on its head and then with one full laughing breath...

"Hello? Is that Natalie Waite?"

She stopped, wondering horribly if she had been speaking aloud and he had recognized her voice. But then he said, "I thought I recognized you even in this darkness; what are you doing wandering about on a night like this?"

"It was too stuffy inside."

"I thought so, too. Thought I'd just wander over to the library. You going that way?"

"No," said Natalie, although she had been going along the path that led to the library. "I'm going the other way."

He glanced down at the row of houses, as though knowing surely which one she would be wanting. "Have a nice time over the holiday?" he asked.

"Fine."

"How is your father?"

"Fine. Working hard."

"Hope to meet him one of these days."

"He says he'll be coming to see me here very soon."

"Hope to meet him. Well," he added vaguely, taking a step along the path toward the library. Then, as though just reminded of it, he turned back and said, "I suppose you've heard our news?"

"No," said Natalie.

He laughed embarrassedly. “We’re having a baby,” he said, and since such a bare announcement obviously impressed him as lacking in some effective emotional quality, he went on to say weakly and without any note of conviction in his voice, “We’re very happy about it.”

“Congratulations,” said Natalie, thinking, Elizabeth? “That’s wonderful.” There seemed to be very little else to add; when they actually had a baby it might be possible to say soberly that it was a pretty thing, or that it resembled Arthur, or that it was incredibly small, and look at its tiny hands, but at present she could only say again, “How wonderful for you both.”

“We’re very happy about it,” he said. “Well, good night.”

“Good night,” Natalie said. She did not wait for him to leave — perhaps for fear that he should turn back with such another startling announcement — but went quickly on down the path, toward the house which Arthur Langdon had noted and to which she had known all along that she was going.

* * *

Once she started toward the house — it was diagonally across the campus from her own and she could have reached it much more easily by going directly to it, rather than wandering along the edges of the campus to reach it obliquely — she went quickly, almost running at last up the walk. This house was rococo where her own was classic, and its hallway was colorful and filigreed with gold. She went in silently, knowing exactly how to go, and up the stairs, putting her feet down lightly and barely brushing the bannister with the tips of her fingers, her most vital intention to move without noise and not to be noticed if possible. She met no one on the stairs, but when she reached the second floor, she stood hesitating, looking down the hall where lines of open, lighted doorways looked much like those in her own house. She would have to pass them all, and the question was whether to walk with dignity or make a run for it. There was a light, she could see, shining through the transom of the door at the end of the hall and she straightened her shoulders, almost laughed at herself, and then began to walk with quiet sure steps down the hall. She attracted no notice from the first open room; no one even looked up, but the second open room was filled with girls, lounging on the bed and the floor, and someone noticed her and called, “Hey, here she comes.” Without turning her head, she was aware of the girls crowding to the doorway, and knew what their half-audible voices said and how their eyes looked, following her down the hall. The noise brought girls to the doorways all up and down the hall, and even ahead of her Natalie saw doors opening. She pretended to be trying not to smile and she walked without turning her head to the last door on the left. When she hesitated before the door, she heard the great mocking silence up and down the hall, and an echoing burst of laughter and jeering which almost obscured her knock. Then she lost her courage, feeling them all watching her, and, knowing that this door was rarely locked, she opened it without invitation and slipped inside. Standing then with the door safely shut behind her, she took a long breath and laughed; outside she could hear giggling and the sound of footsteps coming softly down almost to the door and then turning back — the sounds of many girls all together saying to each other hilarious things meant to be heard beyond the door.

Natalie said, “I’m sorry, I really am. I came to say I was really terribly sorry. I shouldn’t have gone, and I’m sorry.”

“I’m never *really* angry with you anyway,” Tony said.

“It was horrible,” Natalie said.

“Of course.”

“I told you they would be. Did they hang on you?”

"They were all there. Even my brother."

"They fed me," Natalie said. "They didn't do anything else *except* feed me, I think. May I come in?"

"What are you afraid of?" Tony asked. "Me?" She was sitting cross-legged on the bed; she had not moved when Natalie opened the door and now she only lifted her head and smiled. She was playing solitaire with the ancient fortune-telling cards called the Tarot, cards old and large and lovely and richly gilt and red; Natalie, glanced down at them and could almost feel their remembered softness which from long use was so little like cardboard now, and almost, she thought, like parchment. Tony and Natalie believed that they were the only two people in the world who now loved Tarot cards, and used them — so reminiscent of antique, undreamed games — for games of their own, invented card games, and walking games, and a kind of affectionate fortune-telling which was always faithful to the meanings of the cards as recorded in the Tarot book, but which somehow always came out as meaning that Tony and Natalie were the finest and luckiest persons imaginable. Of all the suits, Tony most favored swords, and the card named Page of Swords was always her particular card; Natalie liked the card named the Magician, and thought that the face on the card resembled her own. Tony's solitaire with the great cards covered half the bed, and Natalie could see that the Magician had been moved out to fill a space, and the page of swords lay upon the queen of cups. "Come along," Tony said. "You're back now, at any rate."

Natalie came away from the door and stopped in the middle of the room to slip off her shoes. "Wet," she said.

"You come to me miserable and helpless and soaked and probably starving," Tony said pleasantly.

“I have fifteen dollars, though,” Natalie said, remembering suddenly what had not seemed actual to her before. “My father gave it to me.”

“Splendid,” Tony said absently, regarding the cards on the bed, “now I shall have a stamp to write home for money.” She stretched. “Seven of pentacles on eight,” she said. “The trouble with these infernal cards is I never can tell whether my solitaire comes out or not.”

Natalie, moving across the room, stopped suddenly to listen. “They get worse and worse outside,” she said.

Tony lifted her head to listen for a minute. “Beasts,” she said. “Have they fed?”

“A little while ago. I nearly got trampled to death on the stairs.”

“*Do* you suppose,” said Tony, marveling, “*do* you suppose they’ve got hold of a *man* out there?”

“Sounds like it, poor devil. Those cards are certainly not meant to give sensible answers — you can’t make a solitaire come out with them.”

“I suppose not.” Tony swept the cards together and began to shuffle them. “I like the way they feel, though. And ordinary cards are so dull and silly.” With the cards still in her hand, she got up easily, and without seeming to have an objective went casually over to the door and opened it. “*Get* away,” she said amiably.

The girls outside scattered shrieking, and Tony closed the door and went back over to sit on the bed again. “Someday I shall be allowed to torture them,” she said. “I believe I shall take them one by one and peel them like apples.” Idly she spread the cards out before her. “Tomorrow we can get a new deck if you like,” she said. “One full of jacks and spades and diamonds, and I can play solitaire with *that* and leave the Tarot deck for you to read dubious futures in and my solitaire *still* won’t come out.”

“If you had a deck of cards with only one card in it...” Natalie said.

"Someday," Tony said vaguely.

"The Langdons are having a baby."

"Page of swords," Tony said. "Imagine breeding Elizabeth to Arthur. The American Kennel Club will of course have to destroy all the cubs."

Natalie realized happily that she was very sleepy; it was a feeling of warmth and comfort and security, and she said without thinking, "You said I'd be right back here."

"Did I?" Tony laughed. "Damned queen of pentacles." Again she lifted her head and stared for a long minute at Natalie. "You'd better sleep."

Sleepily Natalie stood up and came to the bed. "Move over," she said and without waiting squeezed onto the bed between Tony and the wall.

"Just as I got my cards set out," Tony said. She gathered the cards together and slid off the bed onto the floor. "Take the damn bed," she said. "There was a letter for you from the Student Committee, I picked it up at your house yesterday. They said you haven't been to any classes for two weeks."

"I haven't?"

"You're to go see them at ten tomorrow morning," Tony said. "I lost the letter somewhere."

"Too bad," Natalie said. Sleepily she pulled the blankets over her head. "Door," she said.

Tony again went almost silently to the door, opened it, and with a large and menacing gesture drove away the girls outside. When she came back into the room she sat quietly on the floor next to the bed, shoving the cards away.

"I'll read to you," she said. After a minute her voice began quietly, "'... She screamed in genuine alarm as Alice came out of her room with only her shoes and stockings on, and her large matinee hat, a most coquettishly piquantly indecent object! Poor Fanny went red at the sight of her mistress and didn't know where to look as Alice came dancing along, her eyes noting with evident approval the position into which I had placed her maid.

"'"*Mes compliments, mademoiselle!*" I said with a low bow as she came up.

"'She smiled and blushed, but was too intent on Fanny to joke with me. "That's lovely, Jack!" she exclaimed after a careful inspection of her now trembling maid, "but surely she can get loose!"

"'"No, no, Sir!" cried Fanny affrightedly; "Yes Jack do!" exclaimed Alice, her eyes gleaming. She evidently had thought out some fresh torture for Fanny, and with the closest attention, she watched me as I linked her maid's slender ankles together in spite of the poor girl's entreaties!'"

Effortlessly, Natalie found herself falling asleep, warm and happy. She was agreeably aware of the slow relaxations of her hands, her feet, her face, and felt the lines beside her mouth smooth out and her face fall into nothing more than a covering of bone; she thought vaguely that at this moment she must look as she would when dead, and heard then Tony rising to go once more to the door. "*Will* you leave us alone?" Tony said quietly.

A confused murmur outside, and then Tony said, "What would I expect of you, poor things? Go off to bed — there won't be another sound from *here*."

Much, much later, Natalie was sound asleep aware of Tony's slipping into the bed beside her. Side by side, like two big cats, they slept.

Opening her eyes in the morning Natalie saw first that it was barely light outside and then turned to see Tony's eyes regarding her.

" — Morning?" Natalie said.

"Come on, lazy," Tony said.

They got out of bed together, enjoying the quietness of the morning when everyone else was asleep, and enjoying, too, the feeling of being together without fear. They did not speak much, but moved as though speech were not necessary: first Tony, rolling out of bed, turned a somersault on the floor and rose laughing silently, then Natalie, stretching and turning to the window to see the rising sun, bent and touched her toes without bending her knees. Together, warning one another not to laugh, they went down the hall full of the sounds of sleep from rooms on either side, into the showers, where they bathed together, washing one another's backs and trying to splash without sound. Then, dry and shivering from a cold shower, they went back to Tony's room and dressed.

"I have to get the money from my room," Natalie whispered remembering when she saw her clothes.

"I'll get it," Tony said. "You finish dressing."

Natalie laughed helplessly and silently as Tony slipped out the door in a battered blue bathrobe. Although she could not see the campus and the path Tony must take from the window of the room, she set her elbows on the windowsill and contemplated the rising sun and wondered with amusement on Tony's probable progress across the sleeping campus to Natalie's room in an old blue bathrobe and the insolence of being awake before anyone else.

"Did you get it? Anyone see you?" she asked anxiously when Tony came back into the room. Tony tossed Natalie's raincoat onto the bed and shook her head.

"I could have danced up and down the paths," Tony said.

Dressing quickly, then, because although they were awake before anyone else, time went on without them, and they might yet be caught by some early riser, they combed each other's hair and slipped into coats and opened the door softly and went out into the hall. Natalie thought as she followed Tony down the hall how easy it would be to create some kind of sensation in this, or any other, house; how easy it would be to write some kind of message, probably obscene, or else menacing, and leave it under each door, and was proud and pleased with herself because she had not, and it was too late now.

They tiptoed down the stairs, afraid at this moment of waking some curious person who might ask them where they were going, and reached the front door in safety. Once Tony had opened the door they knew they were surely out, and they gave up trying to go quietly; Tony let the door slam behind them in a gesture calculated to awaken every sleeper within hearing, and, followed by Natalie, ran down the path — running not from fear, but because it was early morning and they were together and they had fifteen dollars and a world ahead of them and no one to know at any time where they were.

The college was located, with singular lack of imagination, on School Street, and was approximately a mile from the center of the town from which it derived its name. The college owned most of the land along School Street, and all the land behind School Street; where the college land ended, there were nothing but fields and trees. On the one side of the college, where School Street ended and Evergreen Street began, there was a quiet and slightly decayed residential section, inhabited largely by single professors and married students. On the other side of the college, where School Street ended and Bridge Street began, there was — with the odd literal quality that characterizes the inventors of towns — a river with a bridge across it. Bridge Street turned into Main Street when its function as a street over a river ended, and Main Street was, inevitably, the street which led into the center of the town. The stores at the Bridge Street end of Main

Street had a bare, utterly straightforward look; they had intruded boldly into a section formerly devoted to small dirty shops with dubious wares, building and asserting themselves under the banners of “improvement” and “help our city grow,” and they found themselves now, their banners still valiant and their cleanliness untarnished, unpaid for and unpatronized, since the people who shopped and longed for a cleaner city drove naturally to the center of town to the grimy stores they already knew. On one corner, here, was a new grocery, all chromium counters and great glass windows, with red and black and white signs shouting, “Veal chops, special,” and, “Our coffee is the best in town,” and, “Holiday bargains” — the holiday unspecified in case the sign should not be taken down before Christmas, or Easter, or Judgment Day. Nestled comfortably close to the shining grocery was a stained small hollow calling itself a “Coffee Shop,” with a crude counter in front exhibiting candy bars and gum to the public, and, within, another counter supported by three stools, at which no doubt the weary shopper could sit and drink coffee made, at least by assumption, from the best coffee in town sold next door. Across the street was an antique shop, flaunting its dirt by rights of the unwritten law which requires that antique shops should soil the white gloves of matrons who drop in, laughing, to see if they can match the brasses on Grandmother’s breakfront. Next to this, an empty showroom which had at one time exhibited pianos, had at another time housed an importer of fine woolens and which was now borrowed annually by the Girl Scouts for their White Elephant Sale, by the Campfire Girls for their Handiwork Show, by the P.T.A. for their home-cooked Food Sale, by the Crippled Children’s League, by the D.A.R. by all the organizations who take in, and sell, one another’s washing. Beyond this charitable center which was at this time — due no doubt to the impending holidays — empty of beggars, was a tiny one-column tailor shop, odorous and hardly large enough for a winter coat in need of repair. And next to the tailor, but possessing odors enough of its own from imported cheeses, was what called itself an “Epicure Shoppe” and dealt largely in elaborately packaged foreign foods; this shoppe was the only one in the neighborhood which had any kind of trade at all, since it was virtually impossible to find Norwegian herring in sour cream or authentic Turkish delight or *espresso* or English tinned biscuits anywhere else in town. Farther down the block was the town’s one movie house which showed exclusively foreign films and dazzled the honest townfolk with *Blood of a Poet* seven times a year. The college students went to the large movie houses in the center of the town, and it was only such folk as lady librarians, traveling in packs, and ambitious interior decorators, coming from the newly adapted apartments in the city’s older residential sections, and an occasional French faculty member, who ever went into the small unpolished theater to see *Blood of a Poet* or *The Cabinet of Doctor Caligari* or *M*.

This street hurried along, widening and becoming more populated, until it turned (with the large intersection where four department stores faced one another dourly, each stubbornly insisting that its bargains were more bargainful than the others’, each featuring, in its own decor and color scheme, a Garden Restaurant, or a Spanish Tea Room, or a Black Watch Grill, or a Bayou Terrace) into the center of town, and became a busy, imperative, trafficked Main Street. Here one might find the better dress shops, here were a candy store and a bookstore — which also sold novelties and souvenirs — here were the restaurants with Men’s Grills and Business Men’s Lunches, and the jewelry store and the large hotel with afternoon Thé Dances. Here the buses congregated, and the radio station sent its antenna curiously, skyward. There were offices where secretaries (local girls who could not afford college) typed busily, and a radio store, and a toy store, and a bank.

If a child building with blocks had planned a city, saying, “This is the town, and here is where the people go to shop, and here is where the man lives, and here is where the lady takes her little boy to the dentist, and *here* is the school, and when you want to go to the park it is *here*, and then here is where the trains go, and the station with the station man is right here, and...” — if such a child, building on a rainy afternoon, had planned a city, he might have planned it to look like this one: square, respectable, carefully designed without criminal or foreign or unsubmissive elements, boasting of its college, fostering within itself a small and very decent community organization, a community playhouse, a health center, a fearless and extraordinarily biased newspaper, and all the other elements necessary in a city to keep its loyal inhabitants from becoming restless, or uncharitable, or content.

Down this street — turning from School Street to Bridge Street and from there onto Main Street, Natalie and Tony came, almost dancing; it was twenty minutes to eight.

“Three of wands,” said Natalie, stopping in front of the antique shop and indicating the three-section candelabra.

Tony, who was required by the rules of the game to give the Tarot meaning of the card symbol Natalie had found, thought for a minute and then said, “Established strength. Trade, commerce, discovery. Ships crossing the sea. Reversed, the end of troubles.”

“I saw three ships a-sailing,” said Natalie meaninglessly, but they both laughed.

“Three of pentacles, then,” said Tony, indicating a pawn-broker’s sign which stood unobtrusively but emphatically just around the corner, as though hiding from preference rather than timidity.

"Nobility, aristocracy," said Natalie. "Reversed, pettiness."

"I wonder what the rest of them do with their time?" Tony said absently. "Do you think they go on to their classes as usual? Or has the whole college faded away or blown into dust or collapsed—"

" — or crumbled or snapped out like a light—"

— Just because we've gone? Tony thought. "We are on a carpet," she announced soberly. "It unrolls in front of us, but in back of us it rolls up and there is nothing under it."

"The immediate spot where we are walking is the only immediate spot there is," Natalie said.

"Ace of cups," Tony said, pointing to the fire hydrant.

"House of the true heart," said Natalie. "Joy, fertility."

"Reversed, revolution," Tony said.

"Better still," Natalie said, "suppose they're all just frozen where they were when we left? Like in the *Arabian Nights*, and everything stays like that for a thousand years."

"They are all turned into black and red and gold fish," Tony said, "We must come back and strike three times upon the ground with a staff of brass."

"Ace of wands," said Natalie immediately.

"The origin of all things. Reversed, ruin."

There was so much money in fifteen dollars that they had no need to be lavish all at once, always providing that they were correct in assuming that money was actually a medium of exchange. Perhaps, indeed — they never could know for sure, from one dollar to the next — the green bill or heavy silver coin proffered to the man behind the counter might be met with an incredulous stare, or guffaws, and payment insisted upon in blades of grass, or handfuls of milk, or some unidentified substance which everyone could see and touch but themselves. In a strange country one must be extremely cautious; “Shall we have just coffee to start?” Tony asked.

They were far enough into the center of town to find a drugstore easily. They sat together at the counter, looking at each other and at themselves in the mirror facing them. Natalie, on the right (the one on the right *was* Natalie?) looked very thin and fragile in the black sweater; Tony, (on the left?) seemed dark and saturnine in blue. Neither of them looked at all like the girls in bathing suits who lounged colorfully in the soft drink ads over the mirror. Tony’s face was quite pale in the sanitary fluorescent lights of the drugstore, and beyond their two faces, crowding into the picture and immense in their piled variety, were the wares of the shopkeeper: ointments against the sun, dolls — perhaps charms against the evil spirit? were these natives superstitious? — boxes of candy and boxes of candy without sugar, and an infinite number of articles to be used in the control of light: gadgets to make light, gadgets to shut out light, gadgets to improve and distill light, gadgets that operated only upon light or that operated only upon the absence of light, books questioning the source of light and books wondering about the speed of light and books denying the existence of light or recommending its use as food. There were also an infinite number of articles to control air, and articles to control water, and articles to control fire and wind and rain, and many articles, indeed, to control, most effectively, earth. One section of the store — and only a corner of this could be reflected in the mirror — was devoted entirely to nostrums for controlling the human body, and this department, unlike the others, was small and dignified and its transactions were conducted in low voices. Tony and Natalie in the mirror were exactly at a height, their shoulders touching and beyond their heads the glitter of chromium.

At last Tony said peacefully, “Let’s go to the station.”

Natalie nodded; because the money was in the pocket of the blue raincoat Tony was wearing, it was Tony who offered money to the man behind the counter and it was accepted without comment.

When they came out of the drugstore the town was beginning to fill up with people on their way to work and Tony said carelessly, as they went down the sidewalk, “Be late for work if we don’t move along.”

“I’ve got to do five reports for the old man this morning,” Natalie said immediately. “Got to be in the mail this afternoon. Reports to the higher authorities on people caught doing the same things day after day, recommending the ultimate punishment.”

“Old lady Langdon caught us smoking in the washroom yesterday,” Tony went on, “and said she’d report it to the old man.”

“She wouldn’t dare,” Natalie said. “Anyway, let’s quit. Let’s just not go into the office this morning. Let’s go to Siam instead.”

“They ought to pension off old Langdon,” Tony said. “Let’s go to Peru.”

They passed the town’s biggest hotel; workmen on scaffolds were washing it down with power hoses and Tony and Natalie stopped shamelessly to watch. The fine spray from the hoses drifted down onto them through the foggy drizzle, and settled small drops in their hair.

“This is the only city I know,” Tony said, “where if it’s raining already they throw more water on you.”

They walked on after a while, moving wherever they pleased but always bearing toward the railroad station. They stopped and stared at a cab driver who was trying to clean bird droppings off his windshield; they splashed in the water in the gutter.

They came at last into the railroad station hand in hand, small in the great doorway, dwarfed by the stained-glass window above their heads. At the top of the great sweeping stairway they paused and looked down on the people below, all so sure of their several destinations; they listened to the message of the train caller standing honorably at his desk beneath the clock and obedient to the will and the distant voices of the trains, translating by permission the great sounds to any who cared to listen.

Natalie and Tony came down the great stairway, down the wide aisle, and slid into seats in one of the rows, listening and watching; they perceived the thin thread of taxicabs which was all that held people in the station to the city outside, the transparent fine barrier of imminent going and coming, of being irresistibly called away or brought back, the conscious virtue of creatures selected to travel with the trains, the harmony of the discipline that controlled his huge, functioning order, where no head was uncounted and no ticket unhonored; they heard the distant paternal urging of the trains.

Oddly enough, Elizabeth Langdon and the rest came here only of necessity, with the intention of leaving this place as soon as they reached it. And yet two people who wanted earnestly to be strangers might sit here for hours and never lose the quick sense of being about to go away, and might probably never see anyone who knew their names, or cared to remember them. After a while Tony and Natalie rose quietly and went down the aisle again and into the station restaurant. They sat down at a table overlooking the nervous movements of the taxicabs and the suitcases set unerringly in the puddles, and ordered ham and eggs and orange juice and toast and griddlecakes and doughnuts and coffee and sweet rolls. They ate lavishly, passing bits of food to one another, regarding contentedly the glass domes on the coffeepot behind the counter, the glass covers on the stacks of English muffins, the round red seats of the stools. When Tony poured herself a third cup of coffee, Natalie said, “Don’t hurry, we have until ten o’clock.”

“I do hope our train’s not late,” Tony said, “We’ll be late enough getting in as it is.”

“We can telegraph from Denver,” Natalie said.

“Or call from Boston,” Tony said. “They’ll be expecting us to call, anyway, probably from New Orleans. We have two hours between trains; I thought we might spend it in some bookstore. We have *plenty* of money, after all.”

“A week from today we’ll be on the boat.”

“And two weeks from today,” Tony said, “we’ll be in Venice.”

“In London,” Natalie said.

“In Moscow,” Tony said. “In Lisbon, in Rome.”

“In Stockholm.”

“I only hope that train isn’t *late*,” Tony said.

“Do you think Juan will be there to meet us?” Natalie asked. “And Hans, and Flavia?”

“And Gracia and Stacia and Marcia,” Tony said. “And Peter and Christopher and Michael.”

“And Langdon,” Natalie said. “Dear pathetic old Langdon, she’ll be so *glad* to see us, jumping all over everybody and barking.”

“I hope they’ve rememberd to clip her against the heat,” Tony said anxiously. “She *does* suffer so.”

“She never did quite recover from the spaying,” Natalie said, and they began to laugh helplessly, and the waitress behind the long counter looked at them and then automatically at the clock.

Far away they could hear the voice of the train caller. “Albany,” he was saying, “New York.”

“New York,” Tony said softly. They put their hands together on the table and were silent, listening to the voice of the train caller echoing flatly through the station. “New York,” he shouted urgently.

“We wouldn’t need but one room,” Natalie said. “They’d never find us.”

“I could get a job.” Tony leaned forward eagerly. “I can speak French, after all.”

“I could be a waitress, maybe.”

“We could open a small bookstore. Only the books we like ourselves.”

“And we’ve *got* fifteen dollars.”

They both took cigarettes from the pack on the table, and Tony lighted them; “Can I get you more coffee?” she asked.

Natalie glanced at the clock. “Yes, thank you. We have plenty of time.”

“Our train doesn’t leave till nearly eleven,” Tony said.

You could live quite comfortably in a railroad station; there was the great arching roof for shelter, and food in the restaurant; there was a ladies’ room and an enchanted spot where you could find books and magazines and little odd colored toys to amuse the children in Paris, in Lisbon, in Rome. It was better, even, than living in a department store, not quite so good, perhaps, as living in a garret in medieval Spain.

It was nearly twelve when they left the station and they went reluctantly, lingering on the stairway in the face of the drizzling rain outside.

“I understand it’s a charming town,” Tony said as they came out into the damp day; over their heads the stained-glass window shone briefly in the reflected light of the restaurant neon sign across the street.

“*Very* provincial,” Natalie said. “Laughably so.”

“But such beautiful old homes.”

“And such a modern college.”

“And the theaters,” Tony said. “And the stores.”

“We must try to look up old Langdon while we’re here,” Natalie said.

Near the station, for some reason, the world was filled with birds flying; all the movement ever made in the world was concentrated, for a minute or so, in one spot, and Tony surrounded by sweeping birds was a marvel of stillness; Natalie laughed and ran away, and the birds followed her briefly and came back to Tony.

"They think you've got fish in your pocket," Natalie called to Tony, and Tony called back, "I wish I had my dear old falcon Langdon."

"Still she haunts me phantomwise, Alice moving under skies Never seen by waking eyes," Natalie said as Tony came running to her.

"Shall we fly?" Tony said, waving back at the birds. "Or would you rather walk?"

"You among the birds," Natalie said. "Page of swords. Vigilance, secrecy."

"Look," Tony said, and held Natalie's arm to stop her before the posters of a theater; the movie now being shown inside was old, and apparently past any redemption by adjective, so that the management had simply, resignedly let the pictures into the frames outside the theater, and were now presumably hiding away somewhere inside, beyond reach of irate patrons. One of the pictures showed a glorious scene between a man in a cowboy hat and uncomfortable pistols, who backed against a door to face a darker, equally weaponful villain; in the background a damsel wrung her hands and all three seemed to turn anxiously to the camera, which alone could justify the violent emotions they ravished themselves to feel. It was plain from the picture that it was near the end of the day; the sun was setting dramatically outside the backdrop window; the hero had the look of one who would shortly remove his guns and his spurs and go home in a car he had bought but could not afford; the heroine seemed to be thinking, under her beautiful look of fear and concern, that perhaps she should keep the children out of school until this chicken-pox scare was over. The villain, too — who, tired now of jokes about his villainy and being treated mockingly by his friends as a potential murderer, had said to himself, “Just this one more time, and then I shall be myself again” — snarled, and sighed, and snarled again; “It must be a lovely movie,” said Natalie. “Shall we go in?”

“I would *not* embarrass them by watching them,” Tony said, “Look, this one here is a vampire.”

It was, indeed, with horns and blood and black cloak and possibly a machine inside which created heartless villainy while sparing its patronizing public any sense of immediacy (“It’s *only* a movie; don’t be afraid to look.”) and which perhaps in some sense of ultimate justice was the kind of machine most moviegoers imagined vaguely would someday take over the world, after their children and their children’s children and any posterity they might possibly meet were gone; it was precisely the sort of machine that should take over the world (postulating, of course, that it was a world worth taking over at all, and valuable enough to any machine to justify conquest) — precisely the sort of machine to take over the world: heartless, villainous, unimaginative. “A vampire?” said Natalie. “I think it’s a werewolf. Look at its tail.”

“More likely one of those hidden personalities, I’d say,” said Tony.

“Look over here,” said Natalie. “It’s got hold of some girl. Girls who get caught by werewolves always look surprised, did you notice?”

“She’d have reason to be surprised if she knew anything about werewolves,” Tony said wisely. “Perplexed, she looks to *me*.”

“I remember the day Langdon got caught,” Natalie said.

“*She* didn’t look surprised,” Tony said. “No, nor perplexed, neither. She just looked sort of relieved, after chasing *him* for years.”

“If we were vampires,” Natalie said, falling into step beside Tony, “we would not pick on Langdon.”

“I love my love with a V,” said Tony, “because he is a vampire. His name is Vestis and he lives in Verakovia. He—”

“I love my love with a W,” said Natalie, “because he is a werewolf. His name is William and he lives in Williamstown.”

“He is also a waberdasher,” Tony said. “*Mine* is a vixter-repairman.”

“Not much work for him in Verakovia,” Natalie said critically. “I don’t believe I saw a single vixter out of order the whole time I was there.”

“Ah,” said Tony, “but *you* were there in the *rainy* season.”

“Still,” said Natalie, “what, after all, is there to fixing a vixter? A string here, a screw there — nothing.”

“It takes a strong man,” Tony said. “Could *you* do it?”

“I used to think,” Natalie said, “when I was a child, that I had only a limited stock of ‘yeses’ and ‘nos,’ and that when they were used up I couldn’t get any more and then I wouldn’t be able to answer most of the questions silly people asked me.”

“Like, ‘What did you learn in school today?’ and ‘Tell the nice lady your name’?” Tony wanted to know.

“I comforted myself by remembering that I could eke out my stock by things like, ‘I don’t think so,’ and, ‘Well, perhaps.’”

“And, ‘If you don’t mind,’ and, ‘Much obliged, I’m sure,’ and, ‘You better be careful what you say or I’ll call a cop.’”

“Which is the reason,” Natalie went on, “why I don’t answer your very pertinent questions about...”

“Hanged man,” said Tony suddenly. “Hanged man.”

“It is *not*,” Natalie said indignantly. “It’s not fair to use a toy.”

“We never *said* it wasn’t fair.”

Natalie stopped and stared at Tony's hanged man. It was a toy in the shop window, a tiny figure on a trapeze which turned and swung, around and around, endlessly and irritatingly. "Hanged man," Tony insisted.

"The tree of sacrifice is not living wood," Natalie pointed out.

"You can't ever tell," Tony said, peering. "They make extraordinary things for children these days. Dolls that can walk, and birds that can lay eggs, and I suppose animals with real blood for butchering. Not to mention —"

"All *right*," said Natalie sullenly. "Life in death. Joy of constructive death."

"Reversed?"

"Reversed, probably not practical for any smart child," said Natalie, and walked on.

Tony caught up with her laughing. "Let's get something to eat."

"I don't want anything to eat."

"I resign my hanged man," Tony said, still laughing. "It was probably not living wood at all."

They walked on for a minute in silence, and then Natalie said softly, "I used to think, when I was a child, that it was an awful thing to have to go on breathing and breathing, all my life until I was dead, all those thousands of years. And then I used to think that now I was conscious of breathing it would be like everything else where I did it without thinking for a while and then became aware of it, and it would be awkward and difficult to do it as well consciously, and then by the time I had thought that I used to realize that while I was thinking it I had been breathing."

* * *

The cafeteria was filled with people wearing dark clothes and rubbers, moving in sad indecision before bright colorful counters of food. A man in a wet wool overcoat held a slice of cherry pie in his hand; a woman in a coat with a damp fur collar hesitated longingly over a tomato and pepper salad, and below the strawberry shortcake and the sliced ham and the corn muffins and the hot macaroni the floor was trampled and muddy, and the silver of the trays was tarnished and reflected unclearly the plates of food set upon them. Natalie chose cinnamon buns and three kinds of pie; Tony had one kind of pie and one kind of cake and a dish of ice cream and cinnamon buns. They sat down next to the wall, setting their trays squarely on the flat marble table-top, locating the salt and pepper and the mustard and the sugar bowl and the tin container of paper napkins and the used ashtray precisely between them, and their food, colorless and tasteless once it had been separated from its parent counter, awaited them dully on the plates which would be washed and used again when the pie and cake and even the cinnamon buns were consumed.

Their table was long enough to seat eight (crowded in, hot and thirsty after the chase, raising their glasses to salute the lord of the manor, shouting to be heard from below the salt), but they sat alone because they had chosen a table far back, and seemingly destined to be empty except for themselves. Tony said softly, “She *said* she’d be here at twelve sharp, and it’s almost twenty after now.”

“She might have sent a message,” Natalie said. “You know how reliable she always is. Perhaps someone is looking for us with a message now. I’m sure there’s a message on its way; it’s not like Langdon to be late.”

“She wouldn’t trust just *any*body, though,” Tony said. “Not with a message for us, not Langdon. We’ll have to be ready to take the message no matter how strange it sounds. No matter what it sounds like, it will be of course a message for us."

"Do you suppose she got the jewels?" Natalie asked. "And the papers and the guns?"

"Do you suppose that extraordinary woman on the other side is looking for us? What will the message be? 'I have lived long enough, having seen one thing...'"

"I believe it's the boy in the black cap; he seems to have lost something. Or the old man there with the cheese sandwich."

"Save those whereout she presses for dead men deadly wine," Tony said happily. "*There's* a message to send someone."

A tray was set down heavily on the table, next to Natalie, and she was silent, although she had started to tell Tony a line which began, "So Satan spake..." She looked across at Tony to see the reflection of the newcomer in Tony's eyes; Tony looked up once, briefly, and then down again, and Natalie had to look cautiously sideways, and saw only a checkered jacket and, presumably, a man under it. He was taking things slowly off his tray, putting them down on the table as though he liked food and even this food; he was eating the meat loaf, unbelievably checkered like his jacket, and string beans and mashed potatoes cupping gravy (Ace of cups? Natalie thought; No we've used that.) and vanilla ice cream and coffee; he could not have chosen a more disagreeable lunch, Natalie thought, even if he had said to himself, "Now let's see, what looks positively worst? What will I remember with least pleasure? What am I most likely to have for dinner tonight?" When he leaned over to set the tray on the floor his head touched against Natalie's shoulder and she moved back abruptly.

"Pardon," the man said, and Natalie nodded, assuming that he noticed, and drew even farther away.

“Five of pentacles,” Tony said suddenly to Natalie, and Natalie, shocked, stared at her. “What?” Natalie said, thinking, Material trouble, no charity; reversed, earthly love. She looked at Tony and then looked down anxiously at the thick dirty hand maneuvering the coffee cup just beyond her own plates, where the cinnamon bun had suddenly turned stale and sticky.

“Mind?” the man said. Natalie saw that he was holding out a knife. “What?” she said again.

“I’ll do it,” Tony said abruptly. She reached across the table and, astonishingly, took the knife from the man and pulled his plate of rolls toward her. When Tony had buttered the rolls and pushed the plate back across the table Natalie at last turned openly and stared at the man; he had only one arm.

Of course, Natalie thought, trying not to giggle, he couldn’t butter his own rolls, and of course that’s why he’s eating meat loaf, but you would have thought he’d buy a jacket that didn’t look *quite* so much...

“Always got to ask for help,” the man said genially. He smiled at Natalie around a mouthful of bread and butter. “Rather ask a nice young lady any time.”

“Knight of swords reversed,” Tony said, seemingly to her coffee.

Quarrel with a fool, Natalie thought. “It’s getting late,” she said meaninglessly to Tony; it seemed the sort of thing to say to indicate to the man beside her that they were two busy persons, who had better things to do than buttering someone’s rolls.

“Salt, please,” said the man to Natalie.

She wondered insanely if she would have to salt his meat for him, but, passing the grimy saltcellar, thought, It only takes one hand if he puts down his fork for a minute. “Surprised how obliging most people are,” the man said.

“You seem to get along so well,” Natalie said, watching Tony.

The man turned around in his chair and smiled at her, as though his armlessness gave him an automatic right to ask anyone he chose for help, and so begin informal relationships at a point usually achieved through many confidences and confessions, but as though, too, it was not often that he were congratulated upon this rare talent.

“It’s been a long time,” he said. “You get used to it.”

“If it’s been such a long time,” Tony said, “how come you never learned to butter your own bread?”

The man looked across at her and then back to Natalie. “You eat here often?” he asked. “Don’t think I’ve ever seen you here before.”

“Not very often,” Natalie said nervously.

The man shoved away his plate and took a pack of cigarettes out of his jacket pocket. He offered them to Natalie and, not knowing what else to do (it was a fresh pack and it occurred to her wildly that unless someone took out the first cigarette he would never be able to get it), she took one; when he reached into his pocket again and took out a package of matches Natalie waited politely, but he handed her the matches and said, as before, “Mind?”

“Here,” Tony said sharply from across the table. She held out a lighted match, first to Natalie and then to the man.

“Matter with your girl friend?” the man asked, leaning back to look at Tony and exhaling smoke while he talked. “She helpless?”

Natalie also looked at Tony and began immediately to gather her coat around her. The man helped her competently with his one arm and when Natalie rose he waved his hand at her and said, “Come back again sometime, when you haven’t got your friend.”

“Goodbye,” Natalie said politely.

He laughed, and said, “So long, kid.”

* * *

When they came out of the cafeteria it was unusually dark for early afternoon. It seemed that the light had been withdrawn from the day, as though fearing to face a storm, as though sunlight and clear air, anticipating from several days ago the arrival of enemies, had taken long-planned steps to consolidate their positions elsewhere to visit, perhaps, others of their kingdoms, abandoning this one for a while to the forces of rain and now, this afternoon, to storm. People who ordinarily walked looking down at the sidewalk, perhaps in hopes of finding a penny, now walked looking up at the sky nervously, and the rain which had filled the air inconclusively for almost a week now took on a certain firmness with the knowledge of reinforcements in sight.

Tony and Natalie came out onto the sidewalk wearing their raincoats, but it was for the first time as though they were going somewhere, toward a place now, where before they had only wandered happily. Although they walked with their shoulders together going through the wide main street of the town, it was necessary for Natalie to put her hand under Tony's arm to keep up with her, and neither of them spoke. Natalie did not now know what Tony had thought of the one-armed man, nor did she know why Tony had spoken to him as she did; she did not know, even, where Tony was going. It was, at any rate, away from the cafeteria.

"Well?" said Tony, as they reached the first corner.

Natalie could not decide what to say. There were a number of statements which should be able to bring back their former peaceful state, but saying them consciously and with deliberation was somehow not the same, and then too said consciously and with intention they might not at all bring back the former peaceful state, but introduce rather a new state which would begin by being false. Something new, then? Previously unsaid? Previously unthought? I'm tired, Natalie told herself sadly, and was quiet.

"The question is," Tony said slowly as they stood on the corner, "whether we can still escape, or whether they will have us after all."

"I should think," Natalie said tentatively, "that if we hurried..."

Tony laughed. "Don't you see," she said, "if *we're* running and *they*'re running, then we're not hurrying at all?"

"No, I don't see."

"Better go slowly, anyway," Tony said. "Not back to the college."

"No, not back to the college."

Tony hesitated. "Are you sure you're not tired?"

"No."

"Will you come somewhere with me? It's a long way."

"Yes," said Natalie.

"You don't even know where it is."

"All right."

"You see," said Tony, her voice still soft so as not to be overheard, but somehow fierce and angry, "it *frightens* me when people try to grab at us like that. I can't sit still and just let people watch me and talk to me and ask me questions. You see," she said again, as though trying to moderate her words and explain, "they want to pull us back, and start us all over again just like them and doing the things they want to do and acting the way they want to act and saying and thinking and wanting all the things they live with every day. And," she added her voice dropping still lower, "I know a place where we can go and no one can trouble us."

"I want to go there, then."

"You won't be afraid?"

"No."

Tony stood on the street corner and looked around, looking even at Natalie. Ahead of them, there was the intersection, with its stores and streets and the natives hurrying about their concerns, gathering their wares together to be finished before sundown, or before the storm came upon them. Behind Natalie and Tony the main street ended abruptly, about two blocks down, in a sudden, insistent stopping of stores, and a beginning of railroads and country lots beyond. To their right was the Hotel Washington, with its murals in the lobby of Washington writing the Declaration of Independence, Washington making peace with the Indians, Washington — a local god — founding the city's first bank. To their left was the far-off tower of the electric company, and the beacon of the radio station. Tony saw all these things, which she had seen before, and looked again at Natalie.

"You ready?"

"Yes."

"Come on, then."

They crossed the main street to the spot where buses drew in and waited asthmatically for passengers. They did not usually ride on things, Tony and Natalie, and it was odd to both of them to push into the crowd of people waiting, to climb up the narrow steps and push farther into the bus even as it moved swiftly, leaving behind it still-hurrying figures on the street, raising imperative gloved hands, brandishing coins, still hurrying.

Natalie, pushing with the rest down the aisle of the bus, fell rather than sat voluntarily; there was an empty seat next to the aisle and before she could catch Tony the crowd of people had pressed her into it and Tony was gone.

For a minute she only sat, trying to draw herself in and avoid the pressures of people on all sides of her. She felt as though she could not breathe, with someone in the seat next to her, someone on the aisle beside her, someone in front of her and someone in back of her and Tony out of sight. The man on the seat next to her was large and seemed to overflow onto Natalie and she could see that he was pressed against the window as well. She thought that she might be less crushed when the bus swung into the middle of the street and the people inside settled into place, but instead they swayed against her from one side or the other. The thought of escaping from the bus came to her, and she wanted to fight and claw and scream when she realized that she could not even stand up, much less wriggle through the people to get to either door. They were holding her by sheer weight, leaning all together around her so that she might move her hands, if she liked, or turn her head, but could only tantalize herself so because beyond that she was paralyzed. She found herself hardly able to breathe and for a minute thought wildly of pushing against the man next to her until his weight broke the window.

It then became perfectly clear to her that this was the reasonable consequence of all her life, from the beginning until now. She had done so much to preserve herself from this kind of captivity and had taken inevitably one of the many roads which would lead her to the same torment; she was helpless among people who hated her and showed it by holding her motionless until they should choose to release her. All her efforts to become separate, all Tony’s efforts, had brought Natalie to this bus.

* * *

Now, she thought, I must find Tony and get out of here. The thought of escape made her think of prisoners in fortresses, and the long years of small effort required to achieve the last simplicity of release; I could dig out through the floor of the bus, she thought, and would have smiled to herself except that she was certain the man next to her was watching her. She could not see the driver of the bus, nor the way the bus was going, but even though the bus stopped occasionally it did not seem that the pressure around her lessened. She could hear, when the bus stopped, that more people were crowding and pushing in, with ill humor and complaint. Poor things, she thought — do they have to spend all this energy just to surround me? It seemed pitiful that these automatons should be created and wasted, never knowing more than a minor fragment of the pattern in which they were involved, to learn and follow through insensitively a tiny step in the great dance which was seen close up as the destruction of Natalie, and, far off, as the end of the world. They had all earned their deaths, Natalie thought, by a job well done — the woman in the seat ahead who had never needed a face, had perhaps been given for her part only the back of a head and a dark cloth coat collar, the man in the seat next to Natalie, a full-dress part, even the watchchain and the grimy shirt collar — had not this same man, as a matter of fact, been close to Natalie in the station, memorizing her face so that although when next they met she would not know him, he would be able to identify her, winking and gesturing with his head to the others, murmuring perhaps to the bus driver, "*That* one, *there*." The woman in the aisle, whose coat brushed maddeningly against Natalie's face — was she not the one who had held the tomato salad in the cafeteria, watching below her hat brim for Tony and Natalie to come, had she not passed them quickly on the street, glancing with a swift look to make sure of them, had she not stood, ticket in hand, before the train gate, apparently watching the clock? Perhaps, too, it had been this woman peering watchfully out through the eyes of the heroine in the movie poster, whispering, passing on the word: "There they go, *that* way — let *them* know, ahead." And the bus driver must have slipped quickly out of the dress of the train conductor, into the white apron of a cafeteria cook, then into the uniform he wore now, timing himself to the second in order to pull up just in time as Tony and Natalie approached the bus stop. Was the boy in the black cap here on the bus? Perhaps he sat in back of Natalie and it was his breath she could hear, his knees pressing into the back of the seat. And the one-armed man, then, had been sent to spring the trap as the circle grew closer and closer; the one-armed man had been sent with the message; his speaking to them had identified them finally and been the signal for the circle to close in.

Because she could not turn her head she could not see Tony, who was somewhere in the back of the bus. She thought she could feel Tony watching her. “Is this the Cornford stop?” the woman standing next to her leaned down and asked. “I’m sorry, I don’t know,” Natalie said, but the man sitting next to her said (with a warning glance?), “No, next stop.” “Thank you,” said the woman, and moved somehow so that her packages brushed the top of Natalie’s head. “Excuse me,” Natalie said to the man, “but what is the last stop?” “End of the line,” he said, and smiled knowingly at her.

Suddenly a shift took place. The bus, bringing up in a great sweep at a corner, paused for a longer time, and many of the passengers got out. “Change for Linden,” the bus driver shouted, half-turning in his seat, and the man next to Natalie said, “Pardon,” and slipped out past her and followed the woman in the dark coat down the aisle. Tony sat down unexpectedly in the seat next to Natalie.

“I thought they’d *never* leave,” Tony said.

“They were watching me,” Natalie said. She turned and tried to look backward out of the window as the bus started to move, but could see nothing in the rain, which was steadily growing heavier, and darkening the day until it seemed now almost like evening, although it could not be later then mid-afternoon.

“Do you suppose,” Natalie said, “That they are each assigned a certain area to guard, and that they have to get back to it to watch for the next ones?”

“A bad job, that,” Tony said. “Imagine, always pretending to run a world. Always imitating the sort of people they think they might be if the world were the sort of world it isn’t. Pretending to be words like ‘normal’ and ‘wholesome’ and ‘honest’ and ‘decent’ and ‘self-respecting’ and all the rest, when even the words aren’t real. Imagine, being people.”

“The man next to me,” Natalie said. “He was an honest self-respecting man. He was supposed to be the sort of small businessman who has not done really well, and who has had to be satisfied with less than he wants because he is not really very capable and knows it. He did it very well, as a matter of fact. I was almost convinced until he made a joke at me.”

“They have to give themselves away,” Tony said. “They’ve got to make sure you know them or else there’s no point to them at all.”

“I don’t think they’ve estimated us correctly,” Natalie said. “They seem to think we’re weaker than we really are. I personally feel that I have talents for resistance they don’t even suspect.”

“Perhaps,” said Tony dryly, “they have antagonists you have not yet encountered.”

Natalie laughed. “If *I* were inventing this world,” she said, “ — and I may have, at that — I would gauge my opponents more accurately. That is, suppose I wanted to destroy the people who saw it clearly, and refused to join up with all my dull ordinary folk, the ones who plod blindly along. What I would do is not set them against numbers of dull people, but I would invent for each one a single antagonist, who was calculated to be strong in exactly the right points. You see what I mean?”

“The trouble is,” Tony said, grinning, “that you’ve got this world, see? And you’ve got enemies in it, and they’re enemies because they’re smarter. So you invent someone smart enough to destroy your enemies, you invent them so smart you’ve got a new enemy.”

“Oh, hell,” said Natalie. “Maybe I’d better give up inventing worlds and do without any for a while.”

“At least until you’ve got it figured out better,” Tony said.

The bus moved on, stopping meaninglessly now and then to let people get off or on; there was no object to their riding the bus now, these people, beyond the pure formality of spying. The route of the bus was perhaps desperately familiar to the driver, who must have had to travel it many times to be able to do it right when it mattered, and the route was familiar, too, to the people who got on and off, familiar in greater or lesser distance to all of them.

“Imagine,” Tony said softly once, “imagine that we live here, just halfway down that block. That house with the wide porch is very well known to us; we live there. You sweep the porch and I dust the living room just inside. We know so well what the house looks like that we go in there by instinct without even looking at it, and we are oddly comfortable in any other house which resembles it. And now we are going past our stop. As far as this point, the bus route is familiar to us, and we know without seeing them every corner and almost every person who gets on and off daily, and every street sign and every store — back there, as a matter of fact, was our grocery, where one or the other of us shops every day. Beyond this corner, everything is wilderness.”

“That’s why it’s so bad to be carried past your stop,” Natalie said. “You might never find your way back — you’re in someone else’s territory, places familiar to the person who gets off at the *next* stop. *Their* grocery stores."

"We're going much farther today, though," Tony said.

More and more people were leaving the bus, glancing occasionally at Tony and Natalie with curiosity and some amusement. The bus had moved through the business section of town, through the better residential section, through the lesser residential section, and was now in a district of dirty small stores and low, dark-windowed buildings, grim and unwelcoming in the dark afternoon.

"This must be the very edge of town," Natalie said. "I've never been here before."

"I've been here before," Tony said. "Long ago, before I knew who you were."

"Do we get out soon?"

"Soon," Tony said.

The bad neighborhood gave way to railroad tracks, and eventually, to spaces of open country. Vacant lots on either side of the road separated small houses and a rare street sign stood by a squared-off curb, as though at one time optimistic people had planned houses out here, and streets, and broad sunlit gardens, and had stood perhaps on the eight feet of cement curbing already finished and looked around and thought, We can catch the bus on this corner and be into town in an hour; the children will have plenty of space to play. One or two of the few houses had fences around them, and one of them had wash hung out in the driving rain.

"We're going to be the last people in the bus," Natalie said. "If we got out the bus driver could turn around and go on back home."

"Who else would go this far?" Tony said. "Soon."

“I believe there’s a lake somewhere ahead,” Natalie said, peering out through the wet window. “Of course it *could* be just excessive rain, but it does *look* like a lake.”

“It is a lake,” Tony said. “Very popular in the summer when the weather is somewhat more clement than this.”

“I can see houses,” Natalie said. “What do the people live on after the hot dogs are gone?”

“Fish, I suppose,” Tony said absently.

“We’re terribly out of season,” Natalie said. Being so near the lake troubled her; it was a spot where, she could see, warmth and movement had once abided, where a skeletal roller coaster presided ghoulishly over the remains of a merry-go-round, a skating rink, a bath house. She shivered.

“Is *this* where we’re going?”

“Do you want to go back?”

Beside the window of the bus, so close that it startled Natalie, a sign moved by, pointing with one imperative arm at the lake; “Paradise Park,” it announced.

“Do you want to go back?” Tony asked again.

Natalie thought of the woman in the dark coat climbing tiredly onto the bus again at her destined stop, and laughed. “Suppose—” she began.

“Do you want to go back?” Tony asked again.

“No,” Natalie said.

Ahead, the remnants of last summer’s pleasure sprawled darkly, the damp air from the lake carrying along with it the faint, almost undetectable odors of wet bathing suits, and stale mustard, and rancid popcorn; it was impossible to remember with any clarity the heat of the summer or the taste of sweat or the feeling of clothes confining in the heat, although the sight of the merry-go-round recalled very distantly the sweet jangle of its music.

Natalie pressed closer to the glass of the bus window, uncomfortably aware of the dubious warmth of the bus and the clinging wetness of her raincoat against her legs; even Tony, next to her, seemed disagreeably close and pressing and the sudden sight of the thin lines of Tony's face against, through the other window, the leaning timbers of the roller coaster in the gathering darkness made Natalie shiver and say overloudly, " Aren't we ever going to get *out*?"

As though at a signal, the driver swung the bus around in a circle, pulled on the brake, and turned to look at them. "Going back?" he called incongruously down the length of the bus, "or you getting out here?"

Tony rose and started down the aisle, Natalie following her stiffly. "We're getting out here," Tony said.

"Carnival spirit?" said the driver, and he hunched up his shoulders and laughed at them. "Big night on the beach? See the sights, take a swim, look at the girls, win a kewpie doll, take a chance?" He laughed again, snickering, as they stepped gingerly down the slippery steps of the bus. "Take a turn on the merry-go-round for me," he called after them, and the bus door closed behind them.

Natalie stepped quickly to the side of the road as the bus turned awkwardly, because it occurred to her vividly that he might very well try to run them down — who would ever know, on a night like this? He could say it was an accident — and for a moment in the bewildering darkness after the lights of the bus she lost Tony. "Change your mind?" the bus driver shouted, leaning toward her from the window of the bus. "Last chance?" When Natalie did not answer the bus moved, picking up speed as it went down the road, and Natalie watched its lights, thinking, He is going back right now to the lights of the town, to the sounds and the lights and the people.

There was darkness ahead of her, with an odd rich brilliance of water beyond, but no human lights along the lake. “Coming?” said Tony, and she sounded amused. “He was right, you know,” she added. “It was probably the last bus.”

* * *

On the road back to town the signpost pointed evilly down at them with its one arm, still probably saying “Paradise Park,” and ahead the roller coaster leaned slightly forward to hear what they said. The only light, apart from the faintly luminous sky, was its reflection on the water; the only sound (beyond perhaps the anxious breathing of the merry-go-round?) was the noise of the waves on the shore. Irresistibly Natalie found herself moving toward the lake, with a human impulse to get to the edge of the world and stop, but Tony took her arm and said, “This way.”

“Where in hell are we?” said Natalie; she was cross, and it was colder than she liked, and she was unpleasantly aware that that had probably been the last bus back to town.

“Look,” said Tony, and she stood still but did not turn, “if you don’t want to come you don’t have to. *I*’m going anyway.”

“Where else can I go?” Natalie said. “Is it far?”

“No, not very far.”

“I’m not going to stay long,” Natalie said inadequately. “Unless it’s warm.”

Tony laughed. “How would you feel about heaven?” she asked. “You wouldn’t stay unless it was warm?”

“Look,” Natalie said reasonably, “I’m cold. It’s wet. I don’t know where I am or where I’m going. If I say—”

“You want to go home?”

“Stop it, *will* you?”

“We *could* be on our way to Paris,” said Tony. “Or Siam.” She laughed again. “And no one can find us,” she said. “Someday, suppose we were strangers and we met in London. Would you bow to me on the street, thinking, I used to know someone looked like that, and then I might wave to you, thinking, Doesn’t that look like a girl named Natalie I once took down a lonely road? Suppose we were strangers after all this, and we met in London?”

“I would think, ‘Tony, Tony,’” Natalie said.

“I know you would,” said Tony.

They had gone away from the deserted playground now, and the road they followed had been set out, it seemed, for lovers for whom the Roller Skating Rink was not private enough. Over their heads the trees leaned toward one another, nodding and perhaps whispering ahead that they had come, after so long a delay; underfoot, it was wet and somehow encouraging — each step seemed to urge them forward; one could walk forever in such a vacuum.

Tony stopped suddenly, her feet in the mud, and looked up at the rain which found them still between the trees. “And if I stamped on the ground and called,” she said softly, “would anything come rushing to us from the sky, shaking in the world and speaking in a voice...”

“Not in *this* mud,” Natalie said. “Not in this mud you couldn’t stamp.”

“All I need,” said Tony, “is a desire so strong that the world, all of the world, has got to bend itself and forget itself and break out of its circles and rock itself crazy, all to do what I want, and there’s got to be a great crash when the ground under me crashes itself wide open and the fire inside is forced to crawl away from my feet and the sky too turns back so that there is nothing above me and nothing below me and nothing in all time except me and what I want."

"Tony, *stop* it."

"He would take us wherever we wanted to go," Tony said very softly. "We would only need to whisper 'Far away from here,' and he would carry us on his head to someplace where it is hot, and the sun comes down on us, and there is moving blue water and hot hot sand under our feet. Or we might be lying on a curved green hill with our heads in the grass and nothing overhead but clouds or riding on an elephant with strange clashing bells calling us or dancing in the streets of a city where no one is alive but us and the houses are round and red and blue and yellow in the moonlight and the streets are crooked and hung with lanterns and strange, or we can have a world completely flat in all directions and us with our chins resting on the edge and no bodies and with our eyes half-shut can look out peacefully on a world flat in all directions or we can—"

"Then why are we *here*, of all places?"

"We're supposed to be," Tony said. "We have to be here first."

"Have you been here before?"

"Several times."

"Why are we here again, then?"

"Or, if you like, we can be on a cloud, sound asleep in that hot rolling softness close to the sun, or we can be on a mountaintop where the sky is bright blue and the trees are bright green and everything smells of fresh pine and the earth is shining brown and you can see for a hundred miles because even the air is glittering. Or we can say we want to live forever in a palace of blue marble with fountains that flow with purple wine, and flowers growing through the open windows, and hangings of pale-green satin and ceilings of gold, and a repast of fruit and wine set in every room and music of cymbals and lyres, and handmaidens...”

“Are you going in *here*? Into the trees?”

“Or choose perhaps a throne higher than the moon, on a black rock, where sitting we can rule the world, where the stars are around our feet and the sun rises when we glance down and beckon, where far below there are contests to make us laugh and above us there is nothing but our own crowns and sitting there forever we can watch and end eternity with a gesture of our finger...”

The trees were waiting in the darkness ahead, quietly expectant. A tree is not a human thing, with its feet in the ground and its back hard against the sky; it cannot tolerate the small human tendernesses moving beneath, and, not obeying the whims of moveable creatures, can hardly have more pity for a Natalie than for a field mouse or a pheasant, moving with private pride but falling easily. Beneath the trees it was not dark as a room is dark when the lights are put out, the artificial darkness which comes when an artificial light is gone; it was the deep natural darkness which comes with a forsaking of natural light; Natalie’s feet went without sound on the path — made by whom? for what purpose? for whose feet? — and she could not lift her head from contemplation of her own feet on the path, although she knew surely that the trees bent over her, trying, perhaps, to touch her hair. Her feet felt the path and she knew that there was moss there, or something frightfully soft that made no sound.

“Everything is so *easy*,” Tony’s voice said from ahead of her. “You can remember it all if you try, and all you have to do is lie back against a comforting hand and close your heavy eyes and say, ‘I am here, I am where I belong, I have come home.’ Just as we’ve always been doing it, just as it’s the natural and quiet and exciting way of doing things... as we remember, as through all our wanderings we remember, as we remember...”

One foot going before another, it seemed that this was the only way to go in among these trees, and that no one had ever come this way and then turned to go back again, and had perhaps even gone in and out freely. “Tony?” Natalie said. “Tony?”

Tony’s voice came more faintly from ahead. “And do you remember the glory? The wonder of dancing and seeing in the firelight the others dancing?” It was as though Tony had removed a little, gone around a tree where the path had not, as though Tony had gone in the darkness a little farther away with each step, still speaking luringly, and was by now so far away that even Tony’s voice came only by permission of the trees, relayed in mockery.

“Tony?” Natalie said again more urgently, realizing suddenly, concretely and acutely, that it was indeed very dark and that ahead of her the figure she had mistaken for Tony was only another tree.

“Don’t be afraid,” said Tony, a voice dying away, now gone out of hearing; was it *that* way? Twigs over her mouth?

“Tony,” Natalie said, suddenly very frightened.

There was no answer, and Natalie stopped and stood very still among the trees, feeling dreadfully that they leaned forward to watch her. She put her hand to her face and it was there, she felt her raincoat cautiously and it was still slippery and firm under her hand. The *look*, she told herself, shutting her eyes. We were out for a walk and we came on a bus and we got to the lake and we went past the fairgrounds and we walked along a dark road in the rain, and Tony said — what did Tony say? — and anyway we started as a joke, a *schoolgirl* joke, to follow an odd old path through the trees, and whoever heard of anyone lost in a clump of a dozen trees like this near a lake and an amusement park and even in the rain? Why, people must have been along here a million times, and thought it was funny. Why, probably no one ever before got frightened in this clump of four trees and certainly no one ever before couldn't be more than fifty feet from the road and if it were daylight it would be terribly funny, and even a little bit silly, like children playing ghost. So now turn around, Natalie told herself, and you'll see that there's nothing to be afraid of.

She turned boldly, before she could change her mind, and looked behind her; the path curved out of sight almost immediately, but of course it *was* a path and it led back to the road and certainly the road — if there *was* a road? if there ever had *been* a road? — led back to town. The trees so close to the path that it was hardly possible to pass between them without brushing against bark were of course no more than trees and only the fact that it was difficult to see them clearly in the darkness and the rain made them in any way terrible. And since this was only a clump of trees, after all, the path must go forward out of it and very probably Tony was right now standing just ahead beyond the turn in the path between the trees and waiting and laughing.

And waiting and laughing, Natalie told herself again, and she shivered. And waiting and laughing, and laughing and waiting, and, Natalie told herself sternly, this must stop, and thought, People are only afraid of other people. Waiting and laughing, she thought, and said, timidly, "Tony?"

When there was again no answer, she felt suddenly the elemental fear of some other person who will not speak when spoken to, and denies thus the similiarity of sanities between one person and another, some other person who, waiting and laughing, determines secretly and giggling to feast upon his own kind. "Tony?" she said, and, realizing after she had moved that she was walking, began to go quickly ahead on the path. Blundering on alone, she came out at last, almost crying (thinking, What is it I know that means steadiness and warmth and a home? Arthur Langdon? Elizabeth? and their names were meaningless) onto a smooth bare place where the dusk, or the light of the lake far behind reflected from the clouds overhead, fell with a brazen and ghastly clarity.

It then occurred to her that she was expected here. This small clearing among the trees had been set up because she could not remain under the trees any longer, and it was necessary for her to find a place to rest. Nothing happens unless it needs to, she told herself, and saw with complacent pleasure a fallen tree across the small clearing and, as she knew she was expected to, sat down upon it. If I take a minute or so to calm down, she said to herself, if I try to relax and not be so nervous about nothing, if I get a perspective on things instead of...

Without stumbling, as though permitted, Tony came walking easily through the trees and not by the path, seeming not to put her feet down on the soundless moss. It was a dark unfamiliar figure coming, for a minute, so that Natalie turned suddenly, sitting on the log, and was unable to speak and would almost have run back among the trees except that in time she saw that it was Tony. Tony came closer, in the blue raincoat, hands in the pockets and smiling. “I lost you,” Natalie said helplessly.

Tony glanced easily at the trees around them, staring back at them boldly and with amusement. “I was there.”

“Only one antagonist... only one enemy,” Natalie said.

“That’s very true,” Tony said.

She had done what she was told, then, Natalie thought; she has brought me here with friendship and without force, she has followed her instructions to the letter and will probably be commended. Is she sorry? Does she regret it even for a minute, does a sudden fleeting picture come to her, of the two of us together when it was just beginning? Could she forget the methods she had to use, the small jokes and the little intimacies — or is she wholly a traitor, using any means to achieve the traitorous end, not sparing any thought for the tremendous personal, real emotions that were so undefined in her orders (“Get her here”) and yet so inclusive, so desirable, and so secret; will she be required to state in her report that means she used?

Once, try it once, Natalie thought, and said, “Tony, I’m afraid of this place. Please let’s go back.” Perhaps there might be, somehow, a weakness in the traitor to make this an equal battle, perhaps there might be a small remembered joke which could unlock the chains, bribe the guards, press the hidden panel, perhaps — and only to make it an equal battle, Natalie promised — perhaps there might be —

“Later,” Tony said peacefully, the unrepentent traitor, the traitor to traitors. “Later I might let you go back.”

Natalie put her head down on her knees and thought, I wish I could go home, and perhaps said it aloud, and Tony, her head back against a tree trunk, familiarly, said, “It’s good to be here at last; it’s the only possible place.”

“Have you been here before?” Natalie asked after a minute, wanting to say, Have there been others? Are you experienced? Am I the first? What did they say? Do? Were they afraid? Did it happen here? Why does it happen at all? Who put you up to it? May I please go home? May I please go back to my own home? Please? — because she did not know any other word that might somehow ask please, no other word than please. “Of course I’ve been here before,” Tony said, surprised. “How did you think I knew how to come?”

And were they all afraid? Natalie wanted to ask, but she said, “Was it always this cold?”

"Cold? Are you cold?" Tony asked, and there was a note of sarcasm, as though she said, And was she cold, the poor thing, was she cold? And did she want her mother, poor thing, poor thing?

"Tony," Natalie said, half-rising, but Tony put her hand on Natalie's arm, almost casually, and held her.

"Wait a while," Tony said. "I'm almost ready." She looked up at Natalie and smiled, and seemed measuring Natalie, because she looked down even at Natalie's feet, and smiled again. "I'm almost ready," she repeated reassuringly. "It won't take long. What are you afraid of?" When Natalie, suddenly helpless, did not answer, she patted Natalie's arm lightly and said, "Don't be afraid," and added, as one reassuring a whimpering child with a familiar rhyme, "Page of pentacles." When Natalie again did not move or answer, she said, "Well, then. A soldier, a child. Reversed, degradation or pillage."

"I thought it was a game," Natalie said.

"Keep thinking of it as a game," Tony said, and put out her cigarette carefully. With Tony's hands on her face, on her back, holding her, Natalie shuddered. *One is one and all alone and evermore will be so*; "I will *not*," said Natalie, and ripped herself away. She *wants* me, Natalie thought with incredulity, and said again, aloud, "I will *not*."

"Of course you won't," said Tony, moving quietly, and Natalie at the last minute saw and stepped back again and said, "I am not afraid of you."

There was a short, an absolute, silence, the trees suddenly alert, listening. Then: "Certainly," Tony said. "If you want to run home, nobody's going to keep you *here*." And she laughed.

I have been found wanting, Natalie thought; I have made myself unacceptable and am not worthy. She hesitated, half-moving, waiting for the hand or branch to pull her rudely down again and knowing at the same time that she was not worthy, and then she said, “Going?” as though it were a casual thing. Tony looked at her once, and then away at the trees again, and did not speak. Everything’s waiting for me, Natalie thought; she half-moved again, and was still. Perhaps even yet? She thought hopefully, but Tony did not stir, and Natalie took a step toward the path. “Tony?” Natalie said. “Going?”

“No.”

Everything’s waiting for me to go away, Natalie thought. It’s time for me to leave, I am innocent, my father has work to do, Elizabeth is going to bed, Tony wants me away. Everything is waiting for me to go off and do something by myself, everything is waiting for me to act without someone else; they are all too busy for me now, even Tony, standing dark under the dark trees. “Tony?” she said again, insistently. “*Please*, Tony.”

There was again no answer, and Natalie was at the point where the path entered the trees again. She knew that Tony would not answer her; she knew that she would find her way back by the path without difficulty, the trees drawing back from her as she moved, her feet rustling on the dead leaves and dirt, and, crying now, she went out of the light and into the dark woods, through which she could see the lights, now, of the road back to town.

“Tony?” she called back once, stopping with her hand against a tree, and its rough back lifeless under her fingers, “Tony, come on back with me,” but there was no answer.

Her feet again upon the road, with the roller coaster — so soon to be revived for summer traffic — ahead of her, she thought theatrically, I will never see Tony any more; she is gone, and knew that, theatrical or not, it was true. She had defeated her own enemy, she thought, and she would never be required to fight again, and she put her feet down tiredly in the mud and thought, What did I do wrong?

* * *

The incredible sight of car headlights stopped her on the road, flat-footed, and as the car came closer it seemed to her frighteningly that it might be her mother and father, come to look for her. Then the car stopped next to her and a voice said, coming louder as the front window was rolled down, “What on earth are you doing out here alone?”

It *is* my mother, Natalie thought, come to take me home. “I’m lost, I think,” she said.

“Well, get in,” said the woman. She leaned in her seat to open the back door of the car and Natalie obediently climbed in; it was an old car, and the back seat was crowded and cramped with accumulated junk; there were bottles there, she could hear from the rattling, and old papers, and a kind of blanket that felt like the horrible hair of some animal. The car moved as Natalie leaned back and the woman turned halfway around to stare at Natalie. The driver of the car, of whom Natalie could see only a neck and the back of a hat, leaned forward to peer at the road, as though able to see farther with his own eyes than the headlights showed. “Well,” said the woman, looking at Natalie in the dark, “*you* were certainly far away from everywhere.”

“I was lost,” Natalie said.

“Long walk back to town,” the driver said.

“You were very kind to pick me up,” Natalie said.

“We *always* pick up people,” the woman said comfortingly. “Can’t stand seeing anyone walk so long’s we have a car ourselves. And lucky for *you*.”

“It certainly was,” Natalie said.

“Where you from?”

“The college.”

The woman nodded against the reflected light of the headlights. “College,” she confirmed, not at all surprised.

“This is certainly nice of you,” Natalie said.

“How old are you? Eighteen?”

“Seventeen.”

“*Our* girl’s eighteen,” the woman said, pointing out some irremediable fault in Natalie. “Goes to business school.”

“Stays out of the woods,” the man added.

“Well, now, you don’t ever know,” the woman said consideringly. She turned and looked at him and then back at Natalie. “I guess Moms and Dads never *do* know what the kids are doing, really,” she said.

“I guess not,” Natalie said.

“I guess *your* Mom would be pretty mad if she saw you walking down that lonely road alone.”

“I guess so.”

“Can’t ever tell what’ll happen to a girl alone along there,” the man added.

“Attackers,” the woman said, and nodded. Beyond her nodding head the first lights of the town showed suddenly. “*Terrible* things,” she said in a low voice to Natalie, as one communicating female facts not suitable for the ears of men. “Attackers and all that.”

“Where she want to go?” the man asked the woman.

“Back to college?” the woman asked Natalie.

“Extra two miles,” the man said.

“The center of town will be fine,” Natalie said hastily. “After all, you’ve saved me a mighty long walk.”

“More’n *that*,” said the woman, nodding again. “Down that lonely road.”

“Tell you,” the man said, compromising, “we’ll take her as far’s the bridge. How’s that?”

“That will be wonderful,” Natalie said, “I can get back to the college from there in five minutes.”

“All lighted streets, too,” said the woman with satisfaction. They all watched with silent pleasure as the town took shape around them, filling out its streets with stores, with hotels, with lights. They went down the main street and Natalie saw without surprise that the lampposts were trimmed with wreaths and that strings of lights had been festooned overhead in preparation for Christmas; the yellow and blue and red of neon signs blinked crazily into the car as they went on down the main street to the bridge.

The man brought his car to a slow and accurate stop in the center of the bridge, and the woman reached around to open the door for Natalie. “There, now,” she said.

Getting out, Natalie told them both, “Thank you very much, *very* much. I can’t tell you how grateful I am.”

“Nothing at all,” said the woman, and the man said, “All right.”

“Thank you again,” Natalie said, and closed the door. She waved after them as the man made a cautious, formal turn in the middle of the bridge, and waved again as they went back off the way they had come. Then, somehow puzzled by her quick transition from a lonely wet road to the middle of a lighted bridge, she crossed the sidewalk to the bridge parapet and stood looking down, to make sure where she was, but she saw instead the water below, with the raindrops falling into it.

Why shouldn’t I —? she thought with irresistible logic and leaned over farther, and even farther; she put one shoe against the stone to urge herself higher and thought with glory, Mother won’t care if I scuff it now; it will be lost before it wears out.

“Going swimming?”

Natalie came down quickly from the wall, feeling to make sure that her skirt was down properly, turning to see who had spoken to her at this irrecoverable moment; it was no more than a figure disappearing into the rain, and turning a wet grinning face back at her over its shoulder; for a second she thought that it might easily be the one-armed man from the restaurant.

More people were nearby on the bridge, but she was not embarrassed to turn away from the parapet and walk quietly toward the college; it occurred to her that unless she actually jumped over the parapet into the river she was of small interest to them. As she passed, she looked into their faces, and they were laughing or talking or walking quietly along, and none of them did more than slide a look past Natalie who was walking quietly along without interest.

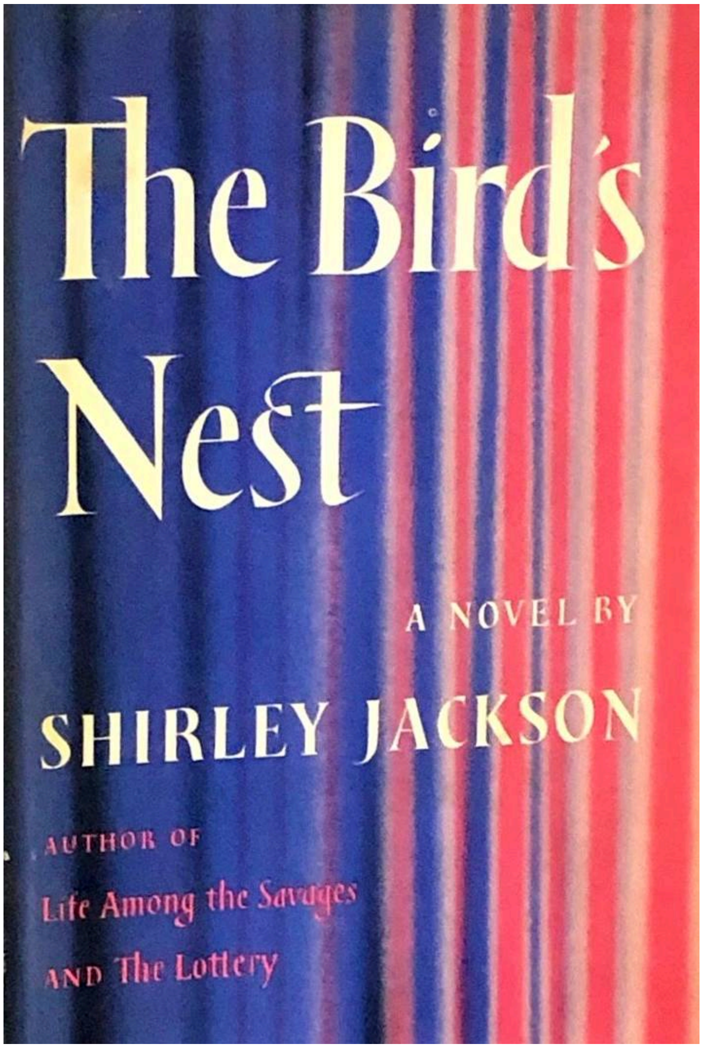
The reassuring bulk of the college buildings showed ahead of her, and she looked fondly up at them and smiled. As she had never been before, she was now alone, and grown-up, and powerful, and not at all afraid.

The Bird’s Nest (1954)

The Bird’s Nest was first published by Farrar, Straus and Young in the early summer of 1954. It received a mixed reception from contemporary critics: a review from the *Virginia-Pilot* newspaper concluded that ‘Although the book dribbles away at the end, the first half is excellent…’ while in the 21 June 1954, edition of *Time* magazine, the critic was dismissive of the book, writing that ‘…the novel dredges a long, dry stream-bed of consciousness’. The *Wisconsin State Journal* assessment of the work on 20 June 1954, was far more positive and complimentary as the reviewer stated that ‘Jackson… has done superlatively in her minute vivisection of her complicated heroine.’

The novel is centred on a reserved and unexceptional, young woman, Elizabeth Richmond, who lives with her aunt Morgen and works in a museum. She leads a mundane existence, until strange incidents start to occur. She experiences terrible migraines and insomnia and her behaviour becomes peculiar and unpredictable. She is sent to a see a psychiatrist, Dr Wright, who diagnoses Dissociative Identity Disorder — previously known as Multiple Personality Disorder. Over the course of the novel three personalities in addition to Elizabeth emerge and vie for control of her mind and body, as Dr Wright searches for the source of the issue.

In 1957, the novel was adapted for a film entitled, *Lizzie*, directed by Hugo Haas and starring Eleanor Parker, Richard Boone and Joan Blondell.


The Bird's Nest
A NOVEL BY
SHIRLEY JACKSON
AUTHOR OF
Life Among the Savages
AND The Lottery

The first edition

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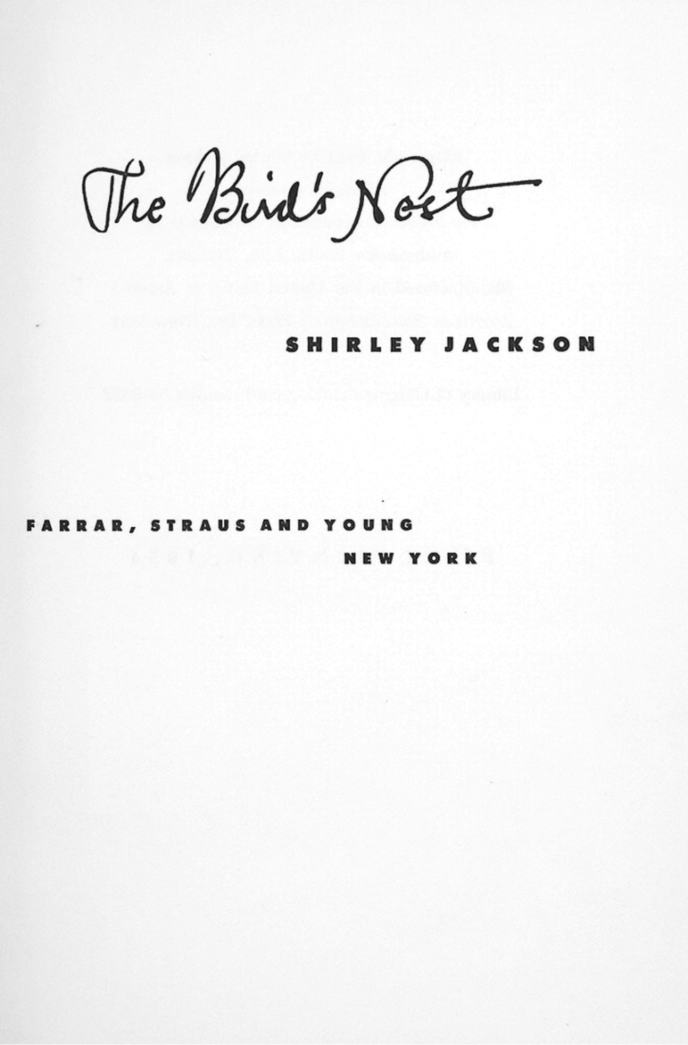
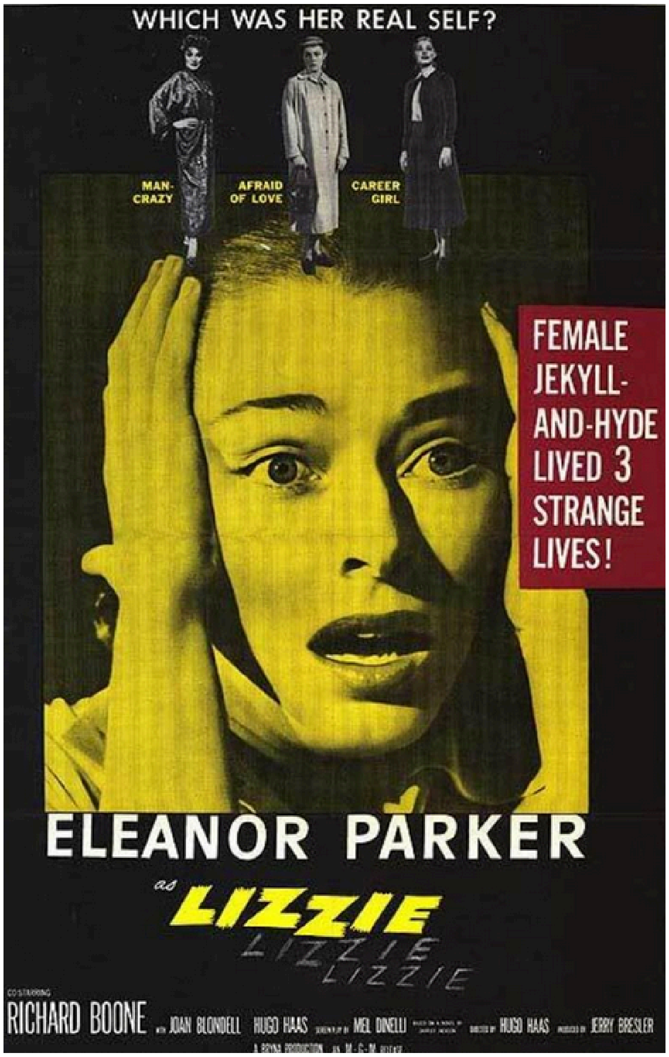


The Bird's Nest

SHIRLEY JACKSON

FARRAR, STRAUS AND YOUNG
NEW YORK

The first edition's title page


WHICH WAS HER REAL SELF?
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HUGO HAAS
MEL DINELLI
HUGO HAAS
JERRY BRESLER
A BRYNA PRODUCTION
M-G-M

The 1957 film adaptation

1. ELIZABETH

ALTHOUGH THE MUSEUM was well known to be a seat of enormous learning, its foundations had begun to sag. This produced in the building an odd, and disturbingly apparent, list to the west, and in the daughters of the town, whose energetic borrowings had raised the funds to sustain the museum, infinite shame and a tendency to blame one another. It was at the same time a cause of much amusement among the museum personnel, whose several vocations were most immediately affected by the decided slant given to the floors of their building. The proprietor of the dinosaur was, as a matter of fact, very humorous about the almost foetal tilt of his august bones, and the numismatist, whose specimens tended to slide together and jar one another, was heard to remark — almost to tedium — upon the classical juxtapositions thus achieved. The stuffed bird man and the astronomer, whose lives were spent in any case almost out of earthly equilibrium, professed themselves unaffected by the drop of one side of the building, unless driven toward a kind of banking curve to offset the natural results of walking on tipped floors; walking was, in any case, an unfamiliar movement to either of them, one tending toward flight and the other toward the complacent whirling of the spheres. The very learned professor of archeology, going inattentively along the slanted corridors, had been seen hopefully contemplating the buckled foundations. The contractor and the architect, along with the ill-tempered daughters of the town, endeavored to blame first the inefficient materials supplied for the building and second the extraordinary weight of some of the antiquities contained therein; the local paper printed an editorial criticizing the museum authorities for allowing a meteor and a mineral collection and an entire arsenal from the Civil War, dug up just outside of town and including two cannon, to be lodged all on the west side of the building; the editorial pointed out soberly that, had the exhibit of famous signatures, and of local costume through the ages, been settled on the west side, the building might not have sagged, or might at least not have done so during the lifetimes of its sponsors. Since the local paper — current and impermanent — was not permitted below the third, or clerical, floor of the museum, the exhibits were allowed to retain their impractical arrangements unmoved by the editorials, although the clerical employees on the third floor read the comics daily and studied the front pages hoping to discover the manners of their deaths. They were given, on the third floor, to meditation, and they believed almost everything they read. In this, of course, they differed in almost no way from the educated inhabitants of the first and second floors who dwelt among unperishing remnants of the past, and made little wry jokes about disintegration.

* * *

Elizabeth Richmond had a corner of an office on the third floor; it was the section of the museum closest, as it were, to the surface, that section where correspondence with the large world outside was carried on freely, where least shelter was offered to cringing scholarly souls. At Elizabeth's desk on the highest floor of the building, in the most western corner of the office, she sat daily answering letters offering the museum collections of pressed flowers, or old sea-chests brought back from Cathay. It is not proven that Elizabeth's personal equilibrium was set off balance by the slant of the office floor, nor could it be proven that it was Elizabeth who pushed the building off its foundations, but it is undeniable that they began to slip at about the same time.

The instinctive thought of every person connected with the museum, up to and including the paleontologist, had been to repair, to patch together, to reconstruct, rather than to build anew in a new site, and in order to repair the building at all the carpenters had found it necessary to drive a hole the height of the building, from the roof to the cellar, and had chosen Elizabeth's corner of the third floor to effect an entrance to their shaft. On the second floor the hole in the wall was discovered through a sarcophagus, and on the first floor, not unreasonably, behind a little door marked "Do not enter"; Elizabeth's office allowed of no concealment, and so she came to work of a Monday morning to find that directly to the left of her desk, and within reaching distance of her left elbow as she typed, the wall had been taken away and the innermost skeleton of the building exposed. She was the first person in the room that morning; she hung her coat and hat neatly on the coat hanger just inside the door, and then went across the room and looked down with a swift sense of dizziness and an almost irresistible temptation to hurl herself downward into the primeval sands upon which the museum presumably stood; far below her she could hear the faintly echoing voices of the guides on the first floor; today was an Open Day and the guides were apparently cleaning their fingernails. The complaining voice which, slightly louder, seemed to come from the second floor may have been that of the archeologist, outside the tomb, finding fault with the air. Elizabeth, looking down, sighed because she had a headache, and because she had a headache nearly all the time, and turned to her desk to contemplate a letter offering the museum a model skyscraper made of matchsticks. The faint sense of holiday, inspired by not having a fourth wall to her office, had faded almost entirely by the time she opened the third letter on her desk. When she had read the letter once, she got up and looked down again into the cavity of the building, and then returned to her desk and sat down, thinking, I have a headache.

"dear lizzie," the letter read, "your fools paradise is gone now for good watch out for me lizzie watch out for me and dont do anything bad because i am going to catch you and you will be sorry and dont think i wont know lizzie because i do — dirty thoughts lizzie dirty lizzie"

* * *

Elizabeth Richmond was twenty-three years old. She had no friends, no parents, no associates, and no plans beyond that of enduring the necessary interval before her departure with as little pain as possible. Since the death of her mother four years before, Elizabeth had spoken intimately to no person, and the aunt with whom she lived required little of her beyond a portion of her weekly pay and her prompt presence at the dinner table. Although she had arrived daily at the museum for two years, since her employment the museum had been in no way different; the letters signed "per er" and the endless listings of exhibits vouched for by E. Richmond were the outstanding traces of her presence. There were half a dozen people who spent their time in the same office, and half a dozen others who occupied other offices on the third floor, and all of these knew Elizabeth, and said "Good morning" to her, and even "How are you today?" — this on particularly bright spring mornings — but those of them who, in philanthropy or mortal kindness, had endeavored to become more friendly with her had found her blank and unrecognizing. She was not even interesting enough to distinguish with a nickname; where the living, engrossed daily with the fragments and soiled trivia of the disagreeable past, or the vacancies of space, kept a precarious hold on individuality and identity, Elizabeth remained nameless; she was called Elizabeth or Miss

Richmond because that was the name she had given when she came, and perhaps if she had fallen down the hole in the building she might have been missed because the museum tag reading Miss Elizabeth Richmond, anonymous gift, value undetermined, was left without a corresponding object.

She had not chosen employment at the museum because of a passionate fondness for learning, or in the hope of someday managing a public institution of her own, but because in her usual undirected way she had followed the information given by a friend of her aunt's, and found a job at the museum open, and because her aunt had added, most pressingly, that Elizabeth might very well try it, since it was necessary for Elizabeth to work at something now that she was old enough to be self-supporting. Her aunt forbore to comment upon her own uneasy sense that it might be easier to identify Elizabeth in some firmer manner if Elizabeth were located in a concrete spot (my niece Elizabeth, who works at the museum) rather than being merely herself and so very obviously unable to account for it. She went to work, then, with no further direction than this crossing of two lines to determine a point, and was taken on at the museum because the clerical work on the third floor required no very sparkling personality, and because her abilities, whatever her disadvantages, included a clear written hand and a moderate speed at the typewriter, and because whatever was given Elizabeth to do, if she understood it, was done. If she took any pride in anything, it was in the fact that everything about her was neat, and distinct, and right in a spot where she could see it. Her desk and her letters were squarely arranged; she came to the museum each morning at the hour she had been told to come, taking always the same bus to work and hanging up her coat and hat where they belonged; she wore always the dark dresses and small white collars which her aunt assumed were proper for an office worker, and when it came time to go home Elizabeth went home.

No one at the museum had stopped to think that driving an enormous hole through one side of Elizabeth's office might be unhealthy for Elizabeth; no one at the museum had mused, slide rule in hand, "Now, let's see, this shaft down the building ought to pass somewhere close to Miss Richmond's left elbow; will it, I wonder, trouble Miss Richmond to find one wall gone?"

* * *

On Monday, just before noon, Elizabeth took her letter out of the drawer of her desk and put it into her pocketbook; she meant to read it again at lunch. It had nagged her during the morning, with an odd urgency; it was somehow most pleasantly personal, and not at all the sort of thing she was used to. Over her sandwich in the drugstore she read it again, investigating the handwriting, and the paper, and the wording; the most exciting thing about it was probably its lingering familiarity. It did not distress her because she could not conceive of someone imagining it, and taking a pen and a sheet of paper and writing it, and putting it into an envelope addressed to Elizabeth at the museum; it was an act of intimacy from a stranger impossible to picture. Sitting in the drugstore Elizabeth touched the badly written words with her finger and smiled; she had very definite plans for this letter: she meant to take it home and put it into a box on the top shelf of her closet with another letter.

Although the museum people spent the greater part of their own time in hammering and measuring and patching, it was generally felt that the presence of carpenters and bricklayers repairing the building was out of place during museum hours, and so as Elizabeth left the building as usual at four o’clock, she met the carpenters coming in. It was of no importance to anyone at the museum, and of little significance to the carpenters, but as Elizabeth passed them in the hallway she smiled and said to them, “Hello, there.” She went into the street, blinking in the sunlight because she still had her headache, stepped onto the usual bus, sat looking out of the window until she reached her own stop, stepped down from the bus, and walked the half block to her aunt’s house. She unlocked the door with her key, glanced at the hall table to see if her aunt had left any message, and into the living room to see if her aunt had got home, then went upstairs to her own room, where she hung her hat and coat carefully in the closet, took off her good shoes and put on sensible slippers, got a chair to stand on to reach the closet shelf, and took down the red cardboard valentine box which had held chocolates on her twelfth birthday. She carefully set the box down on her bed, put the chair back where it belonged, and sat down on the bed with the box. Before she opened it she took the new letter out of her pocketbook and read it again, then folded it and slipped it back into its envelope, addressed so untidily to miss elizabeth richmond, owenstown museum. Then she opened the box and took out the other letter inside; this one was substantially older. It had been written seven years before by Elizabeth’s mother and it read, “Robin, don’t write again, caught my Betsy at the letters yesterday, she’s a devil and you know how smart! Will write when I can and see you Sat. if possible. Hastily, L.”

Elizabeth had found this letter, presumably never addressed and mailed, in her mother’s desk shortly after her mother’s death. Until now it had been hidden alone on the closet shelf, but today, after reading both letters again carefully, she put both into the valentine box and, taking the chair, put the box back again onto the closet shelf, set back the chair, and went into the bathroom and washed her hands with soap as her aunt came to the foot of the stairs and called “Elizabeth? You home yet?”

“I’m here,” Elizabeth said.

“You want cocoa for dinner? It’s turned cold out.”

“All right. I’ll be right down.”

She came slowly down the stairs, kissed her aunt on the cheek because she usually kissed her aunt when she came home and she had not seen her aunt until now, and went into the kitchen.

“Well,” said Aunt Morgen definitely. She sat down heavily at the kitchen table, and folded her hands before her on the table, steadfastly disregarding the chops and the bread and butter. “Now,” she said. Elizabeth sat down hastily, and folded her own hands, and looked without expectancy at her aunt. “Lord, bless this food, our lives to Thy service,” said Aunt Morgen, speaking the moment Elizabeth folded her hands and seeming with an “Amen” in one pure gesture to unclasp her own hands and reach for the chops, “have you had a pleasant day?”

“Same as usual,” Elizabeth said. Food of any kind, under any circumstances, was a matter of substantial importance to Aunt Morgen, and her greed was only very slightly frosted over with conversation; there were, at best, only one or two topics in the world which could lift Aunt Morgen’s eyes away from her plate, and Elizabeth had never succeeded in saying anything which could surprise Aunt Morgen into putting down her fork before the food was gone. Dinner was calculated exquisitely to Aunt Morgen’s appetite, but she was fair; there were precisely as many chops and baked potatoes and slices of bread and pickles set out in Elizabeth’s name as were calculated for Aunt Morgen; their conversation was divided as perfectly.

“Have *you* had a pleasant day?” Elizabeth asked Aunt Morgen.

“Not very,” Aunt Morgen said. “Rained,” she pointed out.

Although Aunt Morgen was the type of woman freely described as “masculine,” if she had been a man she would have cut a very poor figure indeed. If she had been a man she would have been middle-sized, weak-jawed, shifty-eyed, and clumsy; fortunately, having been born not a man, she had turned out a woman, and had of necessity adopted from adolescence (with what grief, perhaps, and frantic railings against the iniquities of fate, which made her sister lovely) the personality of the gruff, loud-voiced woman so invariably described as “masculine.” Her manner was free, her voice loud, she loved eating and drinking and said she loved men; she took toward her sober niece an attitude of avuncular heartiness, and among her few friends she was regarded as fairly dashing because of her fondness for blunt truths and her comprehensive statements about baseball. She had reached an age where sustaining this character was no longer quite such a strain as it might have been when she was, say, twenty, and had reached a position of comparative complacence, discovering how the pretty girls of her youth had by now become colorless and dismal, and sometimes blushed when she spoke. She had never once regretted taking her niece in charge after her sister’s death, since in addition to being plain, Elizabeth was quiet and unobtrusive, and showed no inclination to interrupt her aunt’s conversation, which took place exclusively between the times of dinner’s conclusion and their hour of retirement. In the mornings, before Elizabeth left for the museum, Aunt Morgen frequently inquired after her health, and occasionally advised her to wear overshoes; before dinner, in a peaceful hour which Aunt Morgen spent making dinner and drinking sherry by herself in the kitchen and Elizabeth spent, as today, in her room, conversation was impossible; while dinner was being served and while it was being eaten, Aunt Morgen was too much occupied to speak. After dinner, however, Aunt Morgen habitually took a small glass or two, or even several, of brandy, and it was then, lounging back in her kitchen armchair, with coffee, brandy, and a cigarette on the table before her, and Elizabeth hesitating over her cooling cocoa, that Aunt Morgen held forth for the day.

"If you'd learn to drink coffee," she began tonight, as she frequently did, "I'd let you have some of my brandy."

"I don't care for any, thank you," Elizabeth said. "It makes me sick."

"That's because you drink it with cocoa," Aunt Morgen said. She shuddered. "Cocoa," she said. "Cocoa. Damn miserable puny stuff, fit for kittens and unwashed boys. Did *Shakespeare* drink cocoa?"

"I don't know," Elizabeth said.

"You ought to know things like that, *you* work in a museum. Me, I sit home all day on my fanny, living on my income." She smiled and bowed formally to Elizabeth. "Your mother's income, I should have said. Mine only by the merest faint chance, mine only because of deserving patience and superior intelligence. Mine," said Aunt Morgen with relish, "only because I outlived her. If I had killed her, mind you," she went on, pointing her cigarette at Elizabeth, "they would have caught me. I wouldn't have gotten her money, because they would have caught me if I *had* killed her, and don't think I didn't think of it often enough, but they would have caught me. I don't after all suppose that I'm *that* smart, kiddo."

Aunt Morgen very often called Elizabeth "kiddo" after dinner, and she talked so much of Elizabeth's mother when they were alone that Elizabeth, who had listened sometimes at first, found that she was now able to slip into a placid unlistening after-dinner state, almost as though she had taken a great deal of Aunt Morgen's brandy. As Aunt Morgen's voice went on, Elizabeth watched without awareness the changing lights on the silverware and the mirror over the sideboard, and the quick shadowy motion as Aunt

Morgen lifted her brandy glass, and the endless pattern of rose-edged doorways on the wallpaper.

" — saw me first," Aunt Morgen was saying, "but of course then your mother, once he met my sister Elizabeth, then it was her of course, and of course there was nothing I could do. But I flatter myself, Elizabeth junior, I flatter myself, that my intelligence and strength showed him finally what a mistake *he* made, choosing vacuity and prettiness. Vacuity," Aunt Morgen said, enjoying the word, although she used it almost nightly. "Toward the end, *I* noticed, he came to me more and more, asking *my* advice about the money, and telling *me* his problems. I knew about the other men, but of course he had made his choice, although I must say she wasn't so much by then, was she, up to her neck in mud. Well." Aunt Morgen breathed deeply, leaning back, her eyes half-closed and regarding the brandy bottle. "Stack the dishes, kiddo? Early bed for Auntie."

"I'll wash them. Mrs. Martin comes to clean tomorrow and she gets mad if she finds dirty dishes."

"Old fool," said Aunt Morgen obscurely. "You're a good girl, Elizabeth. No fancy notions."

Elizabeth took the dishes to the sink and turned on the water; because she had begun to recognize, from her headache all day and the first beginnings now of an intolerable stiffness in her back — as though stretching, or rubbing against a doorway like a cat, would relieve her — that she was in danger of another attack of what Aunt Morgen called migraine and what Elizabeth thought of as a "bad" time, she moved deliberately and slowly, taking as long as possible over small motions; activity of any kind helped when she felt "bad." These spells she remembered as from childhood, although Aunt Morgen believed that until the time of her mother's death Elizabeth had only had temper tantrums, and remarked wisely that Elizabeth's migraine was a "reaction of some kind." In any case, the "bad" times had come with increasing frequency of late, and Elizabeth, recalling that she had been away from her work for four days not two weeks ago, thought dully, against the pain, "They'll let me go if I keep staying home sick."

By the time she had finished slowly washing and drying the dishes, and putting them carefully away on the shelves, and scrubbing the frying pan and scouring the sink and washing the table, the pain in her back was considerable; no longer a warning, it was now substantial enough for her to come to the door of the living room, where Aunt Morgen sat doing the crossword puzzle in the evening paper, and ask for an aspirin.

"Migraine again?" said Aunt Morgen, looking up. "You ought to run in and see Harold Ryan, kiddo."

"I've always had it," Elizabeth said. "Doctor Ryan couldn't do anything."

"I'll get you a hot water bottle for that back," Aunt Morgen said good-naturedly, setting down her pencil, "and one of those little blue pills. *That*'ll put you right to sleep."

"I can sleep all right," Elizabeth said. She was already dizzy, and reached out for the door frame.

"Poor baby," said Aunt Morgen. "All you need is sleep."

"Me?"

"Night after night I hear you tossing and muttering," Aunt Morgen said. She put an arm around Elizabeth. "Come along, old lady."

She helped Elizabeth undress, because the backache, which came with suddenness and severity, and disappeared again without warning, was by now severe enough to make it difficult for Elizabeth to move.

"Poor baby," Aunt Morgen said over and over, taking off Elizabeth's clothes, "many's the time I undressed your mother before you were born. *She,*" said Aunt Morgen, chuckling, "was so clumsy then that when you got her on one side she couldn't roll over without help. *There* you are, now the nightgown. Those last couple months were the only time she ever let anyone help her, anyone *female,* that is, and even then only me. Always private, she was. I must say, you didn't get her body; more like your father, you are. Other arm, kiddo. She was a lovely girl, my sister Elizabeth, but mud clear up to the neck. Now for the hot water bottle and that nice little sleeping pill."

"I'm almost asleep now, Aunt Morgen."

"Not going to have you tossing all night tonight."

When Aunt Morgen, walking very softly but stumbling over the night table, had finally turned off the light and gone away, Elizabeth lay in the darkness alone and tried to close her eyes. There was a line of light where Aunt Morgen had left the door a little open — it had not occurred to her that Elizabeth might need her in the night, but she was unable to remember to close a door completely — and Elizabeth could hear, from downstairs, Aunt Morgen's easy movements, from the living room to the kitchen, and the subsequent slam of the refrigerator door, and Aunt Morgen's voice humming to herself, in a kind of pride that *she* was well, and had outlived so many people.

Bad old woman, Elizabeth thought, and then was surprised at herself; Aunt Morgen had been very kind to her. "Bad old woman," and she realized that she had spoken it aloud. Suppose she hears me, Elizabeth thought, and giggled. "Bad old woman," she said, very loudly indeed.

"Did you call me, kiddo?"

"No, thank you, Aunt Morgen."

Lying softly in her bed, the pain in her back lessening and the headache fading in the darkness, Elizabeth sang, wordlessly and almost without sound, to herself. The tune she used was of nursery rhymes, of faded popular songs, of whispers and fragments of tune she had heard long ago, and, singing, she fell asleep. She did not hear Aunt Morgen pass down the hall, nor perceive Aunt Morgen's belated conscientious glance in through her doorway; she did not hear Aunt Morgen whisper, "You all right, kiddo?"

* * *

Aunt Morgen slept soundly of a night and awoke, ordinarily, ill-humored; it did not, therefore, surprise Elizabeth to awaken to Aunt Morgen's displeasure. Elizabeth had lain quietly in bed for perhaps ten minutes, knowing from experience that, once awake, she would not fall asleep again, and, testing delicately, had decided that although she still had her backache, it was so much improved by a good night's rest that she might certainly get up and go to work. The headache still pulsed somewhere at the back of her head, and she repeated what was — although she was not aware of it — an habitual gesture, that of rubbing her hand violently against the back of her neck, as though she might possibly rub the nerves there into submission, and anesthetize them against the pain; this habit was one of several persistent nervous gestures she used, and it did her headache no good whatsoever. When she came downstairs, dressed as neatly as usual, she came into the kitchen where Aunt Morgen, still in her bathrobe, sat sullenly at the kitchen table drinking her coffee. Elizabeth said "Good morning," and went to the refrigerator for milk. When she sat down at the table opposite Aunt Morgen she said "Good morning, Aunt," and still received no answer; when she looked up she realized that Aunt Morgen was regarding her angrily and without the ordinarily misty look of early morning. “My headache is better,” Elizabeth said timidly.

“So I see,” said Aunt Morgen. She tapped ominously on the edge of her coffee cup and prepared her face, by turning down the corners of her mouth and narrowing her eyes, for heavy irony. “I am happy,” she said deeply, “to know that your health was so much improved that you were able to leave your bed.”

“I thought I would go to work; I—”

“I was not referring,” said Aunt Morgen, “to your present state. The improvement in your health to which I refer took place, I should say, at approximately one o’clock this morning.” She stopped to light a cigarette, her hand shaking noticeably with fury. “When you decided to go out,” she finished.

“But I didn’t go out anywhere, Aunt Morgen. I slept all night.”

“Do you really suppose,” Aunt Morgen said, “that *I* am unaware of what goes on in my own house? Do you really suppose, you overgrown baby, that *I* am going to be taken in by your pretense of being sick and be sympathetic and bring you hot water bottles and give you pills and come to see how you are and put you to bed and be as nice as I can, and then for all my pains get laughed at? Do you really *suppose,*” Aunt Morgen went on, her voice rising intolerably, “that I don’t *know* what you’re *doing?*”

Elizabeth stared, speechless; childish defenses came back to her, and she dropped her eyes and looked at her glass of milk, and twisted her fingers together, and trembled her lip, and stayed quiet.

“Well?” Aunt Morgen leaned back. “Well?”

“I don’t know,” Elizabeth said.

“You don’t know *what?*” Aunt Morgen’s voice, softer for a moment, rose again. “*What* don’t you know, fool?”

"I don't know what you mean."

"I mean what's going on in my house, I mean what you're doing, I mean whatever dirty horrible nasty business you do in the middle of the night that even your own aunt can't know about and you have to sneak out like a dirty thief, going down the stairs with your shoes in your hand—"

"I didn't."

"You did. And I will *not* be lied to. Now," said Aunt Morgen, rising and leaning terribly across the table, "I mean to hear, before you leave this house today, exactly what you think you're getting away with. And the sooner," said Aunt Morgen, "the better."

"I didn't."

"It won't do you any good. Where did you go?"

"I didn't go anywhere."

"Did you walk? Or was someone waiting for you?"

"I didn't."

"*Who?* Who was waiting to meet you?"

"No one. I didn't do anything."

"Who was he?" Aunt Morgen slammed her hand down onto the table so that Elizabeth's glass of milk rocked and spilled; the milk ran to the edge of the table and dripped onto the floor, and Elizabeth was afraid to move to find a cloth to wipe it up; she was afraid to do anything more than sit, avoiding Aunt Morgen's eyes and twisting her hands under the table. "Who?" Aunt Morgen demanded.

"No one."

Aunt Morgen opened her mouth, gasped, and took hold of the edge of the table with both hands. She closed her eyes tightly, shut her mouth, and stood, visibly calming herself.

After a minute she opened her eyes and sat down, and spoke quietly. “Elizabeth,” she said, “I didn’t want to frighten you. I’m sorry I lost my temper. I realize that by yelling at you I’m doing more harm than good; suppose I try to explain.”

“All right,” Elizabeth said. She looked quickly at the milk, and it was still running off onto the floor.

“Look,” Aunt Morgen said persuasively, “you know that as your only guardian I feel a great deal of responsibility. After all,” she said with a friendly grin, “I was your age once, much as I hate to admit it, and I can remember how hard it is to feel that people are keeping an eye on you. You feel independent, and free, and sort of as though you don’t *have* to account to anybody for what you do. But please try to realize, kiddo, that as far as I’m concerned, you can go ahead and do whatever you please. I’m not a dragon, or one of your fidgety old maids who faints when she sees a man. I’m your same crazy aunt, and I may be an old maid but I bet there’s not much left can make me faint.” Aunt Morgen hesitated and then, obviously resisting a train of thought which threatened to carry her away, went on firmly, “What I’m trying to say *is,* you don’t need to sneak in and out, and be afraid of my finding out something you’re ashamed of. If there’s some fellow you want to see, and you think for some reason I might mind your seeing him, don’t you think you’d be smarter to have me mad at you for seeing him — which I certainly couldn’t do anything about — than to have me mad at you for sneaking around and hiding things behind my back — which I certainly *can* do something about, and you just *watch* me — and all things considered, doesn’t it seem as though you’d be better off out in the open?” Aunt Morgen ran out of breath, and stopped.

“I guess so,” Elizabeth said.

"Then, look, kiddo," Aunt Morgen said gently, "suppose you just tell auntie what it's all about. Believe me, nothing is going to happen to you. You've got a *right* to do what you please, and remember, I'm not going to scold you, because *I* always did what I pleased, and I can remember perfectly well how you feel."

"But I didn't," Elizabeth said. "I mean, I didn't do anything."

"Suppose you didn't *do* anything," Aunt Morgen said reasonably, "that's still no reason for not telling me, is it?" She laughed. "It's if you *did* do something you ought to be scared," she said.

"But I mean I didn't do *any*thing."

"Then what *did* you do?" Aunt Morgen asked. "What on earth can you find to do at that hour of the night if you didn't *do* anything?" She laughed again, and shook her head, bewildered. "What a *hell* of a way to talk," she said. "Don't you know any honest words?"

"No." Elizabeth thought. "I mean," she said, "I didn't *do* anything."

"Good lord," Aunt Morgen said. "Good holy lord God almighty, I can't *say* it again. Are there any words," she asked delicately, "which might communicate with your dainty brain? I am trying to ask you precisely what occurred, and with whom, at one o'clock last night."

"Nothing," said Elizabeth, twisting her hands.

"I am by now completely convinced that it was nothing," said Aunt Morgen fervently. "I am only astonished that he could have expected anything else. There must be people," she said as though to herself, "like that in the world, but how does she find them? Who, then," she continued to Elizabeth, "was this optimistic young man?"

"No one," said Elizabeth.

"Blood from a stone," said Aunt Morgen, "gold from sea water, fire from snow. You're your mother's own daughter, mud up to the neck." She laughed, unexpectedly good-humored. “I don’t know *why*,” she said, still laughing, “I should believe that *you* would go out on a cold night to meet a young man. My own private guess, being you’re your mother’s daughter, is that you’d make a big mystery of going out to mail a letter, and hope someone would think the worst of it. Or to find a nickel you lost last week. And if it *is* some fellow,” she added, pointing jeeringly at Elizabeth, “I’ll bet your poor dear father’s fortune *he* isn’t fooled. You’re like your mother, kiddo, a cheat and a liar, and neither of you could ever get around me.”

“But I didn’t,” Elizabeth said helplessly.

“Of course you didn’t,” Aunt Morgen said. “Poor baby.” She rose and left the kitchen, and Elizabeth was finally able to get the dishcloth and wipe up the spilled milk.

* * *

There was still a gaping hole in her room at the museum, and it stayed just beyond her left elbow all day. In the morning mail, which included a letter asking the museum for a complete listing of the exhibits in the Insect Room, and a letter asking for a final decision upon an unparalleled collection of Navajo hammered silver, there was another letter for Elizabeth. “ha ha ha,” it read, “i know all about you dirty dirty lizzie and you cant get away from me and i wont ever leave you or tell you who i am ha ha ha.”

Coming home that afternoon with the letter in her pocketbook Elizabeth stopped suddenly on the street between the bus stop and her aunt’s house. Someone, she thought distinctly, is writing letters to *me.*

She put this letter also into the red valentine box which had held chocolates on her twelfth birthday, and opened and reread the other two. “i will catch you...” “She’s all I have...” “you cant get away from me...”

“Well?” Aunt Morgen said after dinner. “You decided to give in?”

"I didn't do anything."

"You didn't do anything," Aunt Morgen said. "All right." She looked coldly at Elizabeth. "You got another one of your phony backaches?"

"Yes. I mean, I have my backache again. And my head aches."

"For all the sympathy you'll get from *me* tonight," Aunt Morgen said heavily. "How often you think you can get away with it?"

* * *

"And how is our poor head *this* morning?" Aunt Morgen inquired at breakfast.

"A little better, thank you," said Elizabeth, and then she saw Aunt Morgen's face. "I'm sorry," she said involuntarily.

"Have a pleasant time?" Aunt Morgen asked. "Poor devil still hoping?"

"I don't know—"

"You don't *know?*" Aunt Morgen's irony was heavy. "Surely, Elizabeth, even your mother—"

"I didn't."

"So you didn't." Aunt Morgen turned back to her coffee. "How do you feel?" she asked finally, grudgingly.

"About the same, Aunt Morgen. My back hurts, and my head."

"You ought to see a doctor," Aunt Morgen said, and then, standing abruptly, and slamming her hand on the table, "honest to *God,* kiddo, you *ought* to see a *doctor!*"

* * *

"... and i can do whatever i want and you cant do anything about it and i hate you dirty lizzie and youll be sorry you ever heard of me because now we both know youre a dirty dirty dirty..."

* * *

Elizabeth sat on her bed, counting her letters. Someone had written her lots of letters, she thought fondly, lots of letters; here were five. She kept them all in the red valentine box and every afternoon now, when she came home from work, she put the new one in and counted them over. The very feel of them was important, as though at last someone had found her out, someone close and dear, someone who wanted to watch her all the time; someone who writes letters to me, Elizabeth thought, touching the papers gently. The clock on the stair landing struck five, and reluctantly she began to gather the letters together, folding them neatly and putting them back into their envelopes. She would not like to have Aunt Morgen see her letters. They were all safely back in the box and she had put away the chair she stood on to put the box onto the shelf of her closet, when the door crashed open and Aunt Morgen came in. "Elizabeth," she said, "kiddo, what's *wrong?*"

"Nothing," said Elizabeth.

Aunt Morgen's face was white, and she held tight to the doorknob. "I've been calling you," she said. "I've been knocking on your door and calling you and outdoors looking for you and calling you and you didn't answer." She stopped for a minute, holding tight to the doorknob. "I've been calling you," she said at last.

"I've been right here. I was just getting ready for dinner."

"I thought you were—" Aunt Morgen stopped. Elizabeth looked at her anxiously, and saw that she was staring at the table by the bed. Turning, Elizabeth saw one of Aunt Morgen's brandy bottles on the table. "Why did you put that in my room?" Elizabeth asked.

Aunt Morgen let go of the doorknob and came toward Elizabeth. "God almighty," she said, "you *stink* of the stuff."

"I don't." Elizabeth backed away; Aunt Morgen, unreasonably, frightened her. "Aunt Morgen, please let's go have dinner."

"Mud." Aunt Morgen took up the brandy bottle and held it to the light. "Dinner," she said, and laughed shortly.

"Please, Aunt Morgen, come downstairs."

"I," said Aunt Morgen, "am going to my room." Eyeing Elizabeth, she backed toward the door, the brandy bottle in her hand. "*I* think," she said, her hand again on the doorknob, "that *you* are drunk." And she slammed the door behind her.

Perplexed, Elizabeth went over to sit on the bed. Poor Aunt Morgen, she thought, I had her brandy. Absently, she noticed that the bedside clock said a quarter past twelve.

* * *

"... i know all about it i know all about it i know all about it dirty dirty lizzie dirty dirty lizzie i know all about it..."

* * *

Because the next day there was proof to correct on the museum catalogue, Elizabeth, with her new letter safely in her pocketbook, did not leave the building until quarter past four, when the workmen were already engaged on the hidden structure of the building. As a result, she missed her usual bus home. When she finally came into the kitchen where Aunt Morgen sat drinking her brandy, Elizabeth saw first that Aunt Morgen had not eaten any dinner, and then she looked up into her aunt's hard stare. Wordless, Elizabeth could only hold out placatingly the box of chocolates she suddenly discovered she was carrying.

* * *

Mr. and Mrs. Arrow fancied themselves as homey folk in a circle where all their acquaintance collected Indian masks, or read plays together of an evening, or accompanied one another on the sackbut; Mr. and Mrs. Arrow served sherry, and played bridge, and attended lectures together, and even listened to the radio. Mrs. Arrow was accustomed to deplore as extreme Aunt Morgen's habit of going to the movies alone, and both Mr. and Mrs. Arrow felt that Elizabeth was allowed too much freedom; Mrs. Arrow had said as much, indeed, to Aunt Morgen when Elizabeth first went to work at the museum. "You allow that girl too much leeway, Morgen," Mrs. Arrow had said, making no bones about the way she felt, "a girl like Elizabeth takes more watching than one of your... one of those... that is to say, Elizabeth, you know as well as I do, takes watching. Not that Elizabeth's not *normal*." Mrs. Arrow had stopped and lifted her eyes to heaven and spread her hands innocently, so that no one would ever believe that Mrs. Arrow meant to imply for a minute that Elizabeth was anything apart from normal, "I don't mean that at all," Mrs. Arrow explained earnestly. "What I mean is, Elizabeth is an unusually sensitive girl, and if she is going to go off by herself every day for long periods of time, it would be most judicious, Morgen, most wise of you, to check *care*fully that she is always among people of the most genteel sort. Of course," Mrs. Arrow went on, nodding reassuringly, "over at the museum they're mostly *volunteer* workers. I always think," she finished, "that it's so *kind* of them."

Mr. Arrow had at one decisive point of growth taken a set of singing lessons to improve his poise, and he was still very apt to sing when even very slightly invited to; Mr. Arrow customarily entertained guests with songs like "Give a Man a Horse He Can Ride," and "The Road to Mandalay," and Mrs. Arrow accompanied him on the piano, pedalling furiously and occasionally humming the easy parts; “For God’s sake,” Aunt Morgen said to Elizabeth, pressing her finger insistently upon the doorbell, “don’t ask Vergil to sing.”

“All right,” Elizabeth said.

“Ruth,” Aunt Morgen said, as the door opened, “how good to see you again.”

“How are you, how are you,” said Mrs. Arrow, and Mr. Arrow, behind her in the hall and smiling largely, said “How are you? And here is Elizabeth, too; how are *you,* my dear?”

Because the Arrows neither collected Indian masks nor patronized a decorator, they were forced to use ordinary pictures on their walls, and whenever Elizabeth thought of the Arrows’ home she remembered the bright reproductions of country gardens and placid smooth hills and sunsets; the Arrows also had an umbrella stand in their hallway, although both of them laughed about it and Mr. Arrow, in his faint deprecating way, said that after all it *was* the very best place to put wet umbrellas. When Elizabeth, coat neatly hung in the Arrows’ hall closet, sat in a great chair in the Arrows’ living room, with her hands folded correctly in her lap and Aunt Morgen spreading herself comfortably in just such another chair, and Mr. and Mrs. Arrow nervously together on the sofa, Elizabeth felt safe.

The whole room partook somehow of the smooth hills and sunsets; the chair in which Elizabeth sat was soft and deep and upholstered in a kind of cloudy orange, her feet lay on a carpet in which a scarlet key design ran in and out and around a geometric floral affair in green and brown, and the wallpaper, pervading and emphasizing the room, and somehow the Arrows, presented the inadvertent viewer with alternate squares of blue and green, relieved almost haphazardly by touches of black. There was nothing of harmony, nothing of humor, in the Arrows’ way of life; there was everything of compromise and yet, comfortably, a kind of deep security in the unmistakable realization that all of this belonged without dispute to the Arrows, was unmovable and after a while almost tolerable, and was, beyond everything else, solid. Not even Aunt Morgen could deny the Arrows the reality of their living room, and when one met them at a lecture on reincarnation, or walking placidly together toward the park on a Sunday afternoon, or dining at the home of one of those odd people who always seemed to invite them, Mr. and Mrs. Arrow brought with them, and spread infectiously, an air of unfading wallpaper and practical carpeting, of ironclad and frequently unendurable mediocrity.

From where she sat Elizabeth could see her own reflection in the polish of the grand piano, and sparks from her own face glancing off the cut glass bowl of wax fruit, and glitters when she moved her hand, flashing and glinting, from the gilt mirror over the marble mantel and the glass beads on the lampshade and Mr. Arrow's cuff links and the painted jar on the table, kept always full of sugared almonds. Mr. Arrow was going to get them some sherry, Mrs. Arrow hoped they would take a chocolate, Mr. Arrow was willing to break the ice with a song, if anyone liked; Mrs. Arrow wondered if Elizabeth was not getting thin, and the lights danced on the glass of the picture where the roses and peonies were massed in the country garden. Elizabeth identified a disturbance; she was getting one of her headaches. She rubbed the back of her neck against the chair, and moved uneasily. The headache began, somehow, at the back of her head and progressed, creeping and fearful, down her back; Elizabeth thought of it as a live thing moving down her backbone, escaping from her head by the narrow avenue which was her neck, slipping onto and conquering her back, taking over her shoulders and finally settling, nestled in safety, in the small of her back, from which it could not be dislodged by any stretching or rubbing or rolling; to a large extent her rubbing the back of her neck was an attempt to cut off the path of this live pain; firm enough rubbing might make it turn back, discouraged, and keep only to her head; " — museum?" Mrs. Arrow asked her.

"I beg your pardon?" Elizabeth said to Mrs. Arrow.

"Are you well, Elizabeth?" Mrs. Arrow asked, peering. "Do you feel all right?"

"I have a headache," Elizabeth said.

"Again?" Aunt Morgen asked.

"It will go away," Elizabeth said, sitting still. Mr. Arrow would bring her an aspirin, and thought he might better not sing until her poor head was better; Mr. Arrow remarked smilingly to Aunt Morgen that frequently the headtones of the human voice were most irritating to the sensitive membranes of the brain, although, of course, many people found it soothing to be sung to when their heads ached. Mrs. Arrow had a kind of headache pill which she had always found more efficacious than aspirin, and would be delighted to bring one to Elizabeth; Mrs. Arrow herself always took two of these pills, but felt that Elizabeth had better not at first venture more than one. Aunt Morgen thought that Elizabeth should have her eyes examined, because these headaches came so often, and Mr. Arrow told about the headaches he had had before he got *his* glasses. Mrs. Arrow said that she would be very happy to go and get Elizabeth one of her headache pills if Elizabeth thought it would help and Elizabeth said untruthfully that she felt better now, thank you. Because everyone was looking at her she picked up the glass of sherry which Mr. Arrow had poured for her, and sipped at it daintily, loathing the underneath bitter taste of it, and feeling her head swim sickeningly.

“ — to breed Edmund,” Mrs. Arrow was saying to Aunt Morgen. “It seems like a long way to go, of course, but we felt, Vergil and I, that it was worth it.”

“Got to take a lot of care with that kind of thing,” Mr. Arrow said.

“I remember,” Aunt Morgen began, “when I was about sixteen—”

“Elizabeth,” Mrs. Arrow said, “are you *sure* you feel all right?”

Everyone turned again and looked at her, and Elizabeth, sipping at her sherry, said, “I feel fine now, really.”

“I don’t like the way that girl looks,” Mrs. Arrow said to Aunt Morgen, and shook her head worriedly, “she doesn’t look well, Morgen.”

“Peaked,” Mr. Arrow amplified.

“She used to be strong as a horse,” Aunt Morgen said, turning to look intently at Elizabeth. “Lately she’s been getting these headaches and backaches and she hasn’t been sleeping at all well.”

“Growing pains,” Mrs. Arrow said tentatively, as though there was still a chance that it might turn out to be something worse. “She could be working too hard, too.”

“Young girls,” Mr. Arrow said profoundly.

“How old *is* Elizabeth?” Mrs. Arrow asked. “Sometimes when a girl spends too much of her time alone....” She gestured delicately, and dropped her eyes.

“I’m all right,” Elizabeth said uneasily.

“Fanciful,” Mr. Arrow said, with a gesture reminiscent of Mrs. Arrow’s. “Wrong ideas,” he added.

“I’ve been wondering if she ought to see Doctor Ryan,” Aunt Morgen said. “This business of not sleeping....”

“Always just as well to go with the *first* symptoms,” Mrs. Arrow said firmly. “You never know what might turn up *later.*”

"General check-up," said Mr. Arrow roundly.

"I think so," Aunt Morgen said. She sighed and then smiled at Mr. and Mrs. Arrow. "It's a great responsibility," she said, "my own sister's child, and yet it's not as though I've been much of a *mother.*"

"*No* one could have been more conscientious," Mrs. Arrow declared, immediately and positively. "Morgen, you must *not,* you simply must *not,* blame yourself; you've done a *splendid* job. Vergil?"

"Fine job," said Mr. Arrow hastily. "Often thought about it."

"I've always tried to think of her as though she was my own," Aunt Morgen said, and the sudden quick smile she sent across the room to Elizabeth made the words almost pathetic, because they were true. Elizabeth smiled back, and rubbed her neck against the chair.

" — Edmund," Mrs. Arrow was saying.

"But I don't understand," Aunt Morgen said. "Was the mother brown?"

"Apricot," Mrs. Arrow said reprovingly.

"That was why we had to go so far out of town," Mr. Arrow explained. "We wanted to get just the *right* color combination. But of course," he went on mournfully, "as it turned out, we could have saved ourselves a trip."

"It *is* a shame," Aunt Morgen said.

"So of *course* we *had* to take the black one," Mrs. Arrow said, and shrugged, to show how helpless they had been.

Mr. Arrow touched his wife on the shoulder. "All water under the bridge," he said. "How about a little music? Elizabeth's head all right?"

"Fine," said Elizabeth.

"Well, then," said Mr. Arrow, moving with speed toward the piano. "Ruth? Care to play along?" As his wife rose and came toward the piano, Mr. Arrow turned to Aunt Morgen. "Which shall it be? Mandalay?"

“Lovely,” said Aunt Morgen, settling herself into her chair and reaching without formality for the sherry decanter. “Mandalay would be perfectly grand.”

Elizabeth opened her eyes then because instead of the sound of the piano playing the introduction to “The Road to Mandalay,” there was a silence, and then Mr. Arrow said, “Well, really.” He closed the music on the piano and said to Elizabeth, “I’m sorry. I *asked* if your head was all right. Really,” he said to Mrs. Arrow.

“He did, you know, Elizabeth,” Mrs. Arrow said. “I’m sure no one wants to *make* you listen.”

“I beg your pardon?” Elizabeth said, perplexed. “I *want* to hear Mr. Arrow sing.”

“Well, if it was a joke,” Aunt Morgen said, “it was in extremely poor taste, Elizabeth.”

“I don’t understand,” Elizabeth said.

“It’s all forgotten now, anyway,” Mr. Arrow said peaceably. “We’ll go ahead, then.”

Elizabeth, waiting again, again heard only silence and opened her eyes to find them all looking at her. *“Elizabeth,”* Aunt Morgen was saying, chokingly and half-rising from her chair, *“Elizabeth.”*

“Never mind, Morgen, really,” Mrs. Arrow said. She got up from the piano bench, her hands shaking and her mouth tight. “I’m certainly *surprised,*” Mrs. Arrow said.

Mr. Arrow, not looking at Elizabeth, folded the music slowly and put it with some care onto the other music on the back of the piano. After a minute he looked around the room, smiling his faint smile. “Let’s not have our nice evening spoiled, ladies,” he said. “Sherry, Morgen?”

“I have never *been* so humiliated,” Aunt Morgen said. “I can’t understand it at *all.* I do apologize, Vergil, I honestly do. All I can say is—”

“Please don’t mind it,” Mrs. Arrow said. She put her hand gently on Aunt Morgen’s arm. “Let’s forget all about it.”

“Elizabeth?” Aunt Morgen said.

“What?” said Elizabeth.

“ — feel all right?”

“What?” said Elizabeth.

“She ought to lie down or something,” Mr. Arrow said.

“I had no idea—” Mrs. Arrow said.

“She’s taken eight glasses of sherry, by *my* count,” Aunt Morgen said grimly. “Where she ought to be is home in bed; I never saw her drink *any*thing before.”

“But just sweet sherry—”

“ — see a doctor,” said Mrs. Arrow wisely. “Can’t be too careful.”

“Elizabeth,” Aunt Morgen said sharply, “put down your cards and get up and put on your coat. We’re going home.”

“Must you?” Mrs. Arrow asked. “I don’t really think she needs to go *home.*”

Aunt Morgen laughed. “Three rubbers of bridge is about *my* limit,” she said. “And Elizabeth has to get up in the morning.”

“Well, it’s been lovely to have you,” Mrs. Arrow said.

“Come again soon,” Mr. Arrow said.

“We’ve enjoyed it *so* much,” Aunt Morgen said.

“Thank you for a very nice time,” Elizabeth said.

“It was nice to see you, Elizabeth. And, Morgen, do make a point of getting to that science lecture. Maybe we can all go together—”

“Thanks again,” Aunt Morgen said.

When the door had closed behind them and they were going down the walk in the cool night air Aunt Morgen took Elizabeth's arm and said, "Look, kiddo, you frightened me. Are you sick?"

"I have a headache."

"No wonder, after all that sherry." Aunt Morgen stopped under the street light and took Elizabeth's chin and turned her face to look at her. "You're *not* tight on sherry," Aunt Morgen said, wondering. "You look all right and you talk all right and you walk all right — there *is* something wrong. Elizabeth," she said urgently, "*what* is it, kiddo?"

"Headache," Elizabeth said.

"I wish you'd talk to me," Aunt Morgen said. She put her arm through Elizabeth's and they began to walk on. "I get so goddamned *worried*," Aunt Morgen said. "All during the bridge game I—"

"What bridge game?" Elizabeth said.

* * *

"Well, now, Morgen," Doctor Ryan said. He leaned back in his chair and the chair creaked under his huge weight, as it had been doing, Elizabeth thought, all her lifetime; she had never thought of it so clearly before, but all she remembered of Doctor Ryan after leaving his office was the way his chair creaked. "Well, now, Morgen," Doctor Ryan said. He put his fingers together in front of him and raised his eyebrows and looked quizzically at Aunt Morgen. "Always *were* one to get het up about trifles," he said.

"Hah," said Aunt Morgen. "*I* can remember a time, Harold Ryan—"

They both laughed, similarly, greatly, looking at one another with wrinkles of laughter around their eyes. "Damn disrespectful woman," Doctor Ryan said, and they laughed.

Elizabeth looked at Doctor Ryan's office; she had been here before, with her mother, with Aunt Morgen; Doctor Ryan had been here in this office ever since Elizabeth could remember, and so far as Elizabeth knew he had no other home. He had been in Aunt Morgen's house when her mother died, his arm around Aunt Morgen's shoulders, his great voice saying small things; he had come once in the night, looming jovially at the foot of Elizabeth's bed, speaking coolly through the feverish, inflamed phantoms crowding the pillow; "You're making quite a fuss, my girl," he had said then, "over nothing but a couple of measles." The rest of the time, the rest of Elizabeth's life, Doctor Ryan had been here in this office, leaning back in his chair and making it creak. Elizabeth did not know the names on the backs of any of the books in the glass-doored case behind Doctor Ryan's back, but she knew peculiarly well the tear on the leather spine of the one third from the end on the second shelf, and wondered, now, if Doctor Ryan ever turned around and took down one of the books to look at. While Doctor Ryan and Aunt Morgen laughed, Elizabeth looked at the grey curtains over the window, and the books, and the glass inkwell on Doctor Ryan's desk, and the little ship model which Doctor Ryan had made himself, long ago, when his fingers were nimbler.

"But honestly, Harold," Aunt Morgen said, "she *did* frighten me. There was poor old Vergil, just opening his mouth, and Elizabeth shouts out this *obscenity — I* mean, honestly—" Aunt Morgen's lips moved, and she made a visible effort to keep from smiling. "I mean," she said helplessly, "I've thought of it *myself*, when Vergil—" She put her hands over her face and began to rock back and forth. "If you could have seen..." she said. "Mandalay..."

Doctor Ryan covered his eyes with his hand. "Mandalay," he said in confirmation. "I've heard Vergil do Mandalay," he added.

"I didn't," Elizabeth said. "I mean, I didn't say anything."

Aunt Morgen and Doctor Ryan both turned their heads to look at her, both soberly interested.

"That's it," Aunt Morgen said. "I really don't think she *remembers.*"

Doctor Ryan nodded. "Physically, of course," he said, shrugging, "all you can do is check the things you *know* about. I can tell you she's overtired, or nervous, or some such nonsense, but then you can come right back at me with something you and I both know is impossible, and we're right back where we started. Tell you what *I* think we ought to do," Doctor Ryan said, suddenly determined, and reaching across his desk for a prescription pad, "there's an old friend of mine, fellow named Wright, Victor Wright. *You* know, Morgen, and *I* know, that I'd be the last person in the world to send Elizabeth to one of these psychoanalysts, knowing her the way I do; no telling *what* they might say. But I *do* want you to run over and see Wright, Elizabeth, and have him take a look at you. He's an odd duck," Doctor Ryan said to Aunt Morgen, "always been kind of interested in this kind of problem. No..." Doctor Ryan gestured, reassuringly. "No *couch* or anything, Morgen, you understand."

"You're a dirty old man, Harold," Aunt Morgen said agreeably.

Doctor Ryan looked up and grinned. "Aren't I?" he asked, pleased.

"Do you think if there's anything wrong this fellow will find it?" Aunt Morgen asked.

"There's nothing *wrong* with Elizabeth," Doctor Ryan said. "I think she's worried about something. Boys, maybe. You ever ask her about boy friends?"

Aunt Morgen shook her head. "I can't get her to talk to me at all."

"Well," Doctor Ryan said, rising, "if anyone can get it out of her, it's Wright."

Aunt Morgen got up and turned to Elizabeth, and then yelped. “Harold Ryan,” she said, “I’ve been telling you to cut that out for twenty-five years.”

“Still the best pinching surface in town,” Doctor Ryan said, and winked at Elizabeth.

2. DOCTOR WRIGHT

I BELIEVE I am an honest man. Not one of your namby-pamby modern doctors, with all kinds of names for nothing, and all kinds of cures for ailments that don't exist, and none of them able to look a patient in the eye for shame — no, I believe I am an honest man, and there are not many of us left. The young flashy fellows just starting out, who do everything except put their names in neon lights and run bingo games in the waiting room, are my particular detestation, and that is largely why I am putting my notes on the case of Miss R. into some coherent form; perhaps some one of your young fellows may read them and be instructed, perhaps not. I can remember joking with my late wife about a patient a doctor could get his teeth into — although that, too, I suppose, will be liable to misconstruction by your head doctors with their dreams and their Freuds; boys I brought into the world, too, some of them. It is gratifying to know that the extraordinary case of Miss R. was taken and solved and lies transcribed here for all the world to read, by an honest man; gratifying, at any rate, to myself. I make no excuses or apologies for my medical views, although perhaps my literary style will leave something to be desired, and I preface this account by saying, as I have said for forty years or more, that an honest doctor is an honest man, and considers his patient's welfare before the bills are sent in. My own practice has dwindled because most of my patients are dead — (that is another of my little jokes, and we'll have to get used to them, reader, before you and I can go on together; I am a whimsical man and must have my smile) — naturally, because they grew old along with me, and I survived 'em, being a medical man.

Thackeray says somewhere (and I had my finger on it not two days ago, somewhere in *Esmond,* anyway) that a man's vanity is stronger than any other passion in him; I've read that twenty times and more in as many years, and I daresay a good writer is much the same as a good doctor; honest, decent, self-respecting men, with no use for fads or foibles, going on trying to make our sensible best of the material we get, and all of it no better and no worse than human nature, and who can quarrel with that for durable cloth? And yet, along with Thackeray, I have my prides and my little passions, and perhaps fancying myself Author is not the least of them.

With all of this, there wasn't much joking in me the first time I met Miss R. poor girl. Ryan had made the appointment for her, and, to tell the truth, I wasn't much inclined to her at first, thought her a sullen type, perhaps. Young women who fancy "character-reading" or "fortune-telling" might have thought her shy. Colorless was a word came to my mind when I looked at her. She had brown hair, taken smoothly to the back of her head, and fastened there with strong combs or a bit of ribbon, maybe; brown eyes, hands long and graceful and quiet when she sat down, not fussing with her gloves or her pocketbook like these nervous women; altogether, if I may be permitted a term which has got sadly out of use, I thought Miss R. a gentlewoman. Her gown was suitable for her age and position; dark, neatly made and not at all stylish, perhaps even — although I liked it, I recall — a bit prim. Her voice was low and level, and I thought her cultured. I cannot recall that she ever laughed genuinely, although when she came to know me she frequently smiled.

Miss R.'s symptoms — dizzy spells, occasional *aboulia,* periods of forgetfulness, panic, fears and weaknesses which were causing her to function poorly at her employment, listlessness, insomnia — all indications of a highly nervous condition, perhaps of an hysteric, had been faithfully reported to me by that amiable blackguard Ryan, to whom her family had taken her when her state became too apparent to be ignored; like most families, the members of this one — in this particular case, I believe, only a middle-aged aunt — chose to overlook the obvious symptoms of nervousness in the patient, and excuse them variously and charitably until the case was too far advanced to be dismissed; I know of one family where it was not until a lad had made off with some thousands of dollars from his father's safe that his doting family confessed that he had been a sleepwalker since childhood! At any rate, Ryan, finding himself at a loss with regard to Miss R. when she did not respond to his usual treatments (nerve tonic, sedatives, rest in the afternoon), and knowing of my own interest in the deep problems of the mind (although, as I cannot say often enough, I am not one of your psychoanalysts, but merely an honest general practitioner who believes that the illnesses of the mind are as reasonable as the illnesses of the body, and that your analytical nastiness has no place in the thoughts of a decent and modest girl like Miss R.) he arranged with me to give her an appointment.

Miss Hartley, my nurse, had taken down the name of the patient, her address, age, and such vital information, and the card bearing these facts was set upon my desk when Miss R. entered.

She smiled at me almost timidly as she sat down; my office is so constructed as to display the maximum reassurance to timid patients — something your chromium and enamel physicians seem to regard as superfluous — and its dark rows of books (from my school days, madam; I admit it before you charge me) against the walls, its heavily curtained windows (enriched, my dear miss, with cigar smoke and ashes and a terror to moths therefrom) and its deep chairs and pillowed sofa (to which, sir, I would gladly at any convenient time admit your ample bottom, for an hour or so of comfortable sitting, and a glass of good wine and one of the cigars which Miss dislikes so much) — all this seemed to bring a measure of quiet to Miss R. who looked about her almost stupidly, but showed, at least, no immediate signs of hysterical terror, a reaction, I might point out, not unheard of in patients forwarded to me by good old Ryan. Miss R. set her long hands upon her lap, as one who has been well brought up and taught that a lady seats herself quietly, and looked steadily to one side of me, and wet her lips nervously, and smiled without meaning at the corner of my desk, and opened her mouth, and closed it again. "Well," I said heartily, to show that I knew she was there and that our interview had, so to speak, commenced itself, and my valuable time for which her aunt was paying had been placed at her entire disposal, "well, Miss R." I said, "what seems to be the trouble?"

I half-expected her to tell me. Sometimes — it is astonishing — a quiet girl who regards the corner of your desk will, without more than the faintest encouragement, bring herself readily to recount the most amazing fantasies, but she only dropped her eyes to examine the foot of the ashstand and said "Nothing."

"Probably," I agreed. "Probably nothing at all. But Doctor Ryan seemed to feel that you and I should have a little talk, and perhaps—"

"It's just wasting your time," she said.

"I suppose so." I dislike being interrupted, but Miss R. seemed so sure that she was well that I was curious; I confess I almost thought at that moment never to see her again. "Doctor Ryan says," I told her, consulting Ryan's note, "that you have difficulty sleeping."

"I don't," she said. "I sleep all right. My aunt told him I didn't sleep but I do."

"I see." I made a meaningless note, and said cautiously, "And the headaches?"

"Well," she said, moving her hands together slightly. I waited, thinking that she was going to continue, and then looked up expectantly. She was gazing raptly at my desk calendar, as though she had never seen such a thing before.

"And the headaches?" I repeated, a little sharp.

She looked at me squarely for the first time, dull, uninterested, stupid, turning her hands one within the other. "And the headaches?" I said. As though I had reminded her, she put one hand to the back of her neck, and closed her eyes; "And the headaches?" I said, and she looked at me, her eyes wide and aware of me, and said loudly, "I'm frightened."

"Frightened, Miss R.?"

"I haven't any headache," she said. "I feel fine."

"But frightened," I said. I noticed that I had begun to fidget with my letter opener, and put it down firmly on the desk and set my hands evenly one beside the other.

Miss R. folded her own hands neatly in her lap and smiled dully at the corner of the curtain.

"Well, now, Miss R." I said, wondering at myself for an intense desire to turn and look at the curtain with her, "suppose we..."

"Thank you very much, Doctor Wright," she said, rising. "I am sure you have done me a great deal of good. Am I to come again?"

"Please do," I said, scrambling out from behind the desk as she started for the door. "Perhaps Miss Hartley can give you an appointment for the day after tomorrow."

"Goodbye," she said. I sat down again as the door closed behind her, and had my look at the curtain, and reflected that if Miss R. could be brought to tell me anything at all of her ailments, it would not be willingly or even — I perceived even then — consciously.

That, then, was my first introduction to Miss R. (and before my reader gasps, and stops, and turns jeering to point at a grammatical error in the good doctor's notes, let me interject with dignity that I use the tautology "first introduction" deliberately, almost in the nature of a joke; I had, as my reader, abashed, will soon see, more than one introduction to this remarkable girl). My own opinion then, I will say honestly, was of a personality disturbed and beset with problems it was incapable of solving alone; I am not a maker of quick judgments and could not, even then, damn Miss R. with a pat name for her illness.

My own special hobbyhorse has long been hypnosis; the great and enduring good brought about by hypnotic treatments, its value in a case such as Miss R.'s, its soothing and consoling effect on the patient, have persuaded me after much practice and definite estimate of results that the skillful and sympathetic use of hypnosis is of inestimable value to the medical man whose patients justly fear placing themselves in the hands of your modern name-callers; I had determined already that hypnosis was the best — indeed, as I saw it, the only — method to induce Miss R. to reveal enough of her difficulties to aid us toward alleviating them, and hypnosis I determined to try.

On her second visit to my office, we again scrutinized the curtains, the ashstand, the calendar, and I spared a moment to wonder what poor old Ryan had made of her; I hesitated to return directly to her statement that she was frightened, and so began by covering the same ground as before; again she insisted that she slept perfectly well, that she had no headaches, and, going by her words alone, it would seem that a visit to a doctor was, to her way of thinking, an absurd and unreasonable imposition; when she looked at me directly, however, there was in her eyes the mute appeal of an animal (and I am an animal lover; I do not degrade Miss R. by the comparison; indeed, I have seen many dogs more intelligent and aware than Miss R. seemed then, on our second meeting) hurt beyond its understanding and longing for help.

"Are you afraid of me?" I asked her gently, at last.

She shook her head no.

"Are you afraid of Doctor Ryan?"

Again no.

"Of speaking to me of your illness?"

And she nodded her head yes. She regarded still the edge of the carpet, but I was persuaded that her answers related to my questions, and continued, heartened, "Do you have difficulty speaking?"

Yes again.

"Then will you permit me to hypnotize you?"

Staring at me then, eyes wide, she first shook her head violently no, and afterward, as one less frightened of the cure than its practitioner, nodded her head yes.

That, then, was Miss R.'s second priceless interview with Doctor Wright. I felt, however, that I had made progress; I could hardly boast that I had won my patient's confidence, but I had, at least — and I defy Ryan to say the same — had from her an answer to a question.

When she left I remarked casually that we would, then, attempt an hypnotic trance upon her next visit and so I was — from bitter and long-suffering experience — not more than mildly surprised when she entered my office upon the occasion of her next appointment with a step slower than usual and a look so furtive that she dared not face the curtain squarely, but regarded instead the toe of her shoe. She spoke at once, from the doorway, before I had even time to tell her good afternoon; “Doctor Wright,” she said, “I have to go. I can’t stay.”

“And why not, Miss R.?”

“Because,” she said.

“Because, Miss R.?”

“I have an appointment,” she said.

“With me, surely.”

“No, with someone else. I have to go back to work,” she added, inspired.

Our appointments, for alternate days, were always at four-thirty, since Miss R. left her employment at four; it was remotely possible that Miss R. might today be required to return to her office, but I said in a leisurely fashion, “Well, Miss R. and is this all true?”

She was unused to falsehood, and had the grace to blush. “No,” she said. She shifted her pocketbook to her other hand and said, “The truth is that my aunt is opposed to hypnotism.”

“Indeed?” I said. “I am astonished that it was not mentioned. Surely Doctor Ryan—”

“I agree with my aunt,” said Miss R. “I oppose hypnotism.”

I might perhaps have accepted this as a moderately reasonable attitude (considering, heaven help us, the fakeries and lies practiced upon the general public in the name of hypnosis, I am only surprised, sometimes, that the uninformed people of this world continue to respect medical men at all), even considering Miss R.’s extremely limited area of experience, and the unlikelihood of her having formed any very decided opinions about anything whatsoever, had I not observed, glancing at her at that moment, that her eyes were imploring me, almost as though, speaking, she wanted one thing and looking, another.

“Nevertheless,” I said firmly, “I intend to continue with the treatment as we agreed at your last visit.”

“How?” she asked, surprised. “If I don’t want you to?”

The look of entreaty which accompanied these words caused me to continue, as firmly, “It would be foolish to suppose that I could or would treat you against your will, nor would I wish to do so, but surely you cannot find any objection to continuing our conversation of your last visit? I found it most enjoyable.”

Warily, as though afraid that I might perhaps leap at her and force upon her my horrendous treatments, she moved toward her usual chair, and I found myself experiencing a strong relief when she was at last induced to sit quietly, and fix her gaze, as always, upon some unoffending object.

How to begin was not a problem; Miss R. having once been brought to consent to treatment, needed no further persuasion, I knew; what Miss R. needed was some method, palatably presented, whereby what she actually wanted (and of this I was positive by now, that she *did* want treatment, and by the means I suggested) could be offered her in disguise, as it were, so that her objections, however unreasonable, might be circumvented with her own unconscious aid. At any rate, with Miss R. whose mental resources were, to say the least, untapped, nothing so patently on the surface as her rejection of treatment needed to be dealt with by any more than the most perfunctory deviousness; I smiled amiably down at my desk and remarked that *at least* I might have the pleasure of conversing with her; she looked at me swiftly and away, perceiving the heavy emphasis I used and seeing what I meant her to see, that I was both vexed and disappointed.

“I’m sorry,” she said, and such a voluntary statement from Miss R. was worth almost any effort to me, in the step ahead it represented. “I wish I could let you hypnotize me.”

I bowed politely, as befits a gentleman whose generous offers have been civilly rejected (Victor Wright, Marquis of Steyne!) and I repressed my smile as I said smoothly, “Perhaps at another time; when we know one another better you will trust me.”

“I trust you,” Miss R. said uncertainly to the floor.

I endeavored to turn the conversation onto Miss R.’s family and her work, since discussion of her physical condition had found her so reticent, but discovered, as I had more than half expected, that Miss R. was ready with no more comprehensive descriptions of her family life or the museum where she was employed; indeed, at one point, despairing, I was almost persuaded that the girl was largely unaware of place and time, and might, if asked suddenly, have difficulty remembering her own name! I learned — through a cross-examination of which the Spanish Inquisitors might have been proud — that she was at this time doing a kind of menial clerical work at the museum, typing (the kind of a formal learned activity, requiring no imagination or inventive qualities in discovering the correct letters, which Miss R. might be expected to do splendidly) and dealing with routine correspondence (again, I ascertained, requiring no initiative) and matter-of-fact listings which required only the ability to copy down names and numbers.

It was this work which had suffered so extremely from her ill health, since she depended upon its income for her livelihood (although I strongly doubted whether her unknown aunt, no matter how heartless, would have let poor Miss R. starve for lack of an income, since various of Miss R.’s answers to my questions indicated that her aunt was in possession of what must have amounted, even today, to a fairly handsome fortune) and she would, without her occupation, have lost even that shred of independence left to her, and as a result — *mutatis mutandis* — suffered the worse. Her aunt had found her the job, persuaded her to take it, and encouraged her to continue at it, and I did Aunt the discourtesy of supposing that she, too, might have found Miss R.'s daily, regular absence a source of some refreshment. In answer to searching questions Miss R. admitted to having her headache still, and was further persuaded to agree that she did, after all, suffer from headaches almost constantly, and backaches almost as often. That Miss R. was entirely inert I soon had reason to doubt, for, seeing me glance once at the clock, she rose immediately, although I had supposed her regarding, as usual, the corner of the desk, and, remarking that her aunt expected her home, made as to take her leave. I assured her that I noted the clock because of an appointment of my own which was still almost two hours away, but could not prevail upon her to stay, although I felt most strongly that we were making a kind of progress.

"Doctor Wright," she said unexpectedly, pausing on her way to the door but not turning to look at me, "I think this is wasting your time. I have nothing wrong with me."

I smiled reassuringly, although unnecessarily, at her back. "If you were able to diagnose your own case, Miss R." I said, "you would hardly have to come to a doctor. Moreover," I went on, before she could point out that she had not come to a doctor at all, but had been sent, "one or two hypnotic sessions will surely show if there is nothing wrong."

"Goodbye," Miss R. said, and took her departure.

* * *

I need not further detail for the impatient reader (you are patient, sir? Then you and I are left behind, inhabitants of a slower and more leisurely time, when we were not restless with an author for his painstaking efforts to entertain us, and demanded paragraphs of rich and rewarding meditation, and loved our books for the leather and the weight; we are forgotten, sir, you and I, and must take our quiet contemplation in secret, as some take opium and some count their gold) — I need not further trouble the reader, then, with a meticulous account of the progress which I made in persuading Miss R. to permit hypnosis; she was finally brought to agree to a brief experiment, although I am assured that she thought herself yielding to a kind of sinfulness rather than an honest attempt at therapeutic assistance, since she insisted upon the provision that she should not be required to answer any "embarrassing" questions, and was not to remain under hypnosis for more than a minute or so — too little time, I could not help noting cynically (although privately, sir; I am not a monster!) for any overt nefarious act on my part. To all of these stipulations I acceded willingly, knowing that even a brief experiment would certainly ease Miss R.'s fears, and might even prove of some assistance in quieting her nervous illness. As I had long suspected, she was, once she had brought herself to the point, a willing and cooperative subject, and in a very short space of time I had subdued her into a light hypnotic slumber.

When she was breathing easily and quietly, her hands and face relaxed, and her feet resting comfortably upon a small footstool, I was agreeably surprised at her appearance of pleasant, intelligent comeliness and reflected at the time that very possibly Miss R.'s nervous constraints stretched even farther than headaches and sleeplessness, and threw over her whole personality an air of timidity and stupidity; I recall that I even wondered briefly if Miss R. might not be a gay and merry companion under her mask of illness. Marveling at the relaxation in her face, which for the first time seemed to me pretty, I asked her quietly, "What is your name."

"Elizabeth R." — without hesitation.

"Where do you live?"

She named her street and city address.

“Who am I?”

“You are Doctor Wright.”

“And are you afraid of me, Miss R.?”

“Of course not.” — smiling slightly.

It was most gratifying to see that, just as the anxious lines upon Miss R.’s face smoothed out under hypnosis, just as the tightness of her mouth relaxed and her voice lost its reluctance, so her funds of information were ready-tapped, as it were, and she answered my questions readily and without hesitation, although I had before heard from her only the briefest of replies and those spoken falteringly and with much hesitation; I foresaw, what I had believed all along, that with the priceless assistance of Miss R.’s own mind, freed of its pressure of constraint, we might easily and without terror soon have her as free from nervous ailments as the best of us.

At this first attempt, I was most unwilling to rouse Miss R. from her happy sleep, but, mindful of my promise to keep her in trance for only a minute or two, I emphasized in her mind (in the form of what is called *post-hypnotic suggestion,* a most compelling influence) the conviction that she would sleep soundly and dreamlessly that night, and awaken the next morning refreshed (concluding that, once we had Miss R.’s insomnia under control, we might be strengthened to attack the headache and backaches, which I half believed to be little more than the result of fatigue) and awakened her. Immediately she became the Miss R. of my previous acquaintance, sullen, silent, looking anywhere but at me as she asked immediately, “What did I say?”

Silently I passed her my notes across the desk, and she glanced at them hastily and then said in great astonishment, “Is this all?”

"Every word," I told her truthfully, although, needless to add, I had prudently kept back my own words which were to instill in her the suggestion of a night's dreamless sleep.

"Why did you ask me if I was afraid of you?"

"Because naturally a doctor's first duty is to establish trust between himself and his patient," I said glibly, and, no doubt still marveling at my tremendous restraint when she was — as I have no doubt she thought of it vividly — in my power, she arose shortly afterward and took her leave.

My treatment, as generally planned at that time, was simple enough for the most untutored layman to understand. Shorn of technicalities, my intentions were thus: through the use of hypnosis, under which I suspected Miss R. might speak and act far more freely than in a waking state, to discover and eliminate whatever strain was causing her deliberately to confine herself in an iron cage of uncommunicativeness and fear. I was positive that at some time lost to conscious memory, Miss R. had forsaken herself as she was meant to be, and imposed upon herself the artificial state of stupidity in which she had been living for so many years; I may liken this state and its cure to (if my reader will forgive such an ignoble comparison) a stoppage in a water main; Miss R. had somehow contrived to stop up the main sewer of her mind (gracious heaven, how I have caught myself in my own analogy!) with some incident or traumatic occurrence which was, to her mind, indigestible, and could not be assimilated or passed through the pipe. This stoppage had prevented all but the merest trickle of Miss R.'s actual personality from getting through, and given us the stagnant creature we had known. My problem was, specifically, to get back through the pipe to where the obstruction was, and clear it away. Although the figure of speech is highly distasteful to one as timid of tight places as myself, the only way in which I might accomplish this removal is by going myself (through hypnosis, you will perceive) down the pipe until, the stoppage found, I could attack it with every tool of common sense and clear-sighted recognition. There; I am thankful to be out of my metaphor at last, although I confess I think Thackeray might be proud of me for exploring it so persistently, and it does, I fear, portray most vividly my own diagnosis of Miss R.'s difficulty and my own problem in relieving it. Let us assume, then, that the good Doctor Wright is steeling himself to creep manfully down a sewer pipe (and I wonder mirthfully, whether by calling poor Miss R.'s mind a sewer I might not be approaching wickedly close to your psychoanalytic fellows, those plumbers to whom all minds are cesspools and all hearts black!). Oh, Miss Elizabeth R. to what a pass have you brought your doctor!

One other matter remains (and now I speak more seriously) which, in the interests of future clarity, ought now to be clearly understood. It has long been my habit — and I believe the practice of many who use hypnosis professionally as a therapeutic method — to distinguish between the personality awake and the personality in hypnotic trance by the use of numerical symbols; thus, Miss R. awake and as I originally saw her, was automatically R1, although use of the prime number did not necessarily mean that I regarded R1 as Miss R. well, or healthy, or fundamental; R1 was Miss R. the first, in my mind and in my notes. Miss R. then, in the light hypnotic trance in which I had already seen her, was R2, and in my notes I was of course easily able to distinguish between Miss R.'s comments and answers awake or asleep by noting whether my questions had been answered by R1 or R2, with already in my own mind a distinct preference for the answers, and, indeed, the whole personality, of R2.

Indeed, when Miss R. came again to my office two days later, I thought I detected already traces of R2 in her manner; her step was lighter, perhaps, and although she did not look directly at me she contrived to speak, beyond the sulky "Good afternoon" with which she always responded to my greeting; "I feel better already," she remarked, and I thought I saw a brief lightening in her face.

I was heartened, as any doctor must have been. "Splendid," I said. "Have you slept well?"

"Very well," said Miss R.

"However," I said, "we must not therefore assume—"

"So I won't be hypnotized again," said Miss R.

I was sorely tempted to speak to her tartly, to point out to her that her purely temporary feeling of well-being might without my assistance suddenly forsake her and lower her once more into the deep despondency from which I had a little way lifted her, and yet I only said gently, "Any treatment, even any clear diagnosis, of your case, dear Miss R. is impossible without adequate knowledge. I do not believe that voluntarily you can or will give me the information I need; in a state of hypnosis you will answer me freely and truly." Had I at this moment remembered her stricture upon "embarrassing" questions, I might not have been so blunt; at any rate, she subsided sullenly into her chair and did not answer. Regretting immediately my sharp words, I fell silent for a moment, so that my self-annoyance might not find utterance in remarks which might seem to be taking out on Miss R. my own irritation. So silent we sat both, and then at last, fetching a deep sigh, I smiled at myself and said frankly, "I do not ordinarily become angry with my patients; perhaps, my dear Miss R. you will do *me* good."

I had, without realizing it, found a way of procedure; Miss R. looked at me, and almost laughed. "I won't make you angry again," she promised.

"Indeed I believe you will, and it may be good for a stern fellow who tends to think of his patients as problems rather than as people. By all means, whenever you find me regarding you as a problem in arithmetic—" (or in sewage, I might have said; O unfortunate analogy!) " — do at once bring me sharply up by an appeal to my temper. You shall never find me wanting in anger, my dear."

We gazed amiably upon one another, quite as though Miss R. were already the person she might someday become, and I verily believe that in the brief moment of anger, and my graceless apology, we came closer together than we had been before. In any case, the unkind question of treatment, brought up of necessity once more, found Miss R. less inclined to flat refusal, and it must suffice to say that she was once again brought to submit herself to hypnosis. "But no embarrassing questions, please?" she asked, blushing as though ashamed of this insistence and yet constrained to make it, as a patient will ask a dentist over and over again not to let the extraction hurt. Since I had at this time no slightest notion of what might seem to Miss R.'s tender sensibilities an embarrassing question, I could only agree helplessly, like the dentist, and promise myself privately to fulfill the obligation as nearly as possible; I had at the same time a notion that Miss R.'s reading of embarrassing questions might be wholly different from my own; I had a conviction that my own assumption, in a like case, of what might constitute an "embarrassment" would be a line of questioning tending toward the point of stoppage in the pipe, but I strongly suspected that what Miss R. meant by "embarrassing" was precisely what any untutored young girl might mean by the word: i.e. anything she would be ashamed to discuss before me, any secrets the poor girl might possess, although these need not be — indeed, very probably were not — the secret I was in search of; I thought tolerantly of love letters and such, and resolved roundly that Miss R.'s maiden sentiments should remain her own still, untampered with by me.

As Miss R. slipped softly into the trance state, I was anxious to meet again the pleasant girl I had spoken with before, and welcomed the amiable face with the delight of one greeting a charming acquaintance; I had decided that it would be most proper and practical to initiate the little series of questions I had first asked as a formal beginning for all hypnotic questioning, establishing, as it were, a little ritual of introduction, and I hoped that after a short time it might have the double effect of reassuring Miss R. in the first moments of trance, and in addition, perhaps, serve as a complementary trance-inducement; that is, when Miss R. falling asleep, heard my familiar pattern, she would be confirmed in the hypnotic state. So, I began again, "What is your name?"

"Elizabeth R."

She again told me where she lived, and assured me that she had no fear of me. When I asked her if she remembered what she had told me upon her previous visit, R2 smiled and said she did, that she had told me she was not afraid of me, and she was not. I felt that this emphasis upon complete trust in myself was very necessary, and endeavored to stress constantly, in my questions and my manner, my utter and entire sympathy with her. I thought of myself, frequently, as fatherly, and often found myself addressing her as a fond parent speaks to a precious child.

Since I had not been restricted, upon this second attempt, to "only a minute or so," I was able to question Miss R. at greater length about her illness, which she admitted frankly in this trance state, and about her daily life; I learned, for instance, much more clearly, about her work at the museum, and her routine homelife with her aunt. I also learned, without really intending to press the matter, that the substantial fortune which kept Miss R. and her aunt so easily was in actuality the future property of Miss R. herself, left in trust by her father; and for years to come, through a skillful and (I must confess I thought it) foresighted maneuver among lawyers and bankers, would be administered entirely by Aunt, with due deference to Miss R.'s comfort and convenience; I do not pretend to understand financial matters, and Miss R. obviously knew less of them, even, than I, but I could not help applauding the wisdom which would preserve Miss R. secure and safe from the many pitfalls which must beset a very young girl possessed of a large fortune and as passive and acquiescent as Miss R. had shown herself to be. Aside from the casual remark which elicited this information, my questions were largely trivial, aimed as much at establishing communication as at securing information, and we got along swimmingly, until I asked, "And why did you refuse to be hypnotized at first, then?"

She wrung her hands, and turned helplessly in her chair, which was so much unlike her relaxed R2 trance state that I felt suddenly and strongly that we were getting, at last, to a closer view of Miss R.; after a minute, still wringing her hands, she brought out, "I won't answer that question." She spoke harshly, and as though reluctantly, and it was the first sign she had shown as R2 of lack of cooperation. I smiled privately at the fancy that I might have asked an "embarrassing" question, and so meekly abandoned the subject and went on, "And so you slept well?"

"Very well," she said, relaxing and smiling. "And thank you for telling me to sleep soundly, because I know that it was your idea."

"Why are you turning your hands in that fashion?" she had commenced twisting her fingers together again and bringing her hands insistently to her eyes.

"I want to open my eyes, but they won't open."

"I should prefer that you keep your eyes closed, if you please."

"But I *want* to open them." — petulantly.

"Closed, please."

"If I could open my eyes," she said wheedlingly, "then I could look at you, dear Doctor Wright."

"There is no need for your looking at me, dear Miss R. so long as you can hear me."

"But if I can't see you, then I don't choose to hear you."

And no question of mine, after that, could provoke a response. She set her lips stubbornly, folded her arms, and scowled, eyes shut. Seeing at last that further questioning was worse than useless, I gave her finally the same suggestions about sleeping well, and added that her appetite should be better, and, in no very good humor with my patient, awakened her. Again she asked me what she had said, but this time, instead of passing her my notes as before, I told her that she had become cross with me and refused to answer me at all. In genuine dismay she said impulsively, "I can't believe it of myself; what will you think of me?" And then, slyly, "Are you going to give up my case?"

I told her, believing her sincerely contrite, that such stubbornness was not unusual, and added humorously that I really believed her to be more stubborn asleep than awake, which made her laugh. We parted amiably, and good friends, and she came to my office the next day but one substantially more cheerful and gay, and much easier with me, as though my human vexation at her last visit had somehow proven us equally fallible, and close. There was color in her cheeks at this next visit, and she reported, almost chattering, that not only had she slept well and without waking during the past two nights but that (as I had suggested to her in hypnosis) her appetite had improved and her headache, which had troubled her intermittently for the past several years and almost constantly for the last few months, had vanished for the whole of the previous day and had only returned briefly this morning, disappearing by breakfast-time; this did much to confirm, of course, one of my beliefs about the headache and the backache and the appetite being all outgrowths, as it were, of the insomnia, and I had great hopes of all of these symptoms clearing away readily as Miss R. rid herself of the extreme fatigue from which she suffered. This must not be taken to mean that I felt Miss R.'s difficulties to be merely physical, and that all I had to do was persuade her through post-hypnotic suggestion that she should sleep well, and so cure her entirely; Ryan, even, could have accomplished *that* with a pill or two; my belief was sincerely that the trifling physical symptoms were precisely that — symptoms; the cure we were seeking must be applied for deeper and more insistently. I confess, too, that I perceived that the easier Miss R.'s physical state, the stronger her trust in me, and the easier, consequently, my endeavors toward understanding her.

She accepted the hypnotic trance readily by now, and fell without difficulty into her usual light slumber. Again I began formally by asking her who she was, and where she lived, and again she answered me without hesitation, smiling a little, and doing my heart good with her smiling, friendly face.

"Do you choose to hear me today?"

"Of course." — surprised.

"The other day you did not, you know."

"I? I could not have done such a thing."

I turned to my previous notes and read her her own remarks upon refusing to hear me if she could not open her eyes. As I read she brought up her hands and began again twisting them and rubbing at her face.

"Then," she asked, "may I open my eyes now?"

"I insist that you keep your eyes closed." I paused. "Do you choose to hear me with your eyes closed?"

"I suppose I must." — pettishly. "You won't leave me alone unless I do."

I frowned a little, at a momentary loss how to proceed, and it was at that moment, I think, that I received the most shocking blow of my life. I sat, as always, upon a stool next to Miss R.'s chair, with a low table next me upon which I could write my notes; Miss R. lay back in the large chair, with her feet on a footstool and a pillow behind her head. I remember that I looked at her for a minute, in the half-light the room was in with the curtain closed, and saw her almost clearly, her face pale against the dark chair, the merest line of late-afternoon sunlight touching her from the crack in the curtain. Her face was turned a little toward me, her lips still parted in a little smile, and her eyes, of course, closed. Her hands were at her breast, still twined together; she is like a sleeping beauty, I thought childishly; I wonder, though, how I ever thought her handsome. Because she was not, I saw, at all handsome, and as I watched her in horror, the smile upon her soft lips coarsened, and became sensual and gross, her eyelids fluttered in an attempt to open, her hands twisted together violently, and she laughed, evilly and roughly, throwing her head back and shouting, and I, seeing a devil's mask where a moment before I had seen Miss R.'s soft face, thought only, it cannot be Miss R.; this is not she.

A moment, and it was gone; the laughter ended, and she turned timidly toward me. "Please," she asked, "may I open my eyes?"

I awakened her at once; I was myself too shaken by the grotesque sight of her to be able to do more than bid her good afternoon; I believe she felt that I was displeased with her, and she would not have been far wrong; I was, as I say, shaken, and I am shaken now, writing of it. What I saw that afternoon was the dreadful grinning face of a fiend, and heaven help me, I have seen it a thousand times since.

* * *

I was not well in time for Miss R.'s next visit, nor the next, so it was nearly a week before she came again to my office. When she entered, and I greeted her, I felt rather than perceived what a good deal of our progress had been lost; from her reluctant step and sullen voice I realized that she was very nearly again the Miss R. who had come to me first. I felt this, I say, rather than perceived it, because when I glanced at her I saw only in her face the shadow of the grinning fiend who had laughed at me, and so I took my turn, in this visit, at looking at the table leg and the rug and a thousand other sane objects, that I might not look into Miss R.'s face. She for her part seemed restless, and in discomfort; she confessed to a return of her headache, and I had great difficulty in subduing her into the trance state; this may perhaps have been because of my own horror of hearing again that jeering laughter. Our visit was brief; I merely imposed the usual post-hypnotic suggestions, and awakened her; I was myself not entirely well, and unequal to great exertion.

On her next visit we seemed again to have gained ground; I felt that I had thrown off the clinging nervousness which resulted from my own illness, and was better able to cope — as one who has raised demons, and must deal with them — with any manifestation Miss R. might choose to exhibit while under hypnosis. We had very little difficulty, however; Miss R. fell almost immediately asleep, and we conversed, R2 and I, upon the several subjects we had before started, of her aunt, her home, her work. Once or twice she begged most pitifully to be allowed to open her eyes, but I was firm in my refusal, and she desisted for the time. When I awakened her, although there was still some constraint between us — the cause entirely unsuspected, I fear, on her side, poor girl — she bade me goodbye with a trace of her former friendliness. In my notes for that day I find the phrase “R2 unusually charming.” She wore a dress I had not seen before, I recall, of a somewhat lighter blue than was usual for Miss R.

It seemed, however, that we were never to step forward without going an equal step back; for every time I found cause to congratulate myself on some appearance of progress, I was given equal cause to despair. For, the next visit after the one when R2 had been so unusually charming, R1, or Miss R. arrived at my office in a state where I could not persuade her to answer me, or, indeed, to speak at all. Hypnosis was out of the question under these circumstances, and I could hardly dismiss my patient in tears; I had no recourse but to administer a soothing draught, and to wait. I busied myself at my desk, and let Miss R. compose herself in her chair; after a time, when it seemed that her agitation had subsided, I half-turned toward her, affectionately, and asked, “What has disturbed you so, dear Miss R.?”

Handkerchief again to her eyes, she held out to me a letter which, as helplessly, I took. “Do you want me to read this?” I asked, and she nodded.

I took it to my desk, where I had set my glasses, and held it under the lamp, and read, half-aloud: “Dear Mr. Althrop, The Museum of Natural Arts and Sciences of the City of Owenstown, although it would be pleased to display your interesting collection of matchbook folders, is nevertheless a non-profit, endowed organization, and as such is not in a position to pay for donated exhibits. Therefore, with great regret, I must inform you that you are a silly silly foolish girl and you are going to be sorry when i catch you —”

“Indeed,” I said. “Singular.” The letter was typewritten carefully, up to the line which began “you are a silly silly,” etcetera. These last few words were handwritten in heavy black pencil, in a straggling, ill-formed hand. "Singular indeed," I said again.

"I typed it this morning," Miss R. said, tormented into speech. "It was on my desk to finish this afternoon and when I came back from lunch it was like that and I—"

"Quietly," I said, "Miss R. quietly, please."

"But I don't want *him* to get the letter. Mr. Althrop."

"Surely not. Now, you say you discovered this when you came back from lunch?"

"It was right on my desk where I left it."

"Pardon me, dear Miss R. but is there anyone in your office who might wish to do you an injury? Discredit your work, perhaps?"

"I don't think so. I don't know of anyone, Mostly," said the poor girl, "they don't care whether I work or not."

"I see." I longed to speak to R2, to ascertain the truth of R1's opinions of her office mates, but the time was certainly not ripe for summoning my friendly R2, and I had to make what unwilling use I could of R1. I questioned her closely about her office, its availability to others, the time she had taken for lunch, even the Mr. Althrop to whom the letter was addressed, of whom she knew nothing. His letter had simply been given her to answer in the form used for such refusals, and that was all she knew — that, and the fact that the letter would now have to be done over, which, even considering Miss R.'s feelings about her personal neatness, seemed a disproportionate cause for her grief; she told me over and over that Mr. Althrop *must not* have the letter; she wanted, with more passion than I had seen R1 bring to anything, to take the letter off with her and hide it, and, even though I smiled at the childish notion that an error hidden is an error forgotten, I agreed with her that the letter must surely be done over, and offered, indeed, to aid her in an apology to her superiors for the delay, if such was required.

When Miss R. had calmed herself sufficiently, I sent her home. Our usual treatment was impossible after the upsetting experience in her office; I sent her home tranquil, and resolved to question R2 at the earliest opportunity, to see if she in turn could throw any light upon this bewildering experience. My hoped-for opportunity came at Miss R.'s next visit, when, seeing her in what was almost her old sullen state, I ventured to suggest our usual hypnotic treatment, and got a sulky permission, although I knew by that time — I believe Miss R. did not — that her permission was hardly necessary; I could by then subdue her into the trance state at will; without some strong motive for resisting, she could no longer revolt against my treatment. Thus is was possible for me to summon my friend R2 with ease, and I was splendidly glad to see her that day. My usual formalities regarding her name and address were spoken, I believe, in a tone of real jubilation, and I know she greeted me with equal enthusiasm. I never met R2 without a strong impulsive regret for the person Miss R. might well have been for all this time, so securely shut away, so well forgotten, and I believe that a large part of my determination upon Miss R.'s cure was exerted upon R2's behalf; perhaps I saw myself — even I! — as setting free a captive princess.

At any rate, it was with deep disappointment that I heard that R2, usually so helpful, was now completely in the dark about the ugly lines scrawled upon the bottom of Miss R.'s letter, and unable to help me at all. She could only suggest that Miss R. had, through her very inoffensiveness, made an enemy in her office who had chosen this cowardly means of avenging herself. "Not everyone," said R2 in her gentle way, "is as lucky as I am; everyone I meet is kind to me," and she smiled at me.

This explanation, however, seemed to me manifestly impossible, if only because it was as difficult to imagine Miss R.'s making an enemy as it was to imagine her making a friend. Beyond this R2 had no suggestions to offer, and I determined at last upon trying a method which I had so far not found necessary — i.e. a deeper hypnotic trance, in which I hoped should stand revealed those facts and incidents about which R2 was as ignorant as myself.

It was certainly true that the answers to many of our questions lay deeply hidden in Miss R. herself, and I believed implicitly that only the most penetrating investigation would disclose them. I therefore threw R2, my pretty one, into a deeper hypnotic sleep, and watched aghast as her soft features coarsened again into those of the fiendish face I so well remembered and which I already feared sincerely and instinctively. She first began those twistings of her hands which I remembered so well, and then her face contorted and — I at the same time wanting badly to awaken her, and drive out the possessing demon — her mouth turned crookedly down into the evil smile I had seen before, and she brought her hands to her eyes in what seemed a desperate attempt to open them.

Hence, Asmodeous, I thought, and said quietly, "I prefer your eyes closed, please."

"What," she said, or rather shouted, in the roughest voice I have ever heard, "you giving me orders again, wicked man? I warn you that one of these days I am going to eat you!" She began to laugh again, and, dismayed, I thought of adverting to my opening formula, hoping to quiet her. "What is your name?" I asked her, in my levellest tone.

She stopped laughing at once, and said demurely (and oh, the cruel crooked mask on the face of R2!) "I am Elizabeth R. doctor dear, indeed I am. You must not think, doctor dear, that because I am sometimes a little bit rude to you that I do not respect you deeply, very very deeply indeed, doctor dear, very deeply indeed."

This, said with an echo of the wild laughter, and an air of mockery that shocked me, coming from a person and face still strongly reminiscent of my own R2, almost with her own voice, interrupted my next question and I was still endeavoring to collect my thoughts when she went on in the same jeering voice, "And Elizabeth is going to tell you how sorry she is to have spoken to you so, doctor dear, indeed she will, and I myself am going to make her do it."

"I should think you would," I said irritably. "Now, please, Miss R. let us continue with the questions. I should like to hear more about this annoying letter which—"

She began to laugh again, and, mindful of my nurse in the next room, I attempted to quiet her by lowering my voice slightly so that she would have to be more restrained in order to hear me. "Do you think you are able to give me any information?" I asked.

"I can tell you all about it, my good friend."

"Yes?"

"And I will, too, if only..." She dragged out her sentence tormentingly. "If only you will let me open my eyes," she finished, laughing again.

Letter or not, I had had almost enough of this rude creature. "You will continue to keep your eyes closed," I said sharply, "and if you can give me any information, I certainly expect you to do so. Now, after you had typed the letter—"

"I? I cannot type."

"The letter," I said shortly, "was certainly typewritten."

"By her, surely. You don't expect that I trouble myself to do *her* work?"

I was bewildered. "Her?" I said.

"Elizabeth," she said in a great shout, "your dear Miss R. Lizzie the fool, Lizzie the simple." And she screwed her face up into a dreadful parody of Miss R.'s usual vacant expression. (And forgive me, reader, if I say that in the midst of my distress I was tempted to laugh; that she should mock R2 troubled me greatly, but R1 had no such hold upon my friendship.)

"Then," I asked her, "who are *you?*"

"I am myself, doctor dear, as you will soon find out. And who, do you suppose, are *you?*"

"I am Doctor Wright," I said, somewhat stiffly.

"No," she said, shaking her head and grinning at me from under her hands, "I believe you are an imposter. I believe you are Doctor Wrong." Her voice rose again in laughter. "And you are asking questions," she went on, shouting, "which are *most* embarrassing indeed."

"If you are not quiet," I said, with all the authority I could command, "I shall awaken you." This, spoken at random — and, indeed, what I most wanted at the moment to do — turned out to be an unexpectedly useful threat; she was immediately silent, and lay back against the chair.

"May I open my eyes?" she asked meekly.

"You may not."

"I *shall* open my eyes."

"You shall not."

"Someday," she said evilly, rubbing her hands against her eyes, "I am going to get my eyes open all the time and then I will eat you and Lizzie both." She was silent, and seemed to be meditating, and then she said quietly, "Doctor Wrong. And Lizzie the fool."

"Why, tell me, do you want to harm Elizabeth?"

There was another long pause, and at last she said, with hatred in her voice, "She's *outside,* isn't she?"

* * *

This was, indeed, a dismaying turn to Miss R.'s case. The cure had seemed so simple, so much a matter of time and patience before we set our feet on the right path and brought Miss R. home to health and vigor, and now, here, barring our way, gibbering and mouthing and shouting foulness, was a demon whose evil seemed at first almost unconquerable. The mind is a curious thing, to be sure, for I found myself angry rather than frightened, much in the manner of a knight (rather elderly, surely, and tired after his long quest) who, in the course of bringing his true princess home, has no longer any fear, but only a great weariness, when confronted in sight of the castle towers by a fresh dragon to slay.

Miss R.'s treatments had now gone on for several months, and I began to see that it would be a longer matter than I had heretofore suspected. The considerable improvements in the minor aspects of her health, which she found so incredibly wonderful, were perhaps the only progress we had so far made, and we were, I confess, certainly no nearer to understanding. I know as well as any medical man that the concept of "demonic possession" has been largely given up as a diagnosis; naturally Miss R. — and her aunt, of course, a dragon of a different sort, whom I had yet to encounter face to face — were kept in ignorance of the new development in Miss R.'s case; neither of them knew more of the treatment than the superficial improvement in Miss R. and I believe that they thought the incomparable Doctor Wright was performing miracles of restoration. I felt strongly that it would be unwise to inform Miss R. of the deeper progress, or lack of it, in her case, because of the danger of alarming her and setting us back in the small improvement we had made; Miss R. being in an hypnotic trance during the greater part of her time spent with me, knew nothing of what occurred, and her aunt knew nothing because neither Miss R. nor Miss R.'s doctor told her. I had called Ryan and told him briefly my conclusions about Miss R.’s case and my proposed method of treatment, and, since he was a busy man (your jovial, hearty physician so often is, regardless of his abilities) I had not found myself troubled in that neighborhood further.

Ruefully, then, I added a new number to my notes — R3, the hateful, the enemy. Perhaps my numerical system was at fault, perhaps I was too persuaded of my belief that we could slough off the paralyzing past and bring back Miss R. as R2, perhaps the rarity of the case and the horrid aspects of it slowed down my usually acute perceptions — it was, at any rate, quite some time before I, dreaming over my comfortable fire at home, half-asleep with my book fallen to the floor and the first intimations of dream touching me — it was not until then, some time later, that I first recognized what I should have known at once, and saw through to the correct diagnosis of Miss R.’s case.

Now, for the layman, demonic possession would do as well as anything to describe Miss R. at that time, and in my heart I suspect that the pictures are close: I remember most vividly Thackeray’s words, which I must have been reading before I slipped off, and which stay with me still: “All of you here must needs be grave when you think of your own past and present....” And I before the fire, alone, and almost dreaming, to awaken remembering that devil’s face.

But let me turn to a medical authority, whose more palatable phrases hold out hope of a cure more certain (and more permanent) than mere exorcism: “Cases of this kind are commonly known as ‘double’ or ‘multiple personality,’ according to the number of persons represented, but a more correct term is *disintegrated* personality, for each secondary personality is a part only of a normal whole self. No one secondary personality preserves the whole physical life of the individual. The synthesis of the original consciousness known as the personal ego is broken up, so to speak, and shorn of some of its memories, perceptions, acquisitions, or modes of reaction to the environment. The conscious states that still persist, synthesized among themselves, form a new personality capable of independent activity. This second personality may *alternate* with the original undisintegrated personality from time to time. By a breaking up of the original personality at different moments along different lines of cleavage, there may be formed several different secondary personalities which may take turns with one another." (Morton Prince, *The Dissociation of a Personality,* 1905.)

I myself had already met Miss R. in three personalities: R1, nervous, afflicted by driving pain, ridden by the horrors of fear and embarrassment, modest, self-contained, and reserved to the point of oral paralysis. R2 was, it was assumed, the character Miss R. might have been, the happy girl who smiled and answered truly and with serious thoughtfulness, pretty and relaxed, without the lines of worry which so deformed R1's face; R2 was largely free of pain, and could only sympathize sweetly with R1's torments. R3 was, on the other hand, R2 with a vengeance: where R2 was relaxed, R3 was wanton; where R2 was unreserved, R3 was insolent; where R2 was pleasant and pretty, R3 was coarse and noisy. Moreover, each of the three had a recognizable appearance — R1, of course, the character I had first met, shy and unattractive by reason of her timidity and clumsiness; R2, amiable and charming; R3, the rough, contorted mask. The shy, fleeting smile of R1, the open, merry face of R2, were in R3 a sly grin or an open shout of rude laughter; if it be suspected that I did not particularly love our new friend R3, it can as readily be seen that I had good reason; when my good R2 began to raise her hands to rub her eyes, when her voice grew louder and her expressions freer, when her eyebrows went up sardonically and her mouth twisted, I had perforce to spend a while with a creature who felt and showed me no respect, who attempted enthusiastically to undo any good I might have done Miss R. who delighted in teasing all whom she met, and who, after all, knew no moral sense and no restrictions to her actions save only those of lack of sight; who, upon occasion, called me a damned old fool!

Now, it seemed to me that we had come closest to R3 on the question of Miss R.'s defaced letter, and perhaps that thought, aided by a chance reflection of my own, put us first directly on the track of R3; I, looking at the letter when Miss R. first showed it to me, thought irritably that I could write a better hand with my eyes shut — and had, although it was a while before I perceived it, my clue. In the course of a seemingly aimless discussion of the letter with R2, I had asked her, placing pencil and paper by her hand, to write a few words to my dictation, that I might see her handwriting, and, bringing her hands feverishly to her eyes, she first cried out "I can't, I can't, I must open my eyes," and so awoke, voluntarily, although she had never done so before. I wondered if she had perhaps not forced herself awake because of the pressure of R3 to come to the surface. Miss R. questioned again at another visit about the letter, burst into tears and refused to speak of the matter, saying only that her headache was too severe to allow of any discussion.

Steeling myself, I determined to summon R3 to an interview which I was not disposed to enjoy, but which I felt might be enlightening; I had seen almost nothing of her since her last visit, except for an occasional quick grin or gesture through R2's conversation, or now and then an echo of her mocking laughter in R2's merry voice, and, of course, the frequent gestures with her hands, accompanied by entreaties to be permitted to open her eyes. Summoning her required, I knew now, only inducing Miss R. into a deeper hypnotic slumber than that which brought R2, when she immediately began to take on the characteristic facial and vocal qualities of R3.

“So we meet again, Doctor Wrong,” she said at once, and quite in the fashion of the possessing demon, “I wondered how long you could struggle on without me.”

“I suspect, Miss R. that you can give me information I need.”

“Not,” said R3 flatly, “if you call me by that disgraceful name. I am no more Miss R. than *you* are. I am only inside her.” She finished off this remark with a disgusting leer and an additional remark which was to me so distasteful that, not content to omit it from my notes, I have since made every effort to forget it, and all similar remarks made by R3. Consequently, it was a moment or so before we could get on; R3 had the disagreeable ability to confound me and render me speechless for important seconds at a time, so that I lost my train of thought and had perforce to allow her free rein during my own moments of distraction.

Now she continued, while I sat aghast, “Elizabeth, Beth, Betsy, and Bess, they all went together to find a bird’s nest... Perhaps, you handsome Doctor Wrong, you would care to rename us? We must surely not be the first children you have brought into the world.” And she burst again into her wild laughter, and — although Miss Hartley, my nurse, must surely by now be accustomed to loud noises from my office — I was half-afraid that Miss Hartley might conclude that I was being laughed at by one of my own patients, since the laughter was so clearly not hysterical. Interesting R3, or threatening her, were the only two methods I so far knew to quiet her, so I said in a low voice, “I shall awaken you, Miss R. if you do not tranquillize yourself.”

She was silent at once, but murmured wickedly, “Someday you will not be able to get rid of me, Doctor Wrong; someday you will try to awaken *her*, and, when you think you have got back your disgusting Miss R. will find that you still have just me. And then," she said, her voice rising and her hands at her eyes, "and then, and then, and then!"

Fear touched me lightly, but I said, "Why, then if I find I have only you no matter who I seek, I shall have to learn to love you." I smiled wryly at the thought of loving this monster, and I suppose she detected my expression in my voice, for she said at once, "But do you suppose I could learn to love *you,* Doctor Wrong? When you wish me evil?"

"I wish no one evil, Miss R."

"Then you are a liar as well as a fool," she said. (I note down these remarks in the interests of thoroughness; I know I am not a liar and I hope I am not a fool, and I perceived that R3's object was to enrage me; I am happy to add that although I was irked at her rudeness, I endeavored, I believe with success, to keep her from realizing it.) "I know a good deal about people," she continued with complacency, "and when I have my eyes open all the time I will get along nicely. No one will ever suspect how long I have been a prisoner, I think."

I hardly dared breathe, hearing R3 rattle along so, revealing herself more with every word; this boastful chatter made it unnecessary to question her, and I would not have interrupted her for the world. *"Now,"* she said, as one explaining an awkward position, "I can only get out when *she* is looking the other way, and then only for a little while before she comes back and shuts me in again, but someday very soon she is going to find that when she comes back and tries to—" She broke off suddenly, and chuckled. "Eavesdropping, Doctor Wrong?" she asked, "do you add poking and prying to your list of sins?"

"I am trying to help my friends, Miss R."

“Please *stop* calling me that,” she said petulantly. “I tell you, I am *not* Miss R. and I *hate* her name; she is a crybaby and a foolish stupid thing, and I certainly am not.”

“What shall I call you, then?”

“What do you call me in those notes? The ones you showed *her* once?”

I was astounded at her knowing of my notes, and that Miss R. had once seen them, but I only said, “I have no name for you, since you disclaim your natural one. I have called you R3.”

She made a face at me, putting out her tongue and shrugging her shoulders. “I certainly don’t choose to be called R3,” she said. “You can call me Rosalita, or Charmian, or Lilith, if you like.”

I smiled again at the thought of this grotesque creature naming herself like a princess in a fairy romance. “Do you also disclaim the name Elizabeth?” I inquired.

“That’s *her* name.”

“But,” I cried, struck with an idea, “you yourself have suggested it: ‘Elizabeth, Beth, Betsy, and Bess...’”

She laughed rudely. “Elizabeth is the simple, Beth is the doctor’s darling; very well, then I choose Betsy.” And she laughed again.

“Why do you laugh?”

“I was wondering about Bess,” she said, laughing.

And so, my dear reader, was I.

* * *

So Betsy she was till the end of her chapter. I found that as these several different girls grew more familiar to me, and of course in the second case more dear, the names Betsy had chosen for them became easier and pleasanter to use than the cold clinical R1 and R2; R2 consented graciously and with a smile to my plea to be allowed to address her as Beth, and I think the name suited her quiet charm. I do not know if Miss R. ever perceived that I had moved quietly away from addressing her formally, or at least from calling her “my dear Miss R.” to calling her Elizabeth; I suppose that she was too accustomed to constant authority in the shape of her aunt to remark being addressed as a child. Betsy, of course, was Betsy and nothing else, although she sometimes amused herself by giving herself grandiose titles or surnames, and I had no difficulty, subsequently, in identifying a note signed Elizabeth Rex as of Betsy’s doing.

* * *

My immediate attempt must be, I thought, to discover the point at which the unfortunate Miss R. had subdivided, as it were, and permitted a creature like Betsy to assume a separate identity; it was my old teasing analogy of the sewer, but complicated in that I was now searching for a branch line! (I do most heartily wish that I had chosen some comparison nearer the stars; a flourishing oak tree, perhaps, but I confess that I misguidedly chose that which seemed most vivid to me, and most indicative, although ignoble, of the circumstances; I am ashamed to think that without going through and correcting all of my manuscript, and my notes, too — for this comparison found a place even there — I must abide by it.) It seemed to me that only a very severe emotional shock could have forced Miss R. to slough off the greater part of herself into subordinate personalities (until I had, with a magic touch, called them into active life) and I was fairly certain that their separate existence — although Betsy claimed a life of her own, in thoughts at any rate, ever since Miss R. had been born — must date from the most patent emotional shock in Miss R.’s life, the death of her mother. To show what kind of a problem I was manipulating, let me from my notes present the reader with the varying descriptions of this event which I received, first from R1, or Elizabeth, then from R2, the cooperative and lovely Beth, and then, lastly, from our villain Betsy.

(On May 12, to Elizabeth, in office consultation): Wright: Do you think you can tell me anything about your mother, my dear?

Elizabeth: I guess so.

W. When did she die?

E. I guess over four years ago. On a Wednesday.

W. Were you at home?

E. (confused) I was upstairs.

W. Did you live then with your aunt?

E. With Aunt Morgen?

W. Do you have any other aunts?

E. No.

W. Then, when your mother died, were you living with your aunt?

E. Yes, with Aunt Morgen.

W. Do you think you can tell me anything more about your mother's death? (She seemed most unwilling, and I thought on the edge of weeping; since I knew I could secure all the information I needed from the other selves, I did not intend to persist in a cruel cross-examination, but I did want as much information as possible for purposes of comparison.)

E. That's all I know. I mean, Aunt Morgen came and told me my mother died.

W. Came and told you? You mean, you were not with your mother when she died?

E. No, I was upstairs.

W. Not with your mother?

E. Upstairs.

W. Was your mother downstairs, then?

E. Aunt Morgen was with her. I don't know.

W. Try to stay calm, if you please. This was all very long ago, and I think talking about it will be helpful to you: I know it is a painful subject, but try to believe that I would not ask you unless I felt it to be necessary.

E. No. I mean, I only don't know.

W. Had your mother been ill?

E. I thought she was all right.

W. Then her death was quite sudden, to your mind?

E. It was — (thinking deeply) — a heart attack.

W. But you were not there?

E. I was upstairs.

W. You did not see her?

E. No, I was upstairs.

W. What were you doing?

E. I don't remember. Asleep, I guess. Reading.

W. Were you in your own room?

E. I don't remember. I was upstairs.

W. I beg you to compose yourself, Miss R. This agitation is unnecessary and unbecoming.

E. I have a headache (touching her neck).

And that was, of course, the end of my information from Elizabeth; I knew by now that her headaches, all-enveloping, would obliterate almost all awareness of myself and my questions. So I pursued my line of questioning, most pleasantly, by summoning Beth. I longed, at this time, to chat with Beth informally, and at length, and I longed to permit her to open her eyes, so that we might seem friends rather than doctor and patient, but the ever-present fear of Betsy prevented; since blindness was now the only thing I knew of which held Betsy in check, I dared not follow my inclinations and admit Beth as a free personality. I was sad, frequently, to think that Beth's whole existence had heretofore been passed only in my office, and that none but I knew this amiable girl; my conviction that Miss R. must once have been very like Beth was so far unconfirmed, and yet I deeply wanted to see Beth take her place in the world and in her family, the place to which my most unscientific heart told me she was entitled. At any rate, it was always a great pleasure to me to call Beth, and hear her affectionate greeting. Here are my notes on this conversation, which followed immediately upon the conversation with Elizabeth which I have just described.

(On May 12, Beth, or R2, in office consultation): Wright (after preliminary trance-inducing introduction of name and place identification) My dear, I want to talk about your mother.

B. (smiling wistfully) She was a lovely lady.

W. Much like yourself?

B. Yes. Very lovely and very happy and very sweet to everyone.

W. Do you remember her death?

B. (reluctantly) Not very well. She died that day.

W. Where were you when she died?

B. I was thinking of her.

W. But where?

B. Inside. Hidden.

W. As you usually are?

B. Except when I am with you.

W. I hope we can change that someday, my dear. But you must help me.

B. I will do anything you ask me to.

W. Splendid. I am most anxious, right now, to learn all I can about your mother's death.

B. She was very kind to everyone, even Aunt Morgen.

W. You lived with your aunt at the time?

B. Oh, yes, we have lived with *her* for years, ever since my dear father died.

W. And your father died when?

B. When I was two years old, or about that. I don't remember him very well.

W. Were you with your mother when she died?

B. I? I was never allowed to be with her. I am always kept hidden.

W. Compose yourself, Beth dear. We can talk of something else if this disturbs you.

B. No, I am eager to help in any way I can; I don't want you to think badly of me.

W. I assure you, I never shall. Can you tell me, then, precisely what you did after your mother's death?

B. (perplexed) We had lunch. And Aunt Morgen said not to worry.

W. Not to worry? You mean, not to grieve?

B. Not to worry. We had lunch and Aunt Morgen said not to worry, Aunt Morgen said not to cry over spilled milk, Aunt Morgen cried. It was disgusting.

W. (amused) You will not allow your aunt her grief?

B. She cried over spilled milk.

W. (laughing outright) Beth, this is cynicism.

B. Indeed not; I do not think evil of anyone.

A man who has just spoken, however inconclusively, with Beth, does not turn hastily to a conversation with Betsy. Nevertheless, it was obvious that the information which Elizabeth and Beth found themselves unable to give must be mined from Betsy, and so, resolutely, I denied the appeal of Beth's pretty face and dismissed her for Betsy; I made an effort to keep my countenance when Beth's turned head disclosed that grinning face, even though she could not, of course, see me, and I forced my voice to remain even and controlled.

(May 12, Betsy, or R3, in office consultation): W. Good afternoon, Betsy. I hope I find you in excellent health.

By. (jeering) The others won't help, so you come and ask *me.*

W. I hoped you might tell me —

By. I know. I was listening. (contemptuously) What do you think *they* can tell you?

W. — about your mother.

By. *My* mother? Do you think I claim that poor dead thing as *my* mother? Perhaps (impudently) I have a mother of my own, question-asker.

W. (Indeed if you had, you demon, I thought, she's a fiend in damnation): Miss R.'s mother, then.

By. As you are her father? (raucous laughter)

W. Miss R.'s mother, who died some years ago. Elizabeth's mother.

By. I know whose mother you mean, old man. The one she — (here she shut her lips, and grinned mysteriously, and put her finger to her mouth in a childlike gesture of secrecy) — Talking about Lizzie when her back is turned, my dear! For shame!

W. Betsy, I would like you to trust me. Believe me, I am only a person who wants to do whatever I can to ensure that you and Elizabeth and Beth will live together peaceably and happily; would you not like to be one person again?

By. I was never one person with her, I have always been her prisoner, and you wouldn't help me if you could. You may want to help Beth, and maybe even Lizzie, but you have no place for me in your pretty little world.

W. Indeed, I am truly sorry to see anyone so bitter as to refuse help when it is so badly needed.

By. I have told you hundreds of times that the best way to help me is to let me open my eyes. (gestures of wringing hands, and bringing them up to her eyes.) — May I? — (wheedlingly) — May I open them, dear Doctor Wright? And I will tell you everything you want to know, about Lizzie and about Lizzie's mother and about old Auntie and I will even put in a good word for you with Beth if I may only have my eyes open — (This was said in a tone of such mockery that I was gravely concerned; I had suddenly the notion that Betsy was teasing me, and might perhaps open her eyes this minute if she chose, and I was genuinely frightened at the thought.)

W. I insist that you keep your eyes closed. Do you realize, young lady, that if I find that you are of no use to me in my investigations, I will surely send you away and never let you come again? (I would have liked to, certainly, and perhaps even then I still could have.)

By. (apprehensive) You will not send me away.

W. I may; it was I who brought you here in the first place.

By. I can come by myself.

W. (not choosing to press *this* point) We shall see. (carelessly) Perhaps you are fond of sweets? (I had thought of this earlier; it occurred to me that a creature so childish might be fairly treated on childish terms; I had as alternatives a doll, and some tawdry jewelry.) Shall I put a candy in your hand?

By. (eagerly) Do you have candy right here?

W. (placing in her outstretched hand a piece of candy which she consumed greedily.) I am glad you begin to find me more friendly. No one would give you candy who did not wish you well.

By. (with satisfaction) If you poisoned me, then Lizzie and Beth would die.

W. I have no intention of poisoning you. I should like to have us friends, you and I.

By. I will be friends with you, old well-wisher. But I want more candy, and I want to open my eyes.

W. I assure you, you will never open your eyes with my permission. But can we not talk together as friends, Betsy?

By. (craftily) You have not given me any more candy yet.

W. (craftier still) When you tell me about your mother.

By. (unexpectedly gentle) Elizabeth's mother? She was always nice. She danced around the kitchen one day when she had a new dress and she said "Nonsense" to Morgen and she curled her hair. I liked to watch her.

W. Where were you?

By. A prisoner, always a prisoner, inside with Beth, only no one knew I was there.

W. Were you ever free? Outside, I mean?

By. (nodding, dreamy) Sometimes, when Lizzie is sleeping or when she turns her head away for a minute, I can get out, but only for a small time, and then she puts me back. (recollecting herself suddenly) But I am not going to tell you, you are not friendly to me.

W. Ridiculous; you know now that we are friends. Were you inside when Elizabeth's mother died?

By. Surely, and I made her scream even louder, and beat on the door.

W. Why did she beat on the door?

By. Why, to get out, Doctor Wrong.

W. To get out of what?

By. To get out of her room, Doctor Wrong.

W. What in heaven’s name was Elizabeth doing shut in her room while her mother was dying?

By. Now, see, Doctor Wrong, I did not say that her mother was dying, although she surely was, and yet it was not in heaven’s name — (laughs wildly) — and as for what Lizzie was doing in her room, why, she was beating on the door.

W. Will you explain it to me?

By. Now certainly not, Doctor Wrong; we all went together to seek a bird’s nest; do you remember the man who was wondrous wise and jumped into a bramble bush and scratched out both his eyes... may I open my eyes *now?*

W. No.

By. — put her in a pumpkin shell, and there she kept her very well. And so Lizzie’s mother died, and it was a good thing, too. She wouldn’t have cared for our Lizzie now.

W. Did Elizabeth change after her mother died?

By. (tormenting) I only said that to tease you, eye-closer. I can tell you wonderful stories about your dear. Ask Lizzie about the box of letters in her closet. Ask Beth about Aunt Morgen. (laughing wildly again) Ask Aunt Morgen about Lizzie’s mother.

W. That will do, please. I am going to send you away now.

By. (suddenly sober) Please, may I stay a minute longer? I have decided to tell you why Aunt Morgen locked Lizzie in her room.

W. Very well. But no more nonsense.

By. First, you promised me more candy.

W. One more, only. We should not care to make Elizabeth sick.

By. (carelessly) She is always sick, anyway. I never thought of a stomachache, though.

W. Do you make her head ache?

By. Why would I tell you that? (impudently) If I told you everything I know, then you would be as wise as I am.

W. Then tell me why Elizabeth was locked in her room.

By. (emphatically) Because she frightened her mother and Aunt Morgen said they all went together to find a bird's nest.

W. I beg your pardon?

By. May I open my eyes *now?*

W. How did she frighten her mother?

By. She put her in a pumpkin shell. Silly silly silly silly....

I dismissed her, more distressed than I can say by the odd, hinted stories she brought me, although far less inclined to credit them than to see Betsy herself as a wicked and mischievous creature, bent on making trouble, and with what fearful designs in that black heart I could not begin to imagine. When Elizabeth awakened, seeing me disturbed, she asked with some anxiety whether she had been talking foolishly while asleep, and I bade her leave me, reassuring her with the not-entire falsehood that I was not well. The next morning — a Tuesday — when I reached my office, there was on my desk a message, put there by Miss Hartley, who had taken it by phone from Miss R.'s aunt, to the effect that Miss R. had a touch of the influenza and so would not be able to keep her appointments for at least the rest of the week, and very possibly the week following. I noted on my appointment book my intention of dropping in upon Miss R. and her aunt within the next day or so, ostensibly to make a polite inquiry after Miss R.'s health, actually to determine if her recovery might not be hastened by a brief treatment from myself; I was of course aware that in such a case the attending physician would be Doctor Ryan, and had no doubt of securing a half hour or so alone with my patient.

I do not, as I believe I have before indicated, see many patients these days, and so found myself relieved by Miss R.'s illness of my greatest concern; I feel myself greatly favored by fortune in that, in the prime of life, I am, although a widower, luckily enough circumstanced to be able to avoid the pushing and scrambling which accompanies the work of many medical men, in their efforts to make a living in a field where the emphasis is upon conformity rather than upon genius (how often have I sighed over the cynicism of the old saw that a good doctor buries his mistakes!) and which is overcrowded at the mediocre level, and unfortunately not crowded at all at the top. Thackeray tells me that any stupid hand can draw a hunchback, and write Pope underneath; calumny, I know, succeeds to misunderstanding in the hearts of the best-intentioned. No one who desired my services was deprived of them, although many who needed my services were discouraged from visiting me; had I been more a crusader, I suspect, I might have had my waiting room filled from morning till night, but it has never been my way to seek out quarrels, and push an issue to a disagreement; I have been content to sit back and, knowing full well my own worth, made no effort to force it upon others. This, I submit meekly, is not modesty, a virtue with which I am not abnormally endowed (and *you,* sir?), but earnest common sense.

Thus, although Miss R. was much upon my mind during the next day or so, so was Thackeray, and the old gentleman and I spent many an amiable hour together with the office door closed and Miss Hartley outside, no doubt supposing that I was busied upon some abstruse problem of research or else — Miss Hartley is a rare humorist — napping.

On Wednesday morning I telephoned Miss R.'s residence and spoke, as I was told, to her aunt, a Miss Jones. Our conversation was brief and matter-of-fact; I identified myself and inquired after Miss R.'s health, Miss Jones told me that Miss R. felt most unwell, was running a high temperature and had been, her aunt said, delirious upon waking in the middle of the night. I was concerned, and inquired after Ryan's treatment, fearing that he regarded this illness more lightly than he should, but Miss Jones reassured me, telling me that Ryan appeared at Miss R.'s bedside twice a day, etc. and I was forced to ring off, after expressing my hopes for a swift return of Miss R.'s health. It seemed most unlikely that a personal visit from myself would be of any value at the moment, nor, indeed, could I reasonably contemplate hypnosis, with its possible unsettling effect upon Miss R. in her present condition. As a result, then, I spared a moment to wonder wryly what conceivable form Miss R.'s delirium might take which could be more frightening than what I had already met here in my office, and to hope that my next word of her might be more encouraging; I then resigned myself to hearing no further news of her for a few days and returned, with complacency, to Thackeray.

It was, then, not until Thursday evening that the blow fell. I had spent a quiet evening at home and retired and was, indeed, asleep, when the telephone at my bedside rang and, having for the last few years become unaccustomed to middle-of-the-night emergency calls, I was at first startled and then frightened and angry when I heard Miss Jones' voice, controlled but showing agitation nevertheless, asking me most urgently to hurry to her house. "My niece," she said, in that strained voice which so often accompanies terror under iron control, "insists upon seeing you at once; she has been calling your name for over an hour."

"Have you not called Doctor Ryan?" I asked, determined to keep to my warm bed.

"She won't let him in," Miss Jones said; she seemed, in her anxiety, to be unable to stop talking and I could not hush her. "She has locked the door against us," Miss Jones continued, her voice rising hysterically.

I sighed, and told her without enthusiasm that I should be with her directly. Even so, she persisted — as frightened relations so often do — in keeping me by urging me to hurry! "For a long time," she said, "we couldn't imagine what doctor she wanted; she kept calling for Doctor Wrong."

I hung up the telephone while she still talked on, and dressed with more speed than I have ever done in my life; childbirth, surgery, accidents — all these can bear to wait for the ten seconds it takes for the doctor to dash cold water on his sleepy eyes, but now I delayed for no such indulgence; there was, I knew to my sorrow, only one person in the world who called me Doctor Wrong.

And she was waiting for me behind the locked door of Miss R.'s bedroom; I could hear her shouting as Miss Jones opened the house door for me, and, hesitating only to mutter my name at Miss Jones, I brushed past her and, still in my coat and hat, took the stairs two at a time — an exertion, indeed, at my age, and one I could ill afford at the moment — and so came to the door from behind which came Betsy's voice shouting a song which surprised me only in that I could not imagine how she came to learn the words during Miss R.'s limited experience. "Betsy," I said, tapping on the door, "Betsy, open this door at once; it is Doctor Wright."

I was aware of my own hard breathing as I stood with my head against the door, listening to the voice inside; Betsy had broken off her song when she heard my voice and appeared now to be talking softly to herself. "Is it really the old fool?" she asked — meaning me, of course — and, "I think it is Ryan again, come to tease me."

Miss Jones was coming up the stairs behind me, and I wanted badly to be into Miss R.'s room with the door closed before there was any question of

Miss Jones' joining us; "Betsy," I said, "let me in immediately, I tell you."

"Who is it?"

"It is Doctor Wright," I said impatiently, "open the door."

"It is not Doctor Wright at all; it is Doctor Ryan."

"I," I said in a fury, "am Doctor Victor Wright, and I command you to open this door."

"Commands?" Her voice lingered mockingly. "To *me,* Doctor Wrong?"

"Betsy," I said as emphatically as I could; Miss Jones was rounding the landing.

"Then tell me who you are," said Betsy.

"I am Doctor Wright."

"Indeed you are not," said Betsy, laughing.

I took a deep breath and thought briefly and lovingly of punishments for Miss Betsy; "I am Doctor Wrong," I said, and very softly, too.

"Who?"

"Doctor Wrong," I said.

"Who?" I could hear her laughing.

"Doctor Wrong."

"Oh, of course," she said, and I heard the key in the lock. "If you had told me who you were sooner, my dear doctor, I would have let you in at once." And the wicked girl opened the door and stood aside as I slipped quickly in, and then she shut the door behind me, full in her aunt's face. "Poor dear," she said loudly, "did Aunt Morgen attack you?"

"Miss R." I said, "this is intolerable. I will not be treated so."

"And I," she said, "will not be treated at all, and I am surprised that you finally came to visit me professionally instead of as my dear friend." She turned a languishing glance upon me, and for the first time I met Betsy face to face, with her eyes open, the pair of us meeting as equals without the protective barriers of my office and hypnosis and sightlessness, and I perceived, looking at Betsy, that she was as fully and acutely aware of this as I was.

“Well?” she said, amused.

I took a deep breath, endeavoring to resume my control of myself, and said as quietly as I could manage, “I see that you have your eyes open.”

She nodded, and hugged herself, and laughed, and grinned, and widened her eyes to show me, and turned herself around gaily. “I told you, I told you, I told you,” she chanted, and then, coming close to me and looking slyly into my face, “and what are you going to do about it, old eye-closer?”

I surmised that for all her posturing and bravado she was still honestly in awe of me and upon that surmise — indeed, the only hope left us — I decided to base my own actions. Smiling back at her placidly, I seated myself upon the edge of the bed and took out my pipe. “I understood that you were ill,” I said conversationally.

“*She* was; I am never ill.”

“Then,” I said ironically, “a good doctor like myself ought rightly to allow you to remain until the course of Miss R.’s infection has run itself out.”

She laughed. “I believe I *have* done her good,” she said complacently. “If she hadn’t been weak and sick, I couldn’t have gotten out, and if I hadn’t gotten out, she would still be weak and sick.” She spread her hands as one who demonstrates an utterly reasonable point. “So you see I *am* good,” she said. She seated herself on the chair next the bed and looked at me soberly. “Doctor Wright,” she said — and I have never seen Betsy so demure— “don’t you think that now I *am* out, I should be allowed to stay?”

She must have mistaken my silence for a hesitation as to whether or not I should agree with her, for she went on persuasively, “You can see that I am healthier and happier than she is, and I have been very patient for a long time, and it's only *fair* to give me a chance. Besides," she went on as I started to speak, "all that I used to say about wanting to do you harm and wanting to hurt her was only because I was so tired of being a prisoner and I just wanted to get out and be happy and not be a prisoner any more, and—"

"Betsy," I said gently, "how can I let you stay? Think of Elizabeth, think of Beth."

"Why should *I* think of them just because *you* care more for them than you do for me, and you expect me to give up just because *you* decide you'd rather have *them?*"

I repressed a smile at her impulsive self-interest, and told myself again that she was in actuality little more than a child, and so I said tolerantly, "Well, Betsy, suppose I make a bargain with you? Suppose I agree to let you stay tonight?"

"Let me have a week, then," she said. "A week, and no one to bother me."

"But Miss R. is ill."

"She will be well," said Betsy grimly, and then looked at me, all innocence. "At least," Betsy said, "she will not be delirious any more."

"Of course," I said, realizing. "It was you."

"I had a lovely time," Betsy said. "And poor Aunt Morgen outside the door, wringing her hands and trembling."

I could not point out to Betsy the callousness of this, any more than I could explain to her childish mind the impossibility of letting her take over, as it were, the whole personality of Miss R.; all I could do, as one does with a difficult child, was to pretend to fall in with her plans, reserving privately the right to determine with my own — and, I must say, my superior — judgment, what was best for all of us. Consequently, I continued blandly, "So, my dear Betsy, are we agreed, then? If I consent to your staying out for a day or so, will you then co-operate with me in helping to heal Miss R.?"

"I will," she said earnestly, and I do believe she thought she meant it. "I will do all I can, if I can only be free, sometimes, and be happy for a little while."

"That does not sound unreasonable," I conceded. "Now will you go back into bed and go quietly to sleep?"

"I never sleep," she told me. "I lie there inside all the time."

Again I must repress my amusement; how many children have we heard, who declare absolutely that they do not sleep, that they never sleep, that they would not know how to sleep if they tried? However, I only said, "Will you let Elizabeth come back, very briefly, then, so that I may put her under hypnosis for a minute and tell her to feel better?"

She considered, chin on hands. "Even if you do not sleep," I added solemnly, "Elizabeth must rest, and I propose a brief suggestion or two from myself to effect that. There is nothing in any case for you to do tonight unless you decide to keep your unfortunate aunt wringing her hands outside your door again, and so, if you want any freedom at all, you would be most wise to help Miss R. regain *her* health."

"She's no use to *me* sick," said Betsy agreeably. "Even if *I* feel well Aunt Morgen wouldn't let *her* go anywhere."

"That's true," I said, thanking heaven for the dragon downstairs. "But you must also promise," I added, "that while you are free you do not in any way attempt to harm Miss R. By stuffing her with sweets, for instance, or damaging her in the eyes of her friends."

"Or making her walk in front of a train," said Betsy, grinning. "You must think I'm crazy," she said, and giggled.

I stood up from the bed, and attempted to smooth the tumbled sheets. “Now hop into bed like a good girl,” I said, with a heavy and most reluctant attempt at heartiness. I patted her shoulder as she climbed into the bed, thinking how extraordinarily different Betsy was from Elizabeth or Beth; I felt like an uncle putting a bad child to bed, and even Miss R.’s grown-up person did not detract from the strong avuncular feeling. I pulled the blankets up under her chin, and then sat on the bed beside her. “Now show me how you let Miss R. come back,” I said, and then, as I spoke, I saw her eyes turn on me dully, and knew that without my perceiving it Betsy had withdrawn herself swiftly and completely and Miss R. lay there before me, wide-eyed and startled, as any young girl might be, who wakes up from what must have seemed a heavy sleep to find a man, albeit her doctor, sitting familiarly upon the edge of her bed and apparently continuing a conversation with her.

“Doctor Wright!” she said, recognizing me, and she attempted to sit up, but I put her gently back.

“It’s all right,” I told her soothingly. “You have been ill, and your aunt has sent for me.” She lay back, still uneasy, and I spoke to her gently, telling her that she had called out for me in her sleep, and that her aunt had felt that I might be able to help her, so there I was, and I was planning to “put her to sleep” for only a minute or so. I could see that she had been very ill; her face was substantially thinner in even the few days since I had seen her, and she was pale and so weak that she could not protest hypnosis; I subdued her easily into a light trance, and then, speaking hastily, and dropping my voice for fear Miss Jones might be listening outside, I said, “Beth — Beth, is it you?”

She stirred, and smiled, and said, “My dear friend, I have been longing to hear your voice.” My poor Beth, too, was wasted and pale, and it saddened me to see her sweet face worn by illness and hear her soft voice so tired; "Dear Beth," I said, taking her hand, "I am sorry you have been so unwell, but we will soon have you better."

"I am better now," she said, "with *you* here."

"But, Beth, you must do something for me, something extremely important; do you think you can? It will help me, and help you to be well much sooner."

"I can do whatever you tell me to."

I hesitated only a minute, debating how most forcefully to drive home my point; then I said urgently, "This is what you must do; you must insist, constantly and as strongly as you know how, that you are recovered from your illness; you must watch constantly for signs of weakness and absent-mindedness; keep insisting upon your own strength and control. Try to keep your aunt near by as much as possible. And, most important, resist absolutely any actions not usual to you. Be vigilant. If you feel yourself compelled to misbehave before your friends, or to consume quantities of sweet things, or to throw yourself before a train, or to do any of a hundred things which would ordinarily not occur to you, fight against the impulse. Now, can you promise me all this?"

"I promise," she said, whispering.

"I will help you all I can, and stay as close to you as possible. It is more important than I can tell you now, but someday I will explain it all to you."

"If you want me to, I will do it," she said.

"Dear Beth," and I pressed her hand.

She opened her eyes, grinning. "I bet you never dreamed I could do Beth so well," Betsy said.

* * *

I know not how I stumbled down the stairs, past Miss Jones halfway; "Is she all right, Doctor?" I believe Miss Jones asked me, and I, shaking my head blindly, made my way somehow to the door, and abandoned that house.

A general who retreats while his army is strong, and able to fight, is a coward, but who can condemn a warrior who, shorn of weapons, seeing his allies desert him, confronted by a field upon which his adversary reigns triumphant, withdraws from battle? I sat up late that night composing a letter to Miss Jones, resigning her niece's care; I told her I was old and ill, I explained to her that my strength was inadequate, I described to her my many pressures of business and affairs, I recommended returning to Ryan, and suggested (with what pangs for my lovely Beth) that she seriously consider some good private institution, and I closed, her humble servant, having covered four sides and said everything, except the truth, which I knew to be that I was badly frightened and unwilling to jeopardize my own health in the service of a girl who had misled me; I had placed my faith on Beth and been deceived, and although I could hardly condemn her for being no more than a weak pawn, my trust in her was gone. I wrote late, as I say, and very well (indeed, I have saved the letter, and it is before me now), but I might have slept that night, and saved my inadequate words.

In the morning, as I turned wearily from my writing desk, Miss Jones telephoned me again. In the levellest tones, as one who endeavors not to judge prematurely and unfairly, she told me that her niece had gone. Suitcase secretly packed, her clothes hastily assumed in the dead of night, our enemy had deceived us; Betsy had carried off Miss R. and Beth, we knew not when or where.

3. BETSY

EVERYTHING WAS GOING to be very very very good, so long as she remembered carefully about putting on both shoes every time, and not running into the street, and never telling them, of course, about where she was going; she recalled the ability to whistle, and thought, I must never be afraid.

She knew that the bus left at twelve; she had planned this more carefully than they ever suspected. She had been extremely clever about packing her suitcase softly and with tiny steps from the closet to the bed, and because she had known that she was going, by then, she had chosen only the most correct clothes for wearing outdoors and on a bus; she had taken a great deal of money from Aunt Morgen's pocketbook, she had tricked the doctor roundly. Even when they discovered she had gone, it was going to take them quite a while to learn all about the suitcase and the money and the bus; she had covered her tracks exceedingly well. Whistling, she came to the corner and thought, they will never expect that I know how to get on a taxi by myself, and it will take me to the bus station in time, too. "Take me to the bus station, please," she said to the taxi driver; these were the first free words she had ever spoken, but the taxi driver only nodded and took her to the bus station. She gave him a dollar bill from her pocketbook, he gave her back change, and she said "Thank you," and "Good night," when she closed the door of the taxi. No one turned, no one shouted, no one stopped to point at her and burst into laughter; everything was going to be very very very good.

She had eleven single dollar bills in her pocketbook, and the rest, some hundred-odd dollars she had taken from Aunt Morgen’s wallet, was carefully hidden in the pocket of her suitcase, since under no circumstances must she be thought careless or a fool, and the loss of all her money, besides indicating that she was not entirely able, might put her into the uncomfortable position of having to ask strangers for help. She had determined with precision that as soon as she got off the bus again she would go to a hotel, where of course in a room of her own she would be able to open her suitcase in private and take out whatever money she wanted.

Since she had both money and time, she was able to have a cup of coffee in the bus station while she was waiting, and she bought herself, also, a magazine; she did not care to read, generally, but she was attracted by the bright cover and had observed that nearly all the people standing in the station carried magazines or books, and she must on no account be thought strange or different. She had a book in her suitcase, a large dictionary for use in case she needed help in talking or writing or spelling; in any case, since she intended eventually to dispose of all her possessions, the book, which was large and solidly printed, might be a source of money sometime if she needed it, but she must remember to cross out Lizzie’s name on the first page. At present, it was perfectly safe with her money in the suitcase and was hardly worth removing just to seem to be reading on the bus. She finished her coffee and set the cup back into the saucer just as everyone else did, and got down from the stool and picked up her pocketbook and suitcase and went to the ticket window. Ahead of her a woman was telling the clerk, “One way to New York, please,” and, since the clerk neither looked up nor laughed, this must be the usual manner of getting a ticket; she felt a deep grateful satisfaction for the clerk and for the woman ahead and for the man who sold coffee and to the taxi driver and for all this wholly strange world; "One way to New York, please," she said, careful to get the right inflection, and the clerk neither looked up nor smiled, but passed her her change wearily. "How soon does the bus go?" she asked the clerk boldly, and he glanced at the clock and told her, without surprise, "Twelve minutes, side door."

Wondering what to do for twelve minutes, since it would certainly be remarked upon if she had another cup of coffee so soon after the first, she noticed a rack of picture postcards, and the idea of a farewell message came to her; they would naturally perceive that she had left them, but she could not forego the pleasure of telling them that they had driven her away. She chose two postcards, regretting that there were no pictures of the museum; she addressed the one with a picture of the monument to Aunt Morgen, writing with the pen which Lizzie always carried in the pocketbook. "You will never see me again," she wrote. "I am going to parts unknown. I hope you are sorry." And then, since the postcard seemed so unfeeling, and Aunt Morgen had, after all, never done her any active harm, she added, "Love, from E. R."

The other card she addressed, having saved this particular satisfaction for the last, to Doctor Wright, and for a minute she thought, pen in hand, of how most clearly and vividly in this small space reserved for messages, to say what Doctor Wright needed to be told; the recollection of the imminent departure of the bus stirred her at last, and finally she wrote quickly, "Dear Doctor Wrong, never try to find me. I will never come back. I am going somewhere where people love me, and not like you. Yours very sincerely, Betsy." This message did not particularly please her, but there was no time to try another because the man was calling, "Bus to New York, side door, leaving in three minutes, bus to New York, side door, leaving in three minutes, bus to New York, side door...."

She hurried out, following the woman who had been ahead of her in the ticket line, and climbed into the bus, marveling for a moment at its size and deep comfort, compared with the smaller busses Lizzie used to ride on her way to work at the museum. After hesitating for a minute inside the door she sat down next to the woman who had been ahead of her in the line, and then got up again to put her suitcase into the rack overhead, as she observed other people doing, because of course she must not seem to be different in any way, and must not have her suitcase on the floor next to her if everyone else had their suitcases in the rack over their heads. Once settled, her magazine and pocketbook in her lap, she leaned back and sighed, and turned her head slightly to see that the woman in the seat next to her was staring at her (had she done something to be stared at? Too slow with her suitcase? Too quick, leaning back?) and so she said hastily, "How long a trip do we have?"

"Where are you going?" asked the woman, raising her eyebrows.

"To New York, same as you."

The woman frowned, glanced forward at the driver, and then said, "How did you know I was going to New York?"

"I heard you buy a ticket, so I bought a ticket the same way."

"Oh?" said the woman, raising her eyebrows again and looking sideways.

It is not going to be safe to rely on anyone, Betsy thought with quick sad clarity, not anyone at all. This woman was old, as old as Aunt Morgen, looking tired and as though she did not much relish this night trip on a bus instead of a sleep at home in bed; it was not fair that a woman as old as Aunt Morgen and looking so tired should be untrustworthy as well. Perhaps even more than wishing she was young again and full of life, the woman wished to be trusted by Betsy, because she turned now and made a big smile for Betsy alone, and said, “So you’re going to New York?” and nodded, and turned her whole face and body at Betsy as though promising a home, and safety. Does she think that *I* am going to think that she is young again? Betsy wondered, and said, “I guess so. I mean, I have a ticket for New York, but I might decide to go somewhere else. Is New York exciting?”

“Not very,” the woman said. She glanced again at the driver, and then leaned closer to Betsy. “No place is very exciting unless you have dear ones there,” she said, and nodded again. “For me, New York is nothing — nothing. *My* dear ones are beyond.”

Betsy looked past her at the dark window of the bus and thought suddenly that it was not, after all, impossible that they would not come after her; could that be Aunt Morgen’s face peering in blindly through the glass, or the doctor gesturing imperiously from the station doorway? “How soon do we start?” she asked the woman, and the woman put a hand in a black glove over Betsy’s hand, and said, “One longs to join them, dear, yearning for dear ones is sometimes almost a pain, a pain *here*,” and she took her hand off Betsy’s long enough to touch herself lingeringly on the breast, and then she put her hand down on Betsy’s again.

But, Betsy thought, even if they knew now about the suitcase and the money and the bus (*could* that be Aunt Morgen, running, calling out, waving her handkerchief frantically?) they would never look for her talking to a dismal woman in black gloves, never look under the woman’s hand to see if Betsy’s hand lay there, and she sat back again, and turned her head courteously to the woman; they were two ladies engaged in conversation, and the bus stirred, and groaned. The driver nodded reassuringly at the station, the doors of the bus closed, and then the bus moved hugely out of the station and into the street (the doctor, was it? Stepping from a taxi, shaking his umbrella?) and then gathered speed toward the edge of town. "I guess we've started," Betsy said happily.

" — very fortunate," the woman said. "I, you see, have no dear ones awaiting me in New York. A child like yourself can never understand—"

Goodbye, goodbye, Betsy thought, turning to see the town behind them. Goodbye.

"Beyond, if only I might reach them."

"Why can't you reach them?" Betsy turned back and looked curiously at the woman who still had her hand over Betsy's and was now using the other hand to wipe at her eyes with a handkerchief. "Where are they?"

"In Chicago. I am unfortunately absolutely without means of traveling farther than New York. A child like yourself, unsuspicious, happy, free — a child like yourself, with an ample allowance—"

"I haven't got an allowance," Betsy said, and giggled. "All I have is what I got from Aunt Morgen."

"Perhaps a small loan—"

"Thank you anyway, but I have enough," Betsy said. "It's in my suitcase."

The woman glanced up, briefly, and then pressed Betsy's hand. "Such a sweet child," she said. "What *is* your name, dear?"

"Betsy."

"Is that all?"

Suddenly, perhaps because Betsy had been listening and looking through the window at the moving lights, or perhaps even just because she had allowed herself to become excited and interested — Lizzie got out, and she looked coldly at the woman while Betsy, caught completely off guard, struggled and tried to catch control again, and Lizzie said, “I beg your pardon?” and then looked wonderingly around the bus.

“I only said ‘What is your name?’” the woman said, drawing back.

“Elizabeth Richmond, madam. How do you do?”

“How do you do?” said the woman weakly, and then Betsy caught onto a deep breath and put Lizzie under again, and said as politely as she could, “I don’t want to talk any more now, thank you. You’ve been very nice, but I would rather not talk any more.”

Without, she hoped, being particularly rude, she got up and went to an empty seat at the back of the bus; she could hardly try to take down her suitcase with the bus moving so quickly, but it was more important to be where she need not talk to anyone, and she could watch her suitcase easily from here. The woman with whom she had been sitting turned once, and looked at her, and then, shaking her head a little, glanced up at the suitcase and then opened her book to read. That’s good, Betsy thought; perhaps she didn’t even notice Lizzie speaking up like that; perhaps she has a Lizzie of her own.

Although Betsy did not sleep, and did not think she ever had, it was of course necessary for Elizabeth to sleep; ever since Betsy had been a prisoner she had watched while Elizabeth slept, lying far back in her own hidden corner of the mind, inert and almost helpless, looking as though up through a dizzying fog at the world of Elizabeth’s dreams, seeing the dim figures of Elizabeth’s world when Elizabeth’s eyes were open, and the screaming phantoms of Elizabeth’s nightmares when Elizabeth’s eyes were shut; she had lain there crying out, soundless and numb, helpless to move Elizabeth’s hands or feet, frantic for motion, for sight, for speech, paralyzed and wrapped in agonizing silence; now, riding the surface of Elizabeth’s mind, she indulgently permitted Elizabeth to dream, and luxuriated in the picture of Elizabeth down there, dumb and helpless and waiting. Beyond Elizabeth, in the far kingdom of the mind, Beth lay, moving drowsily, unaware, not watchful, lost in soundless shadows. Betsy could feel that they were beneath, ready to rouse, as she had been, to any sharp sight or sound calling them awake. Now, Elizabeth slept, and frowned a little, and turned uncomfortably in the soft seat of the bus, and swayed with the movement of the bus, and Betsy lay back against the soft cushion of Elizabeth's dreams, planning what she was going to do, now that she was free.

She knew that she was going to get off the bus in New York, and follow everyone else out of the bus station into the street (it would be a street, she supposed, much like that she had left behind; she must not let her fears of strangeness carry her into imaginary difficulties; she must be prepared to assume a certain steadiness upon the part of the world outside) and then take a taxi, as she had done to get to the bus station — only now, she supposed, it would be daylight, and consequently easier to find a taxi, and she could look out the windows as they traveled. She would then go to a hotel. Aunt Morgen had stayed once at a hotel named Drewe; this, since she knew from Aunt Morgen's staying there that it must be a proper place and suitable for a lady traveling alone (Aunt Morgen had surely been traveling alone?) would be the best place for her to go at first. Later, when she had had time to unpack her suitcase and perhaps look around a little and get to know the city, she would move to another hotel whose name Aunt Morgen would not know; she could not remember whether Doctor Wrong had ever mentioned being familiar with the names of any hotels in New York, but thought she might safely assume that he would not be acquainted with the names of hotels suitable for ladies traveling alone. I have been very strictly brought up, she thought with satisfaction, and I shall be very well-behaved. Particularly she recalled that she had told both Aunt Morgen and Doctor

Wrong that they would not be able to find her, so very likely they would not think of looking in New York, because in New York they might find her. A thought struck her, and she giggled — Elizabeth turning in her sleep — perhaps, she thought, she should have sent postcards to Lizzie and Beth, telling them goodbye; I'll do that first chance I get, she promised herself, I'll write them each a nice card from the hotel, it's no more than they deserve. Elizabeth stirred again, and groaned, and Betsy was still, wanting Elizabeth to stay asleep.

All during the dark hours of the night the bus moved on, going smoothly and rocking Elizabeth gently; because it was important not to seem wakeful when everyone else was sleeping Betsy closed her eyes, and a kind of wonder came to her, at herself going alone through the night. She was for the first time in the indifferent hands of strangers, entrusting her person to the tenderness of the bus driver, her name to the woman napping in the seat far ahead; she was going to spend the rest of her life in a room belonging to someone else and she would eat at a stranger's table and walk streets she did not recognize under a sun she had never seen, waking, before. Soon no one would even know her face; Doctor Wrong would forget and Aunt Morgen would be looking for Elizabeth; from this moment on no eyes which looked upon her would ever have seen her before; she was a stranger in a world of strangers and they were strangers she had left behind; "Who am I?" Betsy whispered in wonder, and not even Elizabeth heard, "where am I going?"

It was, then, urgently important to be some person, to have always been some person; in all the world she was entering there was not anyone who was not some particular person; it was vital to be a person. "I am Betsy Richmond," she said over and over quietly to herself, "I was even born in New York. And my mother's name is Elizabeth Richmond, Elizabeth Jones before she was married. My mother was born in Owenstown, but I was born in New York. My mother's sister is named Morgen, but I never knew her very well." Invisible in the darkness of the bus, Betsy grinned. "My name is Betsy Richmond," she whispered, "and I am going alone to New York because I am easily old enough to travel alone. I am going to New York on a bus by myself and when I get to New York I am going to a hotel in a taxi. My name is Betsy Richmond, and I was born in New York. My mother loves me more than anything. My mother's name is Elizabeth Richmond, and my name is Betsy and my mother always called me Betsy and I was named after my mother. Betsy Richmond," she whispered softly into the unhearing movement of the bus, "Betsy Richmond."

"*My* mother," she went on, half-remembering, and Elizabeth moaned, and pressed her hands together, and dreamed. "My mother was angry with her Betsy and now I am alone, I am on a bus going to New York; I am old enough to travel alone and my name is Betsy Richmond, Elizabeth Jones before I was married. 'Betsy is my darling,' my mother used to say, and I used to say 'Elizabeth is my darling,' and I used to say, 'Elizabeth likes Robin best.'"

Betsy sat up straight in the bus, so suddenly that Elizabeth half-awakened and opened her eyes and said "Doctor?" "No, no," Betsy said, and then, shivering, looked around to see if she had made any loud noise, if she had forgotten to be careful while everyone else was sleeping. It's Robin, she thought, Robin nearly woke up Lizzie. She waited a minute, trying to see through the darkness of the bus; the driver ahead seemed calm enough, and then someone far down on one side moved, and sighed deeply, and Betsy sat back in relief; it's all right, she thought, other people move and make sounds; no one cares. She sat back and looked out the window; I don't even know where Robin is, anymore, she thought, and he wouldn't remember me any more than anyone else, even if he saw me Robin would think I was someone he didn't know at all, and if my mother knew about him he'd be sorry. My mother loves me best, anyway, Betsy told herself forlornly, my mother was only teasing about not loving me best, my mother pulled my hair and laughed and said "Elizabeth loves Robin best," and my mother loves me better than anyone. My name is Betsy Richmond and my mother's name is Elizabeth Richmond and she calls me Betsy. Robin did everything bad.

She wanted to get up and move around, but dared not; it was important for Elizabeth to sleep, and even if she did go up — say — to the driver and ask him how fast they were going, or when they would reach New York, or whether his name was Robin, people would notice her and look at her, because for all she knew it might be extremely unusual for people to wonder how fast the bus was going. Thinking of Robin always made her very nervous, however, and it was important not to be nervous or afraid, and she twisted her hands together and rubbed her eyes and bit at her lip; what must I do, she wondered, if I see Robin somewhere in New York?

The bus went widely around a curve, and Betsy fell against the side of the seat and giggled; it's fun, she thought. Then, suddenly very happy because she was running away, after all, and no one could find her — so how would she find Robin, then? — she sat back and folded her hands and spoke to herself very sternly.

If I'm going to keep it all straight and make a real person by myself, she told herself silently, Robin has to be in it like anyone else; he can't get out of it as easily as that. And besides, everyone who remembers at all has bad things to remember along with good things; it would seem very funny to people if all I had for a life I remembered was good things. There have to be some bad things or it looks funny. So keep Robin in, because he was bad and nasty. We went on a picnic, Robin and my mother and me. No, she thought then, shaking her head, if it's going to be in, it's all got to be in, right from the beginning, the way things ought to be remembered, so start the remembering right from the beginning of that day, right from the top, and remember it all. No one ever remembers just a bad thing, they remember all around it, all that happened before it and after it, and of course, she told herself consolingly, one bad thing is probably enough, and when they ask you what do you remember that's bad and nasty you can say Robin, and that will satisfy them. So, she went on silently, I woke up in the morning that day and the sun was shining and the blanket on my bed was blue. There was a green dress hanging on the bottom of my bed and I thought it would look funny with the blue blanket but it didn't. I heard my mother downstairs and she was saying "A wonderful day for a picnic with my Betsy, a wonderful wonderful day," and I knew she was saying it to me and saying it on the way upstairs over and over so I would wake up hearing her say it. And then she came in and she was smiling and the sun was shining brightly on her face, and I can't remember how she looked that morning because of the sun shining on her face. "A wonderful day for my Betsy," she said, "a wonderful wonderful day for a picnic, let's go to the bay." And she came and tickled me and I rolled out of bed and she hit me with the pillow and I was laughing. Then she said "Peanut butter" and ran out of the room, and I said "Jelly," calling it after her and I put on the green dress and went downstairs and I had oranges and toast for breakfast that morning because it was hot. My mother made peanut butter sandwiches and jelly sandwiches and all the time I was eating my orange she would look at me and say "Peanut butter" and I would look back at her and say "Jelly," and it was funny because she wanted peanut butter and I wanted jelly and it was funny that two people who loved each other and had the same name liked two different things like that. She made hard-boiled eggs and packed everything in a basket with cookies and a thermos bottle full of lemonade and then my mother said “Let’s take your poor old Robin along with us, Betsy, my girl. Because poor old Robin is lonesome and he is Elizabeth’s darling,” and I said “Jelly,” and she made a face at me and said “Peanut butter, but let’s take him anyway.”

I pretended to throw a hard-boiled egg at my mother but she went anyway and telephoned Robin and told him to come right away and we took our bathing suits. Robin and my mother and Betsy went on the streetcar out to the bay and my mother and Betsy put on their bathing suits and Robin put on his bathing suit and the water was warm and whenever Betsy splashed at my mother Robin splashed at Betsy and he said “Betsy is a mean mean girl” and the sun was bright and there was no one anywhere around. Robin and my mother and Betsy ate the hard-boiled eggs and the peanut butter sandwiches and when Betsy said “Jelly” my mother said “Betsy, must you tease all the time?” and everyone lay down on the beach in the sun. Then my mother said, “Betsy, my nuisance, go down along the beach and collect seventy-three shells all the prettiest you can find, and we will be sirens and make them into a crown for our Robin.” Betsy went down the beach and gathered shells, and she was all alone, not even strangers near her, and the water on one side and the beach on the other side and the rocks beyond, and she was singing, “I love coffee, I love tea, I love Betsy and Betsy loves me,” and matching shells because she was the sea-king’s daughter and she was gathering the eyes of drowned sailors to ransom her love from the sea-king’s prison in the rocks. There was an empty popcorn box, and it was a coral chest where she put her jewels, and the two rocks were her throne, and when she sang the waves came running up to her feet, and she was shipwrecked, and living alone on an island, and the empty popcorn box was washed up on the shore, and inside it she found corn to plant, and a hammer to build a house. She made plates and pots out of sand, and baked them in the sun, and overhead she had a roof of seaweed and it kept out the sun. The rocks were her signal tower, to light a fire for passing ships. Pirates came by, and captured her, and the rocks were the cabin of the pirate ship where they kept the gold, and they sank a merchant ship and made all the shells walk the plank, and the popcorn box was full of emeralds and pearls. Then Betsy stood up suddenly, feeling cold, and the shells fell out of her lap and the rocks were rocks again and the sand was only scuffed and piled instead of plates and growing corn and there were no drowned sailors in the bay. “I stayed away too long,” Betsy thought, and she gathered up her shells in the popcorn box and walked fast, because she was cold, and she heard Robin saying, “Leave the damn kid with Morgen next time.”

“No,” said Betsy, loudly enough so that people in the bus heard her, and someone turned around to look; I was having a nightmare, she thought violently, having a nightmare, is all. She waited, tense, and then people turned and moved and fell asleep again, and no one knew that Betsy was even awake, or had been awake at all.

“My name is Betsy Richmond,” she began again at last, whispering, “and my mother’s name is Elizabeth Richmond, Elizabeth Jones before she was married....”

When the bus stopped at last and people stirred and opened their eyes and a man down the aisle stood up and began to put on his coat, Betsy was relieved at having no longer to watch the same inside of the bus, and the windows which, whatever they framed, made it look all the same; she was among the first people standing, and she made her way hastily down the aisle, edging past the man putting on his coat, to where her suitcase was, just as the woman in the black gloves stood up and lifted Betsy’s suitcase down. “Good morning,” the woman said, smiling at Betsy. “Did you sleep? I’ll take the bag, dear.”

“I want my suitcase,” Betsy said. It was not usual, she knew, to struggle over a suitcase in a bus, and she must not be angry, so she took hold of the woman’s arm and said again, “I want my suitcase, please.”

“I’ll carry it for you,” the woman said, smiling brightly at the other people in the bus. “Dear,” she added, bringing her smile around again to Betsy.

This was wrong and very unfortunate. “I want my suitcase,” Betsy said once more, not knowing what else to say, and not sure just how far she might trust herself to show anger; here, in a situation like this, was where her unpreparedness showed most clearly — how angry, really, might a person be when her suitcase was taken forcibly away from her? How reprehensible was this false smiling woman, with her unreal sprightliness and her tawdry dull shoddy air; might Betsy strike her? Push her back? Call for help?

She turned, wanting advice, and met the eye of the bus driver; “I want my suitcase,” Betsy said to him down the length of the bus, and, because most of the people had left by now, he came out of his seat and toward Betsy.

“Something wrong, lady?” he asked the woman who still had a clinging grasp on Betsy’s suitcase, and who gave him her free black-gloved hand on his arm, with a sigh of relief; “I wish this child would behave,” she said, with a gesture at Betsy that endeavored to exclude Betsy from the circle of maturity in which the woman and the bus driver were naturally included. “Alone in the big city,” the woman said vividly.

The wickednesses of the city were not lost upon the bus driver; he nodded and regarded Betsy with sadness. “If people want to *help* you,” he began, “seems like you ought to treat them nicer.”

Any needless waste of emotion in Betsy’s position would be an almost criminal extravagance; “Old suitcase-stealer,” she said to the woman, “Just because I told you all my money was in the suitcase.”

“Well, surely...” said the woman, lifting her head high. “I wanted to *help* the child,” she said to the bus driver. “Her money...” and she indicated that of all counterfeit gratification in which she dealt, money was the least regarded and the most unreliable; “alone in a strange city,” she said, “someone offers to help you, and right away you start accusing them of stealing.” She took away her black gloves, and gave Betsy and the bus driver each a long and unhappy look of compassion. “I can always tell your kind of person,” she said flatly to Betsy.

“Lady,” said the bus driver sadly, “if the kid don’t want your help, you can’t make her. Maybe,” he added without humor, “maybe she just *likes* to carry her own money.”

“Naturally,” the woman said, and turned her back on them both; she took up her own suitcase and pocketbook and went out of the bus, walking with the proud step of one who does not steal. “You want to watch out about getting into some kind of real trouble,” the bus driver said to Betsy. “Can’t trust anybody, almost.”

“I know it,” Betsy said. “I plan to be careful.”

“You got any people here or anything?” the bus driver asked, looking for the first time at Betsy instead of at her suitcase. “I mean, you got anywhere to go?”

“Certainly,” said Betsy, perceiving clearly for the first time where she had come. “I’m going to meet my mother.”

The Drewe Hotel was a sign on an awning, a gold script on caps and vest pockets and matchbook folders; Betsy had never before walked on a carpet where her feet made no sound, and even in the museum she had not seen so high a polish on brass fittings. She was impressed by the thoughtfulness of the management on her account; someone had arranged where the bed was to go and had counted the hangers in the closet, and no disguise of satin or watercolor or walnut veneer could conceal the fact that someone had contrived a closed room where Betsy was to perform all the most private acts of her life for a space of time depending upon herself, in whatever order she chose, at her own expense, carefully and securely hidden away. When the door was safely closed and locked (Aunt Morgen and Doctor Wrong would surely not think to look for her in a room with blue satin bedspreads, but she had promised the bus driver to take good care of her suitcase, so locking the door seemed a faithful precaution) she went at once to the window and leaned out. Her room was high, and not far away, between buildings, she could see the river; leaning against the windowsill, it seemed to her that she could feel a gentle touch, as of the river moving against its banks and jarring the land in little waves, so that even the Drewe Hotel was caressed, distantly; somewhere she heard the indefinable stir of music.

A thought of the world swept over her, of people living around her, singing, dancing, laughing; it seemed unexpectedly and joyfully that in all this great world of the city there were a thousand places where she might go and live in deep happiness, among friends who were waiting for her here in the stirring crowds of the city (oh, the dancing in the small rooms, the voices singing together, the long talks at night under the cool trees, the swaggering arm in arm, the weddings and the music and the spring!); perhaps there were some, searching face after face with eager looks, wondering when Betsy would be there. A little touch of laughter caught her, like the touch of the waves of the river, and she tightened her fingers delightedly upon the windowsill; how happy we all are, she thought, and how lucky that I came at last!

Far below her, upon a narrow ledge between one of the buildings and the river, a man came, edging his way; she could not see his face or his objective, but she watched contentedly, knowing that he would accomplish with competence whatever he had started for. When he stumbled, he caught himself and sent what was surely a grin backwards over his shoulder, as one who says "Nearly lost me *that* time," and then, idly, lifted his head as though to make sure that Betsy was watching. While she held her breath with pleasure, he took one hand from his grip on the ledge and waved, although she knew it was not to her, and, grinning and wavering precariously, shouted something to someone, and made his way on across the ledge and disappeared. She looked on still at the moving water of the river, wondering at the man who went so easily, thinking of him now safely across the ledge, laughing and going on already to some new occupation, moving among his friends now and on his way perhaps to some good place where he was welcome; he may someday be a friend of *mine,* she thought; I may be welcome there too.

Now that she knew she was here to find her mother, the city had begun to take on a more coherent shape for her, because somewhere in the center was the solitary figure which was her mother, and radiating out from that figure in all directions were signals and clues which she might find and which would lead her surely to the center of the maze. Anything, she thought, looking with anticipation at the windows across the way, anything might be a clue.

Although upon reflection she perceived that her mother must always have expected that Betsy would come someday, it was impossible for her mother to foresee exactly when Betsy would be able to escape, so she could probably expect very little in the way of assistance from her mother, until her mother learned definitely (perhaps from the man on the ledge?) that Betsy had come at last, and had begun her search. They might just possibly stumble upon one another by chance, but that seemed unreasonable, considering the numbers of people in the city. Betsy decided wisely that what she must do was recall as well as possible all that she had ever heard her mother say about New York, because all that time, long years ago, her mother had been leaving clues for Betsy to find her someday, building against a future when she and Betsy might be free together.

First, then: Betsy and her mother had left New York when Betsy was two years old; consequently Betsy could not be expected to remember much about the city herself, although she had a suspicion that she might at any moment turn a corner and walk without foreknowledge onto a scene clearly remembered and more real than anything she had ever seen since. All that Betsy knew now about the city, beyond what she had seen from the taxi window, the Hotel Drewe, and her acquaintance on the ledge — although probably the bus driver and the woman with the black gloves were by now somewhere among the city people — was what she had heard her mother say, and that was little more than a dozen idle references in one or another conversation. Carefully, Betsy tried to evoke her mother’s clues.

“ — The one from that little dress shop I told you about, Morgen, you remember — Abigail’s.” Betsy recalled this remark most clearly, and even the faint impatient voice her mother had used always in speaking to Aunt Morgen; oddly, she could not remember the dress her mother had been talking about and could not even picture her mother and Aunt Morgen talking together about it; only the lonely sentence stayed in her mind, and that almost certainly made it a clue.

And then... had her mother not spoken longingly of the place she had lived alone with Betsy? "... And I danced with my baby, and sang, and in the mornings we watched the sun rise; it was like Paris." Should she perhaps consider searching for her mother in Paris? Wiser, she decided, to look here first; Paris was difficult to get to, and she already was in New York; besides, although Elizabeth knew some French, Betsy had never troubled to learn it, and she would feel extremely awkward, having to get Lizzie to translate the simplest things; no, she thought, not Paris. But we danced together, and sang, and we lived high up, because there had been many stairs ("... and my Betsy went down the stairs and down the stairs and *down* the stairs, and I sat at the bottom and waited and waited and *waited*..."). She laughed aloud, leaning on the windowsill and thinking of her mother.

She would spend this first morning in her hotel room, partly because here in private she might relax her vigilance over Elizabeth for a while, and partly because she thought it would look odd if she went out again so soon after coming in; they would think downstairs that she had not unpacked her suitcase or even washed her face. This reminded her that it would not do at all, surely, to continue in Elizabeth's drab clothes, since if Aunt Morgen and Doctor Wrong were really looking for her, they would have a description: Elizabeth Richmond, twenty-four years old, height five foot six, weight a hundred and twenty pounds, hair brown, eyes blue, wearing a dark blue suit, white blouse, low-heeled black shoes, plain black hat, last seen carrying a tan suitcase. Thought to have been kidnapped by a young woman known as Betsy Richmond, about sixteen years old, height five foot six, weight a hundred and twenty pounds, hair brown, eyes blue, wearing a dark blue suit... no, new clothes were essential. Betsy thought wryly that if anything could impel Elizabeth to reassert her authority it would surely be the sudden spectacle of herself in scarlet shoes and sequined gown, so she reluctantly decided upon a compromise, perhaps only a red hat and some inexpensive jewelry.

She unpacked the suitcase, putting Elizabeth's neat underwear and extra stockings into the dresser drawer, hanging up Elizabeth's plain coat and clean blouse in the closet. She undressed and bathed, and then, coming out of the tub, met herself unexpectedly in the full length mirror in the bedroom and for a minute almost lost herself in surprise. Where, she wondered, is Elizabeth? Where in the tightness of the skin over her arms and her legs, in the narrow bones of her back and the planned structure of her ribs, in the tiny toes and fingers and the vital plan of her neck and head... where, in all this, was there room for anyone else? Could Lizzie be seen moving furtively behind the clarity of the eyes, edging in caution to peer out at herself; was she gone far within, waiting behind the heart or the throat, to seize with both hands and take control with a murderous attack? Was she under the hair, had she found refuge in a knee? Where was Lizzie?

For a moment, staring, Betsy wanted frantically to rip herself apart, and give half to Lizzie and never be troubled again, saying take this, and take this and take *this,* and you can have *this,* and now get out of my sight, get away from my body, get away and leave me alone. Lizzie could have the useless parts, the breasts and the thighs and the parts she took such pleasure in letting give her pain; Lizzie could have the back so she would always have a backache, and the stomach so she would always be able to have cramps; give Elizabeth all the country of the inside, and let her go away, and leave Betsy in possession of her own.

“Lizzie,” Betsy said cruelly, “Lizzie, come out,” and Elizabeth, looking for a moment out of her own eyes, saw herself standing naked in a strange room before a long mirror, and, turning to cower fearfully against the mirror, she began to cry, and clutched at herself, and looked with horror into the room.

“Where?” she said, whispering, “who?” and searched with her eyes, hoping perhaps to catch sight of her attacker, of the villain who, enfolding her all unperceiving in a crowd, had brought her here evilly to satisfy his white-slave passions; “Hello?” she said finally, weakly, and Betsy laughed and pushed her down, “You poor thing,” Betsy said, looking again in the mirror at the body which had so frightened Elizabeth, “you poor silly thing.”

And then, with Elizabeth’s tears still on her cheeks, she thought, “I wish I had a *real* sister.”

* * *

She heard, as clearly as though it had been spoken in the room with her, her mother’s voice saying, “No, I want the child with me. I won’t give up my Betsy.”

That was my mother, she thought, turning, my mother was talking, she wants me to come with her. But she didn’t say that now, Betsy thought, when did she say it? When was I listening and heard my mother say that? “No, I want the child with me...”

“Get rid of the little pest. Leave her with Morgen. What good is she to *us?*” And *that*, Betsy thought, was Robin’s voice. “I *hate* that child,” he said, some time long ago, some time to Betsy’s mother, “I *hate* that child.” And had her mother said “But she’s my Betsy; I love her”; — had her mother said that? Had she?

“Poor baby’s cold,” Betsy said, and went into the bed and rolled herself in blankets, and she could lie and think; Lizzie was restless as she grew warmer and Betsy sang, “Baby, baby, have you heard, Mother’s going to get you a mocking bird; if that mocking bird won’t sing, Mother’s going to get you a diamond ring...” I wish I had a diamond ring, she thought, as Lizzie quieted; if I had a diamond ring I could tell them I was engaged to be married. If I was engaged to be married they couldn’t take me back because my husband wouldn’t let them. If I had a husband then my mother could marry him and we could all hide together and be happy. My name is Betsy Richmond. My mother’s name is Elizabeth Richmond, Elizabeth Jones before I was married. Call me Lisbeth like you do my mother, because Betsy is my darling Robin....

(“You’re a silly baby,” her mother said.

“But I want Robin to call me Lisbeth too. Because whatever he calls you he’s got to call me.”

“Betsy,” said Robin, laughing, “Betsy, Betsy Betsy.”)

While Elizabeth dreamed of flight and falling, Betsy planned to get herself some new clothes, perhaps today if she could find Abigail’s shop right away. Perhaps at Abigail’s she could find a way to locate her mother at once; perhaps — and the thought made her laugh secretly and wriggle in the bed — perhaps she might, opening the door of the shop, find her mother there already, looking at herself in the glass, wondering over the sequined dress, the jewels; “Betsy, Betsy,” her mother would say, holding out her arms, “Where have you been? I’ve been waiting and waiting and *waiting* for you.”

* * *

Some time later, when she had wondered over her clothes and spent more time at the window (although the man on the ledge did not come back again) and dressed herself and Lizzie had slept, she thought of food, and was suddenly hungry. I didn't have any breakfast, she thought; with Aunt Morgen by now I'd be having lunch, soup or waffles or macaroni or sandwiches with lettuce and mayonnaise and milk and hot cocoa and little cupcakes and cookies and puddings and dishes of pineapple and pickles; she hesitated in the doorway of her room, looking back. Everything was safely put away and there was no sign of her having been there, so if they should, by some chance, come here looking for her, there would be nothing to show where she was or where she was going. She locked the door carefully and put the key into Elizabeth's pocketbook, which she was carrying for lack of any other. In it was Elizabeth's pencil and a lipstick which Elizabeth used to put a faint color on her lips, and the clean handkerchief which Elizabeth always made sure to carry, and a pencil and a small notebook and a little tin of aspirin; Betsy grinned as she closed the pocketbook, wondering how the key to an unknown hotel room would ever explain itself inside the pocketbook to Elizabeth's chaste white handkerchief, and she went down the hall to the elevator thinking here I am at last.

The most important thing she had learned so far — and it was something to know, after only twelve hours — was that she need not pretend, always, to be competent or at home in a strange atmosphere. Other people, she had learned, were frequently uneasy and uncertain, lost their way or their money, were nervous at being approached by strangers or wary of officials; this made it considerably easier for Betsy to manage, since she could go up to the clerk at the hotel desk and ask her way to the dining room without seeming odd or unwell, and she relied strongly upon getting through a meal upon the same principle; so long as she did not try to order anything with a French name, and observed carefully to see what other people did by way of sitting down, and moving plates, and summoning service, she thought that she would do nicely. She was not awed by the size or the whiteness of the dining room, after having seen the satin bedspreads upstairs, and all tables not Aunt Morgen's were equally strange to her. She sat down, thinking with humor that if she stepped on the waiter's foot, or dropped her pocketbook, or perhaps missed the chair altogether, sitting down, she could always slip off and leave Lizzie to cope. She unfolded her napkin and looked around, and sat back in the soft chair with satisfaction. Each thing, she thought pleasurably, is nicer than the last; everything gets better and better.

With an enormous feeling of delighted wickedness she ordered an Aunt-Morgen-ish glass of sherry, and did not notice the waiter's hesitation over whether she was as old as she looked, and entitled to be served, or as old as she acted, and must necessarily be refused; the waiter, however, was in the last analysis philosophical, and concluded that a woman was more likely to look her age than to act it, so that Betsy was served with sherry and she sipped it gracefully, quite as professionally as Aunt Morgen might. Because it was not possible, in this most charming of worlds, for anything to be either mistaken or out of sorts, when Betsy desired company she looked up at the first person passing her table and said "Hello."

"Hello," he said, surprised, and hesitating by the table.

"Sit down, please," Betsy said politely.

He opened his eyes wide, glanced beyond her at the empty table which had been his objective, and then laughed. "All right," he said.

"I feel funny sitting here alone," Betsy explained. "No one to talk to, or anything. At home there was always Aunt Morgen there and even when she didn't talk I could have someone to look at. Someone I knew, that is," she said.

"Of course," he said, sitting down. "Have you been here long?" he asked, taking up his napkin.

"I just got here this morning, and the bus driver told me to be careful, so of course I am, but I thought you looked all right to talk to." He seemed a very civil man, not so old as Doctor Wrong, but older than Robin, and not at all uncomfortable at talking like this to someone he had not met before. "You weren't outside my window a little while ago?" she asked him suddenly, "climbing across a ledge?"

He shook his head, surprised. "I'm not spry enough," he said.

"*I* could if I wanted to. Lizzie gets faint, but of course I never do."

"Who is Lizzie?"

"Lizzie Richmond. I brought her with me, and she wants to get out, but she can't." She stopped and looked at him suspiciously. "I wasn't going to tell anyone about Lizzie," she said.

"It doesn't matter," he said. "I won't tell."

"Anyway, my mother's going to get rid of Lizzie — we're not going to have *her* around all the time, after the trouble we've already had, getting rid of Robin and all."

"Are you having lunch?" He took the menu from the waiter, smiling at her, and Betsy said, "This is the first time I've ever been in a restaurant," and wriggled happily. "And I'm *extremely* hungry," she added.

"Then we had better make this a special lunch," he said. "Shall I choose for you?" He held the menu toward her, and said, "Or would you rather order something for yourself?"

Betsy took the menu and glanced at it briefly and then handed it back. "Lizzie speaks French," she said, "but of course *I* never bothered to take it up much, so you’d better choose. Only lots of things, please. Everything exciting.” She hesitated. “Nothing,” she said, “nothing like... macaroni, or pickles, or sandwiches, or things like that. Things Aunt Morgen makes.”

“Well,” he said profoundly. He regarded the menu in deep thought. “No pickles,” he said, debating, “no sandwiches.” Finally, with the waiter standing by, and both of them nodding reassuringly at Betsy, he ordered smoothly and quite as though he very frequently had occasion to order lunches for young ladies who wanted everything exciting, and no pickles. While she listened to the lovely words which meant foods so exciting she did not even know the order in which they would be served, and listened to music coming distantly from some upper corner of the room, and listened to the fine harmonious sound of forks touching knives, and cups touching saucers, Betsy told herself, this is what it is going to be like all the time, now.

“There,” he said at last, handing the menu to the waiter. “I think you’re going to like everything. Now, tell me — I don’t even know your name.”

“I’m Betsy. Betsy Richmond. My mother’s name is Elizabeth Richmond, Elizabeth Jones before she was married. I was born in New York.”

“How long ago?”

“I forget,” she said vaguely. “Is that for me?” The waiter set a fruit cup before her, and she took the cherry from the top with her fingers and put it into her mouth. “My mother left me with Aunt Morgen,” she went on indistinctly, “but she didn’t go with Robin.”

“The one you had such trouble getting rid of?”

Betsy nodded violently, swallowed, and said, “But I don’t have to remember that part, I decided in the bus. One bad thing about Robin ought to be enough, don’t you think?”

“I should think so,” he said. “Seeing as you got rid of him, anyway.”

She giggled, lifting her spoon. "*And* I got rid of Aunt Morgen, *and* I got rid of Doctor Wrong, *and* I'm going to get rid of Lizzie, and I'm the gingerbread boy, I am."

"I wonder if Aunt Morgen will be worried about you," he said carefully.

She shook her head again. "I wrote her a postcard with a picture on it and I said I wasn't coming back, and anyway they'll be looking for Lizzie, not me. Can I have some more fruit?"

"He'll be bringing you something else in a minute."

"I can pay for it — I have plenty of money." When she saw that he was smiling she thought, and then said acutely, "That was wrong, wasn't it? That was wrong to say — why?"

"I invited you to lunch, sort of," he said. "That means that I am going to pay, so you mustn't say anything about paying. You must wait, and then be very gracious about my paying."

"Gracious," she said. "You mean 'Thank you *so* much'? Like Aunt Morgen?"

"Exactly like Aunt Morgen," he said. "Where is your mother now?"

"I don't know just where it is. I'm still finding out. Like the man down on the ledge. They're going to have to tell me because I'll just keep asking and looking and looking and asking and asking and looking and looking and —" She stopped abruptly, and there was a silence. When she looked up, he was placidly finishing his fruit. "Sometimes," she said with great caution, "I get mixed up. You'll just have to excuse it."

"Of course," he said, without surprise.

"So you see," Betsy said, looking with deep satisfaction into a bowl of clear soup in which, far down, small strange shapes moved, and stirred, and stared, and strode.

"Who are you?" asked Elizabeth, blankly.

“How do you do?” he said. “I’m a friend of yours.”

Betsy looked up, gasping, and moved far back in her chair, and scowled at him. “Don’t you listen to her,” she said. “She tells lies.”

“All right,” he said, and moved his spoon in his soup.

“I don’t want any soup,” Betsy said sullenly.

“All right,” he said. “It’s good, though, I always like soup.”

“Aunt Morgen likes soup,” Betsy said. “All the time.”

“And pickles?”

Betsy giggled, in spite of her annoyance. “Old Aunt Pickle,” she said.

“Old Doctor Pickle,” he said.

“Old Lizzie Pickle.”

“Elizabeth Jones that was?”

“What?” said Betsy.

“Elizabeth Pickle before she was married,” he said.

“You stop that right now,” Betsy said furiously. “You just stop talking like that. I’ll tell my mother.”

“I’m sorry,” he said. “It was a joke.”

“My mother doesn’t like jokes. Not mean jokes, and when Robin made mean jokes my mother told him to stop and when you make mean jokes you sound like Robin.”

“And you’ll get rid of me?”

She laughed. “That was smart, how I got rid of Robin,” she said, and then, breathlessly, “Oh!” turning to look at a tray of pastries being wheeled past her chair. “Can I have one?”

“First eat your lunch. Your nice soup.”

“I want cake,” said Betsy.

“Your mother wouldn’t want you to have dessert first.”

Betsy was quiet suddenly. “How do you know?” she said. “How do you know what my mother would want?”

“She *certainly* wouldn’t want you to be sick. That would be silly.”

“That’s right,” Betsy said joyfully, “Mother’s Betsy can’t be sick, Betsy is Mother’s baby and she mustn’t cry, and Aunt Morgen said stop spoiling the child.”

“I think,” he said slowly, “that we don’t like Aunt Morgen, do we, you and I? I don’t think Aunt Morgen is so much.”

“Aunt Morgen says to make the child stop fawning on Robin all the time. Aunt Morgen says the child is too old to scramble around with Robin like that. Aunt Morgen says the child knows more than is good for her.”

“Old Aunt Pickle,” he said.

“I want cake,” Betsy said, and he laughed, and gestured to the waiter with the dessert wagon. “Only one,” he said, “and then you eat the rest of your lunch I ordered for you. We’re not going to have you sick, remember.”

“Not *me,*” said Betsy, bending lovingly over the tiny rich cakes, her eyes sparkling with the reflections of whipped cream and chocolate and strawberries; “it’s Lizzie who gets sick,” she said; one had bananas and one had chopped nuts and one had cherries; Betsy sighed.

“And you say they’ll be looking for Lizzie?”

“Maybe the little square one,” Betsy said. “Just to start. I choose the little square one,” she said to the waiter. “Because then later I can try another kind and if any of them are very very good I can come back and have them again, after I’ve tried them all. Because I live right upstairs,” she said parenthetically to the waiter, “so I can keep coming back and coming back. So I choose—”

She broke off as the headwaiter came to their table. “Telephone for you, Doctor,” he said.

"Doctor?" said Betsy, rising. "Doctor?" She snatched at her pocketbook, and said in anger, "You're just Doctor Wrong in another face and you tried to fool me—"

"Wait a minute, please," he said, putting out a hand to stop her, but she brushed past him, her lips trembling and her hands shaking with anger. "It was mean of you," she said, "and I'll tell my mother you pretended to be friends, and now I can't have the little square one." She started off, and then remembered. "Thank you *so* much for paying," she said, bowing her head graciously, and then, almost running, left the restaurant and went through the hotel lobby into the street. A bus, she was thinking, always take a bus to get away, and she turned to her right and hurried down the street. She could see a bus coming to the corner to stop, and she ran and got onto it and sat down with relief, next to a woman in green silk, who looked at her briefly.

When she caught her breath, she leaned forward to look out of the window past the woman and said, "I wonder where *this* bus goes."

"Downtown, of course," the woman said stiffly, as though Betsy had somehow impugned the honor of the bus, or, worse, the discrimination of the woman in green silk; "this bus goes downtown."

"Thank you," Betsy said. "I hope I can find the place I'm looking for. It's not very likely, just starting out like this, but I can try, anyway."

"Some people," said the woman, consideringly, "think it's harder to find places downtown. Myself, I always have a *good* deal more trouble uptown. Are you going far?"

"Well, of course I can't be sure," Betsy said. "I'm just looking. Lots of stairs. And pink walls," she went on, remembering, "and there's a view of the river from the window."

"That would be the west side, then," the woman said. "They've all got stairs, there." She sighed. "I live east, myself," she said, "but of course we're moving in the fall."

"West of what?"

"West of the bus, of course," the woman said. "To your right as you get off."

"Then I turn right, and just anywhere might do?"

"Just anywhere?" said the woman, with a delicate inflection, and she turned emphatically and looked out of the window.

People keep getting so mixed up, Betsy thought helplessly, and she said, "It's because I'm looking for my mother, and I don't know exactly where she lives because I haven't been there in so long."

"Really?" said the woman, looking out of the window.

Oh, dear, Betsy thought, and she put her hand timidly on the woman's arm. "Please," she said, "if you don't mind, can I just ask you?"

The woman turned, hesitating as though half-convinced Betsy might have in mind an improper question — whether she had always lived east, perhaps, or did her building have an elevator? — and then nodded briefly. "Naturally," the woman said, "I can't answer *every*thing."

"I need only a kind of direction," Betsy said. "A clue. I know where I'm going, of course, and I'm positive I'll recognize it at once, but I'm just not quite sure of which house. The window looks out over the river, and the walls are painted pink—"

"Pink?"

"And," Betsy said triumphantly, "I remember there was one good picture on the wall." (And heard, distantly, her mother's voice, "And, really, if you have just one *good* picture you don't need..." Need what? Flowers, was it? Beds? Betsy?)

The woman next to her was thinking gravely. "You remember the street?" she asked hopefully at last.

"Downtown, I'm sure. Because of the stairs."

"Well," the woman said. "I *do* know," she went on at last, "that some people we knew once — not friends, of course, not anyone I *knew,* not the *sort* of people—"

She gestured with a small dismissal, and Betsy said eagerly, "I know lots of people like that, yes."

"*They* had, these people, a place over on... let me see; it was Tenth because when we came out we went directly... no, no, I'm a liar. Sixteenth, I'm positive. Middle of the block."

"Middle of the block," said Betsy. "Could you see the river?"

"The reason I remember it, now you mention it," the woman said, "because of course I never went *back,* not really knowing the people and it was just a party, and all, was because they had a picture they thought a lot of. Painter, *he* was."

"Oh," said Betsy. "No, she's not a painter, my mother."

"Oh, not *professional,*" said the woman. "Not *bohemian*. I'm sure I wouldn't send you any place you shouldn't go. After all," and she folded her arms and turned her face firmly to the window.

"I didn't mean that at all, I'm sorry," Betsy said. "I just meant it didn't sound like the right place."

"Well, you *did* say a picture," the woman said.

"You see, it's my mother," Betsy explained again. "She's waiting for me to come after a long time."

"You get off here," said the woman, with finality.

"Thank you," said Betsy, rising. "And thank you for telling me where to go."

"No need to mention me when you get there," said the woman. "They probably don't even remember my name."

* * *

The street was not one to be joyfully remembered; she looked eagerly at things which would, unmolested, tend to be permanent — the view down to the end, down to the narrow spot where it disappeared, presumably into the river, but the long sight of it was not prettier than the nearer view, and the sidewalk beneath her feet was not inscribed in the cement ELIZABETH LOVES BETSY and the dirty fence on her left bore no recognizable carving and even the arrow in chalk and the scrawl “go this way” indicated only a low gate with “clubhowse” uncertainly inscribed over it. Not my club, Betsy thought, my mother’s not *there,* anyway, and that’s at least one place ruled out. Middle of the block, she said, middle of the block, view of the river, and not a place marked ROOMS, Dressmaker, Canaries for Sale, Medium. Across the street was a white stone apartment house, crowding defensively against its neighbors advertising ROOMS, and Betsy crossed the street to get to it; it announced its number and the sizes of its apartments in bold emphatic placards, but said nothing about whether or not there were stairs, and Betsy, wondering at which point now the sudden recollection might begin, went hurriedly down the path of the canopy and up the one shallow step — perhaps only ostentation, since directly inside there was another step going down the same distance — and into the small foyer, where there was a mural of orange fish against a black sea. However live the fish may have been when the mural was painted, they were long dead now, floating miserably upon the painted surface of their water, fins dragging; perhaps at one point they might have been saved, when, gasping for breath, they first came to the surface and turned their agonized suffocating eyes upon the casual guest entering the foyer of the apartment house; a little fresh water, a kindly look, might have revived the painted fish and made the visitor welcome in the dim light. The fish had died, however, and there was a stout woman in a plaid cotton dress sitting at a table, searching eagerly for gentility; “You want a room, I guess?” the woman said, leaning forward against the table and resting herself heavily upon her magazine, and the reassuring weight of her bosom upon the table recollected her, because she sat back and said, “May I ask whom you are looking for?”

“My mother,” Betsy said.

“She’s *here?*” Again the woman recollected herself, and sat back. “Name, please?”

“My name is Betsy, but I’m looking for my mother. Is she here?”

“I couldn’t say, dear. What apartment you want?”

“I’m not sure. But it has pink walls and a view of the river, and one good picture, because if you have one good picture you don’t need...” Betsy stopped, but the woman could not help; she was staring absently at an advertisement in her magazine which promised to teach her engineering in six weeks. “Pink walls?” the woman said when Betsy stopped.

“And a view of the river.”

The woman glanced up, then sideways, then down. “Makes you think you got a mother *here?*” she asked. “Anybody’s mother’s *here, I* certainly don’t know it.”

“But she said—”

“Pink walls,” said the woman irritably, in some obscure impatience with a world where there could be pink walls, and she spent her days seeing orange fish on a black sea; “one of those decorators,” she added, in ultimate condemnation.

“Then my mother’s not here?” asked Betsy despondently.

“No,” said the woman, “she’s not. Poor kid. Lost your mommy, have you?” She turned the pages of her magazine quickly as though looking up a reference, and said, “You run along, now, you hear me?”

Betsy turned obediently and went past the dead fish again, and as she came to the step up which would correspond to the step down outside, she heard the woman saying with disgust, “Always want something you haven’t got. Pink walls!”

Outside, she started off again down the street. There did not seem to be any other possible place to look, and Betsy gave up almost immediately the idea of trying from door to door, and then, when she saw someone coming down the street toward her, indistinct in the shadows of the buildings, she thought it would surely do no harm to ask, and when they took word back to her mother they could report that Betsy was really trying hard.

“Excuse me,” she said, reaching out to touch the man on the arm, “but have you seen my mother? Mrs. Richmond?”

“Hello,” he said.

“Robin?” said Betsy, and then, again, “Robin?” and then turned and ran, and heard him laughing behind her, as one whose hunting is leisurely, his quarry sure; then she came to lights and safety.

* * *

“Give me Doctor Wright, please. I must speak to the doctor, hurry, please.”

“Who?”

“Please, I’m on a public telephone and I’ve got to hurry. Please, Doctor Wright. Tell him it’s Beth.”

“Who you want?”

“Please, the doctor. Doctor Wright.”

“You got the wrong number, lady.”

“Sure I got the wrong number, you silly fool. You think *I’m* crazy?”

* * *

Safely back in the hotel, she was still both frightened and angry, and yet did not dare indulge herself in either fear or anger, since both used up vital stores of control. She was angry at Beth for getting slyly to a phone and nearly ruining them all; she was afraid of the man who said he was Robin and yet let her run away. Mostly, in the hotel, she was angry and afraid of that doctor who stayed around watching for people in trouble, so he might offer to buy them lunches, and then betray them; it was not going to be safe, Betsy reminded herself bitterly, to trust anyone at all. She sat down heavily in the chair by the desk, the door of her room soundly locked and the key back in her pocketbook, and tried hard to think. Things were not going well, not at all as well as they had gone at first. She had done something wrong, obviously, and she was fairly sure that it had been her talking to the doctor at lunch (had he not promised to be a friend during the brief moment when Lizzie got out; did he not mean, therefore to be a friend to *Lizzie?*); fortunately, Robin's presence had warned her in time against the neighborhood she had visited tonight; her mother was not there. Therefore, although she had surely grieved her mother, she was not abandoned altogether; she must only be more careful with the next clue and not risk running directly into Robin's arms. ("Darling Robin," she said aloud, "call me Lisbeth.") Then, when she turned cold and suddenly trembling, she saw clearly that everything was not all right; something had happened.

She thought immediately that she had been caught, and then realized that she was alone still, with the first light of morning coming over the buildings across the street. Suddenly, wildly she ran at the door, pulling at it frantically to make sure it was locked, and almost cried with relief when she found it secure; she didn't get away, then, Betsy thought, and then wondered, Who?

It was still almost too dark to see in the room; when Betsy turned on the light next to the door, her hands still trembling so that it was difficult for her to touch the little switch, she saw first of all Lizzie's suitcase lying open in the middle of the floor. "So she found the suitcase," Betsy said aloud, and then, cold and still, said into the continuing silence of the room, "Lizzie! Where are you?" But there was no answer.

There were tears on her cheeks, Lizzie's tears again, and Betsy brushed them away irritably, thinking, the messy messy *sloppy* thing, can't she leave my stuff alone? The suitcase was half-packed, clothes thrown in wildly, and, as though Lizzie had given up despairingly in the middle of packing, other clothes were strewn around the room, torn and scattered. Lizzie's own best white blouse lay over the end of the bed, collar ripped off and buttons hanging by threads, and Betsy, looking slowly around the room, saw with fear the sheets pulled from the bed and cut with the nail scissors, the pillow slashed open, the paper from the desk tossed wildly in a scattered heap, as though swept off altogether by an arm wild with fury; the curtains were pulled down and lay on the floor, the shades pulled askew, and even one corner of the rug had been tugged aside and turned back on itself; "Don't be afraid," Betsy whispered, "Betsy is my darling, my darling." She pressed hard against the wall, feeling still the weakness of panic, and knowing that if she yielded only the smallest particle of her strength she was gone again; she could not afford anger or fear or despair; she could not waste a moment to look behind her. "I am Betsy Richmond," she whispered, "my mother's name is Elizabeth Richmond..."

Gradually she became quieter. The light in the room grew, coming stronger over the tops of the buildings, and she thought of the man on the ledge and was heartened. At last she stood away from the wall, sighing deeply like a child who has finished crying, and walked around the room slowly, thinking, wouldn't you think she'd have more respect for other people's things? She picked up a stocking, hacked with the scissors and tied into knots, and then laughed suddenly. Why, Betsy thought, she's learning from *me;* this is *my* kind of thing, not hers, and she's even with me now for spoiling that letter of hers. And she's got more life than she ever had before, Betsy thought, laughing still, as she took up the soft white blouse ripped apart; the picture of Elizabeth's tired hands pulling wildly at the weak seams of the blouse caught Betsy suddenly as irresistibly funny, and she fell back onto the bed and rolled in helpless laughter. Poor baby, she thought, working so hard to spoil my things, poor frantic baby. Her face and hair were full of feathers from the torn pillow, and as her laughter eased, she found that she could blow a feather into the air again and again, catching it each time as it fell; then, luckily, the sunlight touched her face, luckily because of course she still had a great deal of work to do about finding her mother, and could not afford to lie on a bed playing games with feathers. She rose, and looked at herself in the mirror with distaste. Her clothes had certainly suffered during the night; they were covered with feathers and disarranged, and for a minute she wondered that they too had not been cut and torn, before she realized that of course Lizzie had been planning to escape, and in these clothes. She wondered idly if Lizzie had attacked the room desperately because she had tried to escape and could not find the doorkey, or if she had destroyed the room first, vengefully, planning to escape afterward, and been caught by exhaustion; "Poor silly baby," Betsy said again, and, whistling, began a hunt for any piece of her comb so that she might smooth her hair. Then, suddenly, one hand on the suitcase, she turned as cold and sick and frightened as she had ever been. The big dictionary she had brought with her, so that she might check spelling and various usable words, was lying just inside the suitcase, its binding torn off, its pages pulled out and crumpled, its millions of good, practical, helpful words hopelessly destroyed.

“Lizzie,” Betsy said aloud, backing off, “but Lizzie wouldn’t ever have done anything to her own *book,* not to her own good book—”

Suddenly, madly, she took up the book, and rising and turning, threw it as hard as she could at the mirror. “There,” she said out loud, through the crash, “that’ll show you I’m *still* worse than you are, who*ever* you are!”

* * *

Sometime later, back on the bed playing her game with the feather, she was quieter again. This only meant, she reasoned, that she had less time than she had thought. She must quite simply get to her mother just as quickly as possible.

It was by then nearly noon, and she could not remember whether or how she had had dinner the evening before. She turned her back resolutely on the icy little reminders that there seemed to be a good deal of time unaccounted for, all around; why, for instance, had it been afternoon when she left the lunch table, and night when she returned after meeting Robin? She thought she had probably not had dinner, because she was now so extremely hungry, and she dwelt with gratitude upon her hunger, which was surely a healthy and a normal feeling, and not at all dangerous, except that it entailed going out of her hotel room. At last she reasoned shrewdly that if the doctor was still watching for her downstairs he had to stop sometime to eat, too, and if he stopped to eat his lunch or his dinner he would put someone else to watching her, and whoever he got to watch her would have to have dinner or lunch, too, so she would be, to all effects, invisible, if she was only having dinner or lunch, and might come and go as she pleased. Thinking of the little cakes, she moved hastily to the shattered mirror and arranged her hair and then, taking her pocketbook — thankful that because she had Aunt-Morgen-ishly hidden it on the closet shelf, it had escaped the ruin of the room — she unlocked the door of the room and locked it again, leaving the chaos inside, and dropped the libertine key into Elizabeth's chaste pocketbook and went down the hall to the elevator. When she came into the dining room she walked proudly, and even stopped for a minute inside the door to consider and choose a particular table; she sat down with perfect ease, and ordered herself a glass of sherry.

"But then why did Robin run away?" he asked.

"Because I said I'd tell my mother what we did." She looked up, dumfounded, fork in hand; "no," she whispered, staring fearfully, "no," she said, and then, just like Elizabeth, "why?" looking from him to her plate to her fork to the pastries, "why are you talking to me?" she said.

"Please," he said, half-rising, "please, it's all right, Bess, really—"

"Bess?" she said. *"Bess?"*

* * *

Now she knew concretely that she had almost no time; she had wasted so many minutes, looking out of windows and gloating over cakes, and they were close behind her now, the doctor in the dining room and Aunt Morgen and perhaps even the betraying bus driver, and the whole city still to search for her mother. Perhaps, she thought, stopping in her flight to stand for a minute in the half darkness apart from the hotel entrance, perhaps if I just stand here she might come. Mother, she said silently at the people going past, mother, come and find me; I'm lost and I'm tired and I'm afraid, come and find your baby, please?

"My dear child," he said, coming silently up behind her, "do come back inside; I promise you I only want—"

"It's Robin," she said, and ran again, going in and out between people, not wondering if they saw her or thought she was strange, listening only to hear if he was following her. She came to a corner and turned, and went into a lighted doorway into an endless bright store; "Too late, closing," a girl said to her, just inside, and she turned without speaking and ran out another doorway into another street and down the street and on until she saw a crowd ahead and thought, "He's in there, waiting," and turned and ran back down the street and turned at the corner and stopped.

"How can he find me?" she thought, reasonably at last. "He doesn't even know my name." She breathed deeply, standing against the wall of a building. This corner was darker and there were fewer people passing, going always toward the lights beyond; for a few minutes she watched the street light turn red and green and red and green, and then she thought no sense wasting any *more* time, no one could ever find me here, and she laughed that she still had her pocketbook, because all the time the strap had been firmly hooked over her elbow.

"Where is a bus?" she asked a man passing by, and the man stopped, and thought, and then said, "Bus to where, miss?"

"I don't care," she said.

"Well," the man said, "if you don't *care,* why take a bus? Why not walk?"

"I don't know," she said. "Where are *you* going?"

"I'm going over across town about three blocks," he said. "I'm going to get my wife a birthday present, a necklace."

"Can I come? My mother likes necklaces and things like that."

"Come along," he said. "You can help me pick it out. She likes," he went on, as Betsy walked along beside him, "she likes jewelry, but not ordinary jewelry. Not the kind you get just *any*where. Unusual stuff."

“That’s the best kind,” Betsy said. “Of course, almost anything is unusual if you’re not used to it.”

“Well, that’s what I mean,” the man said. “There’s this little shop I know about, and of course *she* doesn’t. So it’s got to be a surprise.”

“I’m sure she’ll like it very much,” Betsy said. “Coming from you, that is.”

“Well, I guess she will,” the man said. “She likes just about everything I pick out, because of course I always look for unusual things.”

“Of course I do too,” Betsy said. “Right now, I’m looking for my mother and being new here I don’t know what’s unusual or not, but my mother will know. She lives here somewhere.”

“It’s a pretty good town,” the man said, consideringly. “Of course you have to live here to appreciate it.”

“I’m going to live with my mother when I find her,” Betsy said.

“She live in Brooklyn?”

“Probably,” Betsy said doubtfully.

“How’re you going to *find* her?” the man asked.

“Well,” Betsy said, “you’re looking for something, and I’m looking for my mother, and so if I go along with you maybe I’ll find my mother.”

“*My* mother now,” the man said, “you could find *her* any time.”

“Well, you see, I came here to meet my mother and I just haven’t gotten to her yet. It just takes looking. Does your wife live in Brooklyn?”

“No,” the man said, surprised. “She lives with me.”

“Where do you live?”

“Uptown.” He stopped, and looked at her searchingly. “You all right, kid?” he asked.

“Of course,” Betsy said. “Why?”

“Thinking I lived in Brooklyn,” the man said, going on. “At this time of night.”

“Does your wife,” Betsy asked, hurrying to catch up with him again, “know you’re getting her a birthday present?”

“Sure,” the man said. “Only she doesn’t know where, you see.”

“How about a cake?” Betsy asked. “She ought to have a cake, with ‘Happy Birthday’ and candles.”

“Golly,” the man said, stopping again. “Golly. Let’s see,” he said. “You figure a cake costs — what? Say, sixty cents?”

“Just about that, I guess,” Betsy said.

“And then you got to have candles,” the man said. “Now, let’s think this over. You say candles cost maybe a dime? And the cake sixty? Because then you got to get a thing says ‘Happy Birthday’ and that’s maybe twenty-nine cents, you find a five and ten open if you *can*. So there goes another buck. So the necklace costs—”

“*I* know,” Betsy said. “*I* get the cake and all. *You* get the necklace. Then it’s all right. Cake from me, necklace from you.”

“Right,” the man said. “Cake from you, necklace from me. You say chocolate, maybe? Mocha?”

“I like chocolate,” Betsy said. “Get a nice card, too, and tell her it’s from me.” She stopped under a street light and gave him a handful of change from her pocketbook. “Because,” she pointed out, “if you’re going uptown or to Brooklyn it’s no help to me anyway, because my mother’s the other direction. But thank you very much anyway.”

“Right,” the man said. “Cake from you,” he went on, worried, “necklace from me. But listen—” he called, as Betsy turned to go the other way, “who’ll I say? On the card and all?”

“Tell her it’s from Betsy, with my love.”

"Right," the man said. And as Betsy hurried down a side-street she heard him calling, "Hey — thanks."

"Many happy returns," she called back, and went on her way. Although she had very little hope of finding her mother so soon, she was glad she had remembered the cake anyway. We always have cakes on birthdays, she thought; my mother would be disappointed if I forgot; my name is Betsy Richmond and my mother's name is... She stopped short and laughed aloud; things were good again at last.

"I beg your pardon," she said, stepping out among the people passing; she took hold of the arm of a woman going by alone and said "I beg your pardon" again.

"Well," said the woman good-humoredly, "if you're not a cop, you can beg my pardon and get away with it. Something you want?"

"Do you know someone named Elizabeth Richmond? Where she lives, I mean?"

"Richmond? No. Why," the woman asked, peering at Betsy, "you looking for her?"

"It's my mother. I'm to meet her, and I've forgotten where she lives."

"Whyn't you look in a phone book? Under R, for instance?"

"I didn't think of that," said Betsy blankly.

The woman laughed. "You kids," she said, and went on.

It was so easy Betsy was almost afraid. She walked down to the corner to a lighted drugstore, went inside and directly back to a rack where the phone books were piled; it was too easy, she thought dubiously, not willing to touch the pages, it was a trap; but how could she ever look at her mother and say she had taken so long because she thought it was a trap? Could people afford to be afraid if they were going to their mothers? Why would her mother want to make a trap for her Betsy who was her darling?

RICHMOND, ELIZABETH. It stood out from the page, blackly, and then, below it, RICHMOND, ELIZABETH, and below that, RICHMOND, ELIZABETH, and, again, RICHMOND, ELIZABETH. Who, Betsy thought, staring, who? My mother's name...

She turned hastily away from the telephone books and then told herself sternly no, no traps, and turned back again, and put her finger down on the page. Silly, she thought, lots of people have the same name. *I* have the same name. And anyway it's the *place* I want, I already *know* my mother's *name.* So find an address, and it's somewhere near Sixteenth, she said, and anyway how many people are having birthdays tonight? It's west of the bus, I know *that,* and you can see the river, and I'll just be careful not to tell anyone where I'm going because of traps.

One of the addresses said West Eighteenth, and that seemed good, and so did West Twelfth, and the others were East, and one of them was a hundred and something, which seemed fairly uptown, so that narrowed it down to two, and *now,* Betsy thought triumphantly, things are getting very very good, because now I've got the best clue of all, and I can go right there and maybe even be in time for the candles.

When she came out of the bright drugstore into the darker street she realized that it had really gotten quite late, and she did not dare look for a bus, with so little time; she got, instead, into a taxi, and told him West Eighteenth Street. Her time was growing shorter; she felt the minutes pulling at her, and when she looked out of the taxi window at the lights outside she felt them surge sickeningly against her, and had to hold tight to keep her eyes from blurring and she wanted acutely not to breathe. Just a little while more, she whispered, just a little while more, Betsy is my darling. The taxi let her off at the corner of Fifth and Eighteenth, and the driver showed her which way to start. She hurried, because it was better, walking, and the streets were almost empty. I said I’d do it and I will, she whispered, I said I’d do it and I will, *my* mother is waiting for me and the rest of you will die.

She could not remember at all whether the first address had been twelve or a hundred and twelve or twelve squared or a hundred and twenty-one; twelve seemed to be a shop and as she looked into the darkened windows, going by, she saw that it might be a dress shop and, although she could not read the name darkly on the window, she knew that it must be Abigail’s and she knew she was right, at last; here I come, she whispered, I am coming and my name is Betsy... It must be a hundred and twelve or a hundred and twenty-one; they were almost across the street from one another and she stopped and looked at the lights of a hundred and twelve and thought, here it is, this is it.

No fish here, she thought, entering, and wondered with surprise why it should seem important not to have fish painted on the walls. “Excuse me,” she said, putting her face close to the little barred window which seemed so absurdly small for her mother to get through, “I’d like to find Mrs. Richmond. Elizabeth Richmond.”

“Not here.”

“But I’m sure this was the address. Do your rooms have a view of the river?”

“Naturally, miss. *All* our rooms—”

“Then she might be using her other name. Try under Jones.”

“Not here.”

“But I’m sure—”

“Try over across the way.”

Of course, she thought; it was the place with the fish after all, they probably just pretend to see the river. She crossed the street, setting her back firmly to the useless apartment house, and came into another lobby; no fish *here,* she thought with satisfaction. “I’m looking for my mother,” she said, standing with her knees tight against the desk in the lobby; the lady behind the desk had a pink dress on and of course that was a very *very* good sign. “My mother,” she explained.

“Name?”

“Richmond. Elizabeth Richmond. Or maybe Elizabeth Jones.”

“Make up your mind, which.”

“She’d be up there now, getting ready; we were going to have a party because it’s her birthday.”

“No noise allowed after ten P.M. No parties any time.”

“Just for our birthday celebration. Just my mother and me and I’m going to buy her a necklace.”

“No parties here. Try somewhere else.”

“But my mother—”

“Try over across the way.”

She went out proudly, because she was ashamed at having been misled into talking to strangers about her mother and giving both these people her mother’s name; what would the man on the ledge think of her if he knew she was going around telling people where her mother lived? Here she was, so close to her mother, and she could have spoiled it all right then by telling the fish; “I beg your pardon,” she said, and took the arm of a lady passing by, “you’re not my mother, are you?”

“Well, *really,*” said the lady, and then laughed. “Your error,” she said. “Excuse it, please.”

“Richmond,” she said. “Elizabeth Richmond.”

The woman turned, and scowled. “Her calls herself Lili?” she demanded. “Lili?”

“Maybe.” Betsy tried to draw away, but the woman held her tight. “If that’s your mother, young lady,” she said, “and I’m not saying it *isn’t,* you’re the one to know, after all, but if *that’s* your *mother,* I’d be ashamed to say so, and that’s final.”

“Richmond,” Betsy said.

The woman nodded, keeping hold of Betsy’s arm. “And that’s the one,” she said, nodding, “and I’d be ashamed if it wasn’t that *I* had nothing to be ashamed of in all of it, and doing my share and pulling my weight and here all the time he was after *her,* see? And coming to me with a straight face, and me not even knowing, what I mean, unless you got a suspicious turn of mind you don’t *think* about that kind of thing.”

“Robin,” Betsy said. “I already know about Robin.”

“Another one, is it? But of course sooner or later they’re going to find out, what I mean. What I mean, *some*thing’s going to happen, you can’t stay a dope forever. So when he came to me there I was and he said hello same as usual and me — what I mean, I wasn’t letting on at first, see? — I said hello and then he says what’s wrong and I don’t answer and he says it again, like this, ‘Hey, what’s wrong?’ and then, what I mean, I let him have it. You think I’m a dope, I said to him, you think I’m going to stand for this thing forever, you think I’m going to wait and wait and wait and wait and wait and you after *her* all the time? It isn’t the money, I told him straight out, it isn’t the money—”

“It was Robin,” Betsy cried out, pushing against the woman, “it wasn’t anybody except Robin, I *know.*”

“Maybe you *do* know, too,” said the woman with hatred, holding Betsy off to look at her, “maybe you *do* know all about it, and I for one wouldn’t be surprised, being well aware that I was the *last* to know, so he says what are you talking about — innocent, see? — and I said how long you think

I’m going to wait and wait and wait and wait and wait for *you?* People are talking already, I said, and I guess I’m the last to know. You think I’m crazy? I asked him right out. So then don’t you think he had the gall to admit it? And *tell* me? I was so mad I couldn’t even *cry* and me, I cry when I’m mad, whenever I’m real mad I can’t help it, you know what I mean? And so he says she’s nice. What do you mean, I ask him, nice? You mean nice? What’s a nice girl got to do with you? I asked him right out.”

“Not Robin,” Betsy said forlornly. “I’m a nice girl, aren’t I?” She caught her breath and said tightly, “You wouldn’t let me go around Robin again?”

“Carnal,” the woman said with satisfaction. “Carnal desires, and that’s what you call *nice!* And, what I mean, can you take that kind of thing forever? So I came right out with it and I told him, either her or me, I said, and you can make up your mind while I stand right here waiting, either her or me. I mean I wasn’t going to make any kind of a fuss, if he wanted her, she was what he got, and if he wanted me, all he had to do was prove it. So I came right out with it, see, I never liked beating around the bush and I wasn’t going to give him any satisfaction, see, and any chance to say I tried to hold him when he wanted to go, you know, if he wanted to waste his carnal desires with her he could go ahead with my blessing. Because it had gotten to that point, see, where it was either her or me.”

“Where is she?” said Betsy.

“Halfway down the block. See that light, there? Likely,” said the woman, whom Betsy now perceived to be Aunt Morgen, “you’ll find them together.”

* * *

Now, she thought, striding greatly down the street, now I am really very angry with this mother of mine, hiding away with Robin and trying to keep me from finding Robin all this time, and all I ever wanted was to be happy and it was lucky Aunt Morgen happened to tell me, because otherwise they'd just keep on getting away with it, and pretending it was her birthday all the time. No fish here, she noticed, coming up the low step which compensated for itself by going immediately down again; lucky for *them;* "I want my mother, please," she said to the man at the desk just inside. "They'll be trying to hide."

"Your *mother?*"

"They probably haven't been here very long. They wanted to be all by themselves, and hide. But she's my mother."

The man at the desk smiled. "The rose room?" he suggested significantly.

"Yes," said Betsy, "the rose room."

"Miss Williams," said the man, leaning back in his chair to speak to the girl at the telephone switchboard. "Anyone in, in 372?"

"I'll check, Mr. Arden. That would be our rose room?"

"I believe so, Miss Williams. This young lady is inquiring."

"Number 372 is busy, Mr. Arden. There must be someone there, since they're using the phone. In our rose room, Mr. Arden."

"The rose room," said Mr. Arden tenderly. "Miss Williams, did the management send up champagne?"

"I'll check, Mr. Arden. Champagne and a rose corsage. Compliments and congratulations. This morning, Mr. Arden."

"Splendid, Miss Williams. And now this young lady is inquiring." He turned and smiled on Betsy. "A little ceremony," he explained. "Compliments of the establishment. The..." he hesitated. "The *personal* touch," he said, and blushed visibly.

"Can I go right there?" Betsy asked.

"Are you expected?" he asked in return, raising his eyebrows.

"Of course," Betsy said. "They're waiting for me."

"Well," said Mr. Arden, and turned one hand eloquently. "Are you *sure?*"

"Of course," said Betsy. "And I'm late now."

Mr. Arden bowed. "Miss Williams," he said, "take the young lady up to our rose room."

"Certainly, Mr. Arden. Will you come with me, please, miss?"

There were no fish painted on the walls of the elevator and that was a very *very* good sign, and the walls upstairs were pale green and not at all like sea water, even though pale green was a color for deepness and going down and losing and fading and sinking and failing; "Our rose room is very popular," Miss Williams said walking softly as they left the elevator. "The management *invariably* sends up champagne and a corsage of roses for the bride. Compliments of the hotel, of course. Such a charming custom."

"They'd be wanting to hide," Betsy said.

"Right down here. Last room on the left. Privacy, you know." Miss Williams giggled, but very softly.

"Here?"

"No, no," said Miss Williams. "Let *me* knock, if you please." She giggled again. "Always knock *twice* on the door of our rose room," she said, and giggled.

"Someone said to come in," Betsy said.

"Good evening," Miss Williams said, opening the door. "Here's a young lady you were waiting for, Mr. Harris."

"Good evening, Betsy," said Robin, grinning hideously from across the room.

"No, no," said Betsy, stumbling back against Miss Williams, "not *this* one, not Robin again?"

"I beg your pardon?" said Miss Williams, staring, "I *beg* your *pardon?*"

“I won’t let you, not ever any more,” Betsy said to Robin, “and neither will my mother.” She turned and struggled violently past Miss Williams in the doorway, broke free, and ran. “I’m *terribly* sorry, Mr. Harris,” Miss Williams said behind her, “in our rose room... I didn’t dream...”

“It’s perfectly all right,” he said. “A mistake of some kind.”

And she could hear him after her, down the hall and down the stairs, praying not to stumble, not Robin again, it wasn’t fair, not after all she’d done, not after all she’d tried, not Robin again, it wasn’t fair, no one could do *that* again, praying to move quickly enough, to be safely out of it and away before he could touch her, to be safely out of it; “Robin,” she said, “Robin darling, call me Lisbeth, Lisbeth”; was he following? To be out of the light and invisible, to be easily around the corner and gone, to lose him long behind... was he below? In the doorway? Waiting grinning with his arms wide to catch her, could she go any faster? There was the end of the stairway ahead, and the door leading out, and she threw herself against the opening and it opened and there he was, as always, waiting for her always, and she said “No, no more, *please,*” and went under his hand and sobbed and hurried for the door; “Thief,” someone called in a loud voice, and someone else cried, “Help?” and beside her she heard him laughing as she hurried and she put her arms up to hide her face and ran and nearly stumbled on the low low step which went up and down; there were lights, and she opened her eyes a little and never dared to look behind her because she heard him coming.

“Robin,” she said, “Robin, call me Lisbeth, Lisbeth, call me Lisbeth, Robin darling, call me Lisbeth.” And fell, and fell, and could not be caught, and fell.

* * *

She was in the hotel room, and trying to pack into her suitcase what fragments of clothing seemed worth taking with her. She had ripped and torn at the clothes and the curtains and the bedpillows because she was angry, but now she had the pocketbook and the key, and felt only a pressing need for hurry, because — and she knew clearly where her great danger lay — Betsy might come back at any moment. It was on the desk, among the broken pens and spilled ink, that she discovered the highly important paper which she knew was to be hidden among her things and delivered to someone as yet unidentified. Although she did not understand how anything of vast importance could be written on such a tiny slip, she knew perfectly that it must not fall into Betsy's hands; she had the swift impression that it was an artificially valuable thing, like the thimble in hide-the-thimble or the handkerchief in drop-the-handkerchief, of value only so long as the game went on, and then of interest to no one. Besides, she could not read it. It resembled the hundreds of small papers which come into people's hands every day, enclosed in packages of laundry, for instance, recommending dry-cleaning of curtains for the spring, or the labels which certify that Easter eggs are pure, or the slip of paper enclosed in the theatre program pointing out that there was an inadvertent mistake on page twelve, where Miss Somebody's name had been mistakenly rendered as Miss Something Else; at any rate, she could not read it.

She had no idea who had written it, or why, or who it was supposed to be given to, or how, or when, but she put it into her pocketbook anyway, since if Betsy was not to see it that in itself was sufficient reason for her to conceal it and make every effort to see that it was properly delivered. She wasted precious time attempting to read it, and, puzzling, could only decide that it seemed to contain numbers of some kind, and words which, while clear and distinct to any passing glance, turned into meaningless markings when she brought it close enough to read. Because she was so sure of its desperate importance she decided to pin the paper into the money in her wallet; she knew she would not take out a bill to pay for candy or magazines or the taxi to the bus station without considering very carefully, and so ran no chance of losing the little paper.

There was not much she could find to put in her suitcase. It was irritating to reflect that if Betsy had been sensible and given up the key without trouble none of this would have happened and her good clothes, which, after all, cost money, need not have been ruined, but Betsy was a dangerous, scheming girl, and was, besides, a wastrel; consider, for one thing, this hotel room, which must surely have been an unnecessary expense and would have to be paid for with other people's money. She badly wanted to be paid up and out of the hotel before the hotel people found out about the damage to the room; it had been Betsy's fault, after all, and they would almost certainly expect her to pay as well for the mirror which Betsy had broken.

When she had packed the suitcase with everything she thought could be mended, or patched together, or used for something else, she snapped the suitcase shut and stood up to look around the room for anything she might have overlooked. Then, moving quickly, she slipped into her coat and took up her pocketbook and the suitcase. Then she stopped and stood perfectly still; Betsy was coming back.

There was no time now for the suitcase, and she dropped it and scrambled the key out of her pocketbook and ran for the door. Just as she touched the key to the keyhole Betsy found her and with a furious shout snatched at her hand and bit it until she dropped the key and Betsy grabbed for it as it fell. If Betsy once got a hand on the key there was no hope of escape; wildly, she got a hand in Betsy's hair and pulled, and dragged her back away from the key, and it lay there on the floor while both of them, panting, stood back and waited for one another like two cats circling. Then, with unbelievable speed, Betsy went for the key again, the tips of her fingers just touching it, and she put her foot down hard on Betsy's hand and held it there.

Nothing could pain Betsy, she knew; no kind of hurt could register on that black mind, and so she could only try to overpower Betsy physically, and force her down; with quiet slow strength she put her hand almost gently around Betsy's throat and tightened her fingers as slowly and surely as she could; she made no sound, because she needed all her breath, but Betsy screamed, and gasped, and then ripped at her hand with sharp, cutting nails, and kicked out, and screamed again, sinking; the heel of Betsy's shoe caught in the light cord and brought the lamp smashing down; the noise will bring someone, she thought. She felt Betsy's nails rake the side of her face, and then Betsy called out "Mother!" and was vanquished.

She took her hand from Betsy's throat and, sobbing for breath, rolled over on the floor and got the key in her hands. Then, moving slowly and with pain, she stood up, got the key into the door, and turned it.

* * *

"Well," said the nurse with great enthusiasm, "you *have* had quite a sleep. Feeling all chipper now?"

Many rooms have white walls and many beds have white covers, but only hospitals have white walls and white covers and a bed table with a glass of water and a glass bent straw and nurses who speak with quite that quality of enthusiasm; "Where?" she said, and it hurt her achingly to talk.

"Mustn't chatter," said the nurse, holding up a playful finger. "We've got a pretty sore throat there, haven't we? But we're not going to think about it at all; we're going to have a nice wash-up and then Doctor will be here and give it a look-see. And we’re not going to talk and we’re not going to get excited and mostly we’re not going to think about what happened, because after all it was pretty horrid, wasn’t it? Let’s just turn our head a little, so I can go over those scratches on your cheek without hurting. Now.” The nurse stood back and beamed with wholehearted simplicity, “Soon be just as pretty as ever,” she said gaily.

“Where?”

“Where what? You do say the *silliest* things.” The nurse laughed, and held up her finger again. “We’re going to be in trouble,” she said, “if Doctor comes in and finds us talking. And won’t he be pleased to see how nice we look today, after the way we looked yesterday! And I must *say* that we were a pretty smart girl to be carrying around that little paper, we were indeed.” She turned, and almost curtsied, her jolly air replaced immediately by one of extreme gravity. “Good morning, Doctor,” she said.

“Good morning. Good morning, Miss Richmond. How’s the throat this morning?”

“Hurts.”

“I imagine it does,” said the doctor. He hesitated, and then went on, “I don’t want you to talk any more than you have to, but I’d like you to try and give me some idea of how it happened. Do you know who tried to choke you?”

“No one.”

“Miss Richmond,” said the doctor, “someone has had a hand around your throat, making those violent bruises. Do you mean that you don’t know who did it?”

“She scratched me.”

“Who?”

“Doctor,” said the nurse, coming forward in an ardent little rush, “Miss Richmond’s doctor is here, just outside.”

“Bring him in, by all means. Miss Richmond, thanks to the memo we found in your pocketbook, we have been able to locate your aunt and your doctor and get them here quickly.” He rose, and went to the door, where she could hear him speaking quietly. “Since last night,” she heard him say, and another voice speaking, questioning. “ — an eye on her in the hotel,” the doctor said.

The nurse came over and looked down on her with vast kindliness. “You’ve been a lucky girl,” said the nurse enigmatically.

“ — self-inflicted, but it’s impossible that—”

“Aunt Morgen?” she asked the nurse.

“Downstairs,” said the nurse. “Came to take her girl home.”

The door opened wide, and the doctor came back, with another, smaller man, who walked with small steps and seemed pale and worried. “A paper with my name and address,” he was saying as he walked, seemingly in confirmation of what had just been said, and the doctor nodded; they both came and stood looking down at her from the two sides of the bed, and the nurse stepped hastily back. “I wish she could talk more,” the doctor said. “She can’t seem to tell us who did it.”

“I know who did it,” the little man said absently; he was looking down at her gravely, and then he reached out and touched the scratches on her face briefly and withdrew his hand. “Poor child,” he said. “We were worried about you,” he told her.

She looked up at him, perplexed. “Who in sin are you?” she said.

4. DOCTOR WRIGHT

SINCE I DO not anticipate making the history of Elizabeth R. into my life's work — although I can conceive of lives spent on less — I do not think it necessary to enter into as much professional detail in what I now see as the second, and concluding, stage of her treatment at my hands. On the one side, I feel strongly that although the layman cannot be too well instructed in the uses and values of the several therapeutic methods employed, too detailed an examination of such a case as Miss R.'s may in some respects lessen the efficacy of similar treatment in further cases, the patient being already too well familiarized with the slow progressive steps and prepared for them, as it were; on the other side, my own feelings about the case are mixed, and I am most unwilling to complicate my account with unnecessary detail. Moreover, I strongly suspect that readers today (what, still with me, my friend? Our numbers have grown no larger since we last saw eye to eye; literature is — and I insist upon it to you, sir — a diminishing art) will not sit docilely under a description of a piece of work carefully and painstakingly done; with little patience to lavish upon their own performances, they have none for the work of others.

In any case, I shall curtail my presentation of Miss R.'s case, and go as quickly as I can to my conclusion. I believe I may have given my reader the notion that I am not an even-tempered man by nature; few are, in truth, I believe. I was hugely annoyed by Miss R.'s abduction at the hands of Betsy, and hardly less aggravated at being called upon, some three days later, to travel to New York — a spot which I particularly loathe — and by airplane, which is, to my thinking, a mode of travel only slightly less nauseating than riding camelback. I traveled with Miss Jones, the venerable aunt of Miss R. and Miss Jones' company did not materially improve my voyage. She was alternately enormously amused at my discomforts in the airplane, and reproachful over what she deemed my "letting the child escape" — which, since it was I alone who kept Betsy under so long as she did stay, seemed to me both ungrateful and uningratiating; I have, altogether, rarely undertaken a less rewarding journey.

We found our young lady substantially the worse for her holiday. No one knows, even now, the entire story of what had happened to her, and my most astute questioning, since, has not uncovered all the facts, by any means; we knew, of course, from the phone call which told us she was in hospital, that she had been taken unconscious from the floor of a hotel corridor, that she had been beaten, scratched, and half-strangled, and that she seemed to be suffering from what the New York doctors called, with unshakable assurance, partial amnesia. I myself came into her hospital room with some misgivings, having reason to doubt the cordiality of my reception by Betsy, and found upon the bed a girl whom I would unhesitatingly have denounced as an imposter, had I not, in the past, seen the facial changes produced when Elizabeth R. became Beth, and then Betsy. This girl — she impressed me as considerably younger than either Elizabeth or Beth, Betsy of course being physically ageless — seemed slighter, somehow, and almost frail; even allowing for the probable harrowing effect of her miserable days in New York, she did not impress me as a young woman of robust health. She resembled Elizabeth strongly, but her face was sharper and of a more cunning turn; I thought she had a sly look.

At any rate, she and I were strangers. She addressed me civilly enough, but was surprised that I should have come so far to see her, and concluded of her own accord that it was done in duty to her aunt, in whose name she thanked me courteously. Her medical attendant, she further informed me, was Doctor Ryan, and she supposed that if I called at his office upon my return to Owenstown he would be willing to oblige me with any future bulletins with regard to her health, should my interest in her continue so long. She spoke very lamely because of the painful condition of her throat, but we none of us, the attendant physician, the nurse, or myself, had any difficulty whatsoever in determining that Doctor Wright's services were superfluous to the present Miss R.

I confess I felt a momentary pang of sympathy for whoever had gotten a hand around her throat, but bowed in silence and retired with what grace I could muster, amused privately at the chagrin of the hospital doctor, who had summoned me in haste because a slip of paper containing my name and address was found in Miss R.'s pocketbook. I assured Miss Jones that her niece was in most capable hands; then, very willingly, I abandoned Miss R. to her aunt to bring home, and a pleasant trip I wished them both. I myself returned by train, a longer but less unsettling mode of travel, and reached my own office and my good fire with an aching head and a deep desire never to hear more of either Miss R. or her aunt. I felt, not to put too fine a point on it, that Miss Jones would probably be completely satisfied with the girl we had found in New York, that my own Miss R. was gone, probably for good, and that I had undertaken a wild goose chase for nothing more than to be mocked in a hospital room by an impudent girl, and to risk my life in an airplane with her fright of an aunt; I found in myself nothing but a kind of sublime impatience with Miss R. and all her family.

Two things I knew which I do not believe anyone else suspected: that Beth had written the note with my name and address and tucked it into Miss R.'s pocketbook, and that the bruises on Miss R.'s throat were made by the fingers of Betsy; I believe they would have thought me mad in New York had I proposed either as a clue to Miss R.'s condition. I contented myself, therefore, with my anger, and did well with it.

I was not, nevertheless, altogether dumfounded when, two days after her return, Miss R. came to my office; Miss Hartley, of course, announced her only as Miss R. and it was a genuine pleasure to me to find myself greeting Elizabeth who, timid and hesitant as always, sat down as though she thought she had an appointment, and indeed, upon questioning, it developed that she really thought she had. The poor girl knew of nothing that had passed, and assumed, in all innocence, that she was merely continuing her regular series of visits! I was touched, and perhaps a little guilty over my anger with the poor creature, and so it was with great cordiality that I affected to act as though nothing untoward had occurred since our last meeting.

"Have you completely recovered your recent illness, my dear Elizabeth?" I asked her. "You look extremely well." There were still dark bruises on her throat, which she had tried to cover with a silk scarf under her collar, and the scratches on her face had not entirely faded, but there is no doubt but what she looked better than she had the last time I had seen her — or the time before that, for that matter.

"I feel better," she said. "I have been sick a long time, I think."

"You caused your aunt much concern." With a genuine sense of well-being I opened the desk drawer and took out the notebook which I used for recording my conversations with Miss R. and smiled at her rueful face when she saw it. "We have a good deal of time to make up," I told her. "How long has it been since we last talked together?"

"About a week?" She was doubtful.

"It seems to have done you good, at any rate. Now, let us begin with our usual catechism. Headaches?"

"None, except for a slight one a day or so ago, when I woke up from a bad dream."

"I assume," I said, "that since you woke up, you had been asleep, and from that I deduce that your insomnia has not been so troublesome as before?"

"I have been sleeping soundly. Except..." She faltered. "Except... I have had very bad dreams."

"Indeed? Can you recall anything of them?"

"I was standing," she said reluctantly, "and I was looking at myself. There was a big mirror — it went as high as I could see. And even though I don't want to speak unkindly of anyone I think it is cruel of Aunt Morgen to lock my door at night. I am no longer a child, you know."

My eyes were on my notebook, but I heard the curious change in her voice, and asked, without looking up, "Did you write my name and address on a slip of paper?"

"You did see it, then?" Her voice was delighted. "I was so frightened, and I tried to telephone you, because I knew that *you* would *always* come to help me, but the man wouldn't call you to the phone, and I was so frightened."

I looked up at her; it was surely Beth, come to me voluntarily without hypnosis, pale and tired and brutally disfigured by her scratched face, but my own lovely girl nevertheless. "If you hadn't written that note," I told her, "we could not have rescued you."

"Rescued me?" she asked wonderingly.

"I will explain it in good time. Let me only say that you were most wise to make that note. There are a great many things I am anxious to discuss with you, but I fear that you are not entirely well even yet, and I think you should rest." I had not until now met Beth face to face, and — just as when

I first saw Betsy with her eyes open I recognized suddenly that she was an independent personality, a being whole and apart from any other, rather than a mere angry manifestation engendered solely in my office — I saw that Beth now, looking about her and drawing herself together, was endeavoring to *form* herself, as it were; let my reader who is puzzled by my awkward explanations close his eyes for no more than two minutes, and see if he does not find himself suddenly not a compact human being at all, but only a consciousness on a sea of sound and touch; it is only with the eyes open that a corporeal form returns, and assembles itself firmly around the hard core of sight. This was, at any rate, my impression of Beth's growing consciousness; she had been at first no more than a voice and a look, but as she hardened into an individual the separation between her and the other personalities grew visibly greater; it was impossible, for instance, to look now at Beth, as I was doing, and believe her the same person as Elizabeth, who had been sitting in that chair not ten minutes earlier; except that they wore the same clothes, and their faces, although subtly different, wore the same ugly scratches, they were two entirely different girls. Thus, my growing clumsiness with Beth; I can only say again, helplessly, that there is a world of difference between a wraithlike shadow and a real girl. So, I stumbled and got through my stiff sentences, and made a note which read — I swear it; I have it in my notebook still— "Elizabeth Beth brillig; o borogrove" and then Beth said primly, "Do you know that I have never seen you before, doctor?" and I thought that perhaps my own expression had been fairly fatuous, being accustomed to dealing with Beth sightless. I asked her if she felt well enough after all, to talk with me for a while, and she was eager to stay, adding that Aunt Morgen was "so cross all the time now."

I was not very much surprised at that, to be sure, and asked her what her aunt thought of her continuing to visit my office.

“She said I could come,” Beth said. “When I go out she wants to know where I am going and when I am coming back, as though I were a baby still.”

I wondered at this; from what I had seen of Aunt I would have expected her to keep her runaway niece chained to the bedpost, but I suppose that actually, short of a legitimate confinement in an institution, she could hardly endeavor to keep her niece under constant supervision; she knew only the hospital’s diagnosis of “amnesia” and so imagined, I suppose, that her niece had forgotten that she ran away, and why, and might be assumed to be fairly safe from another attempt. I sighed, and Beth said quickly, “It is *you* who are tired, and I have stayed too long.”

“No, no indeed,” I said. “I am only perplexed.”

“I know,” she said. “You are worried about me, and wondering over my health, and hoping I will be well.” She thought. “Are you going to put me to sleep?” she asked.

I most certainly did not want to attempt hypnosis; indeed, I wanted only to send her home until I might prepare myself more adequately for returning to her case. But she had come to me faithfully, and I was still her physician. “I shall,” I said steadily. “If you wish it, we shall resume our regular treatments now.”

Perhaps because she was excited she was most difficult to subdue into a deep hypnotic slumber this afternoon; with her eyes closed and lying back in her chair she more nearly resembled the Beth I remembered, the girl who had once been only R2! I had never before put Beth under further hypnosis without arriving at Betsy, and perhaps that thought, too, delayed our achievement of her hypnotic trance; time after time she would open her eyes and smile at me and I, smiling back, would begin again, patiently. At last her eyes closed and she began to breathe evenly and I, hardly daring to speak above a whisper, said, “What is your name?”

Her eyes snapped open, and she scowled at me. “Monster,” she said, the scratches showing red on her face, “wicked man.”

“Good afternoon, Betsy. I trust you are rested from the fatigues of your journey?”

She turned her face away sullenly, and I repressed a great jubilation at seeing her so chastened; here was no wild laughter and tormenting teasing, but only a vicious creature trapped and held fast. “Betsy,” I said, abandoning my ironic tone, “I am truly sorry for you. You treated me unfairly, but I am sorry, nevertheless, to see you so miserable, and I still offer to help you in any way I can.”

“Let me go, then,” she said, to the wall.

“Where can you go?”

“I won’t tell,” she said sullenly. “You haven’t any right to know.”

“Then, Betsy, will you tell me where you went, when you ran away? We found you in New York, you know — did you go there directly?”

She shook her head mutely.

“Why did you run away, Betsy?” I asked her, most gently.

“Because you wouldn’t let me be free and happy. And when I was in New York I was happy all the time, and I had lunch in a restaurant and I went on a bus and everyone I met was nice, not like you or her or Aunt Morgen.”

I confess I could have found it in my heart to feel sorry for the young sinner; a giddy day or so, a few hours of freedom, a taste of luxury — they would appeal to the best of us. But, I told myself sternly, the best of us would not thereby jeopardize the lives of Beth and Elizabeth, and so I went on, “And in the hospital?”

“I wasn’t there,” she said, and it was a cry of agony, “I wasn’t even there!”

“You mean you were inside?”

She shook her head. “I was gone,” she said. “I didn’t even know about it, and I *always* know *every*thing, what Lizzie does and what Beth does and what they say and think and what they’re dreaming and now I know about the hospital just because I heard *her* talking to Morgen, and I wasn’t even *there—”*

“Her?”

“Her,” Betsy said with loathing.

“Then,” I said, with an attempt, at geniality, “it was not you who denied me in the hospital.”

Betsy grinned. “I heard about it,” she said. “*She* said that you—”

“The subject is not worth discussion,” I said. “We have more important things to worry about, and primary among these is the question we were working on before Elizabeth fell ill; I mean, of course, the death of your — of Elizabeth’s mother.”

“I won’t talk to you,” she said, sullen again. “You don’t like me.”

“I don’t,” I agreed readily. “You have been most unfair to me. But I believe that I should like you a good deal more if you answered my questions sensibly.”

“I won’t talk to you,” she said, and made the same answer to everything I said, and finally would not speak at all.

I found in her sullenness the conviction that she knew she was beaten, and, much heartened by this taming of the villain of our piece, I gave up my questions, and wondered if I might untangle my hypnotic snarl by awakening her, but I found this almost as difficult as I had found hypnosis in the first place. Again and again I found Betsy's hating eyes fixed on mine, and I began to suspect that matters among these several personalities were coming to a head, as it were, and that instead of slipping from one to another easily through hypnosis, they were each of them enough aware of individuality to resist being pushed under, and were clinging tenaciously to the surface, each in hope of finally establishing dominance. It seemed reasonable to assume that power was closely coordinated with conscious control, and the more time any personality spent governing the others, the stronger that personality would be, bleeding the others of their precious consciousness. I already knew that here knowledge was surely power, and the personality most basic in Miss R. was the one to whom the mind was most open; Elizabeth had lost, and was losing, a large portion of her conscious life, with no conception of what was going on when she was under, and my poor Beth was very little better off; Betsy had, so far, with her ability to comprehend both Elizabeth and Beth, seemed easily the most basic of the ones I had met, and yet how unwilling I was to admit it! Now, however, Betsy's dark hints of a "she," to whose mental workings Betsy did not have constant and easy access gave me hopes that perhaps Miss R. might be coming to herself again, although I trusted that the girl I had met in the hospital was not to be the entire final form of the personality; I could have wished her a little of Beth's sweetness!

I finally put Betsy aside, then, and awakened, as I thought, my friend Beth; she opened her eyes, looked around, sighed and sat up at once. "Again?" she said, as though to herself, and then her eyes fell on me. For a long minute she looked at me, and then she said deliberately, "I thought I asked you not to bother me any more. If you will not leave me alone I will tell my aunt."

It may be imagined that I was not overly complimented by this address; I resisted a strong impulse to rise and show her the door, and said only, “My name is Victor Wright. I am a doctor and you have been, miss, my patient for upwards of twenty months.”

“I? Impossible.”

“I thank you,” I said stiffly. “It is not quite so impossible as you think; there are, in fact, those in this town who could, if they would, point to me as a man of science and integrity. However, madam, it is not my credentials which are in question, but your own. Can you tell me who you are?”

She flashed a look of dislike upon me. “If I have been your patient for as long as you say,” she told me arrogantly, “then you must have found out my name by now.” And she gave a short laugh which reminded me disagreeably of her aunt.

“Your name,” I said flatly, “is Elizabeth R. although in any future conversation between us I am going to surprise you by calling you Bess.”

“Bess?” she said, more nettled than surprised. “But why?”

“Because I choose to,” I said, just like Betsy. I believe that if she had not reminded me of her aunt (a picture which will always remind me in turn, most vividly, of my experiences in the airplane) I should have not been so brusque; I ought to have spoken to her kindly and patiently, and brought her slowly to an acceptance of myself, but even a man of science cannot always be impartial, and sensible, and invulnerable, and she had antagonized me hopelessly.

She was not stupid; she perceived this at once, and perhaps had some inkling of future favors to be gained from me, for she changed her tone and said more civilly, “I am sorry to be rude. I have not been myself since my mother’s death; I have been very nervous, and I may say things I never really mean to. I was very much affected by my mother’s death.” She seemed to consider this a most handsome apology, and flounced and simpered at me to show that she bore me no ill-will for having insulted me twice before.

I thought her tawdry, and artificial, and mincing, and I did not at all care for her obvious attempts to sound refined; how, I wondered, could Elizabeth and Beth speak like quietly-educated girls, and this one speak so lispingly, and then thought that the mind behind this one was surely faulty, although strong, and must be securely incorporated with Elizabeth and Beth to manufacture a final endurable personality. As soon as I felt that I might answer her with composure, I said, "I am not surprised, of course, that you felt grief at your mother's death; it would be unnatural if you had not. But surely, in this length of time..."

I paused, and she lifted her handkerchief to her eyes.

"After all," I continued, when it appeared that she was too much "affected" to speak, "your aunt was also devoted to your mother, and she has succeeded in overcoming her loss."

"Aunt Morgen has no fine feelings at all." This coincided very nearly with my own view of Aunt Morgen, but I said nothing; after a minute she went on, "Besides, Aunt Morgen is old and fat and foolish, and I am young and" (she simpered) "attractive and rich; surely it is a shame that sorrow should—"

"Blight?" I suggested ironically.

She gave me another look of dislike, and continued, "Many people have told me that I look very much like my mother when she was younger, except that my hair has a better color than hers did, and my ankles are narrower." She regarded her ankles with pleasure, and I could not resist saying, "Then let us hope that those scratches do not leave scars on your face."

She looked up at me and for a minute she was as badly frightened as anyone I have ever seen. Then she said, with a false smile, “They won’t, thank you for asking. I checked with Doctor Ryan.”

“Did you tell him how you got them?” I asked.

“I fell,” she said quickly, still desperately afraid. “I don’t know why you keep asking about them, it isn’t polite and it doesn’t matter anyway.”

“And Betsy?”

She stood up, trembling, and said ferociously, “There isn’t any such thing as Betsy, and you know it, you want to frighten me again and I won’t *have* it!” She stopped, caught her breath, and then went on more quietly. “I told you that I have not been myself since my mother’s death. I sometimes... imagine things. I am a very nervous person by nature.”

“I see,” I said. “And how long did you say it had been, since your mother died?”

She lifted the handkerchief again. “Three weeks,” she said.

“I see,” I said. “Most distressing. But your aunt has completely gotten over it?”

“To tell you the truth,” she said, sitting down again and obviously relieved that we had gotten away from the scratches on her face, “Aunt Morgen and I don’t get on very well. I expect to be moving out on her soon.”

I did not envy Aunt the graceless society of this young lady, and would have liked to send her home Miss R. in the form of Elizabeth, as a gesture of common humanity, but I could not really see my way clear to proposing soberly to Miss R. that I put her into an hypnotic trance, so I only said, “I trust your agitation will have abated somewhat, Miss Bess R. by our next appointment.”

“Our?” she said in absolute astonishment. “My dear man, you do not suppose that I am coming here again?”

“Indeed?”

She laughed, with a return to her former arrogance. “There are so many people who speak so well of you,” she said, “that you hardly need to beg for patients to come to your office. I told you I had seen Doctor Ryan; *he* is *my* doctor, and I am telling you plainly, once and for all, that I do not want or intend to be any patient of yours. There is nothing personal in it, and I have told you already that I am sorry for being rude before, but just because I apologized to you, you needn’t expect to send me a bill and get paid for this short conversation. I may be rich, but I am not going to be taken in by every...”

I showed her the door at last.

* * *

Without enthusiasm, I added R4 to my notes, and hoped she was the last; each of Miss R.’s varying selves, I thought, proved more disagreeable than the last — always, of course, excepting Beth, who, although weak and almost helpless, was at least possessed of a kind of winsomeness, and engaging in her very helplessness. I found myself, lying awake that night in bed — one finds, I think, that even with a clear conscience there comes an age when sleep forsakes the weary mind; I am not elderly, but I frequently, now, court sleep in vain — that I was telling over and over, as though they were figures in a charade, my four girls: Elizabeth the numb, the stupid, the inarticulate, but somehow enduring, since she had remained behind to carry on when the rest of them went under; Beth, the sweet and susceptible; Betsy, the wanton and wild; and Bess, the arrogant and cheap. I perceived that no one of these could possibly be permitted to assume the role of the true, complete (by very definition none of *them* could be complete!) Miss R. and, equally, none of them could be judged “imposters”; Miss R. would be at last a combination in some manner of all four, although I must admit that the contemplation of a personality combining Elizabeth’s stupidity with Beth’s weakness, Betsy’s viciousness with Bess’s arrogance, left me with an urge to throw the blankets over my face and hide myself!

I saw myself, if the analogy be not too extreme, much like a Frankenstein with all the materials for a monster ready at hand, and when I slept, it was with dreams of myself patching and tacking together, trying most hideously to chip away the evil from Betsy and leave what little was good, while the other three stood by mockingly, waiting their turns.

As I sat the next morning at my desk, putting my notes in order, I heard Miss Hartley’s surprised voice in the outer office, and then the door to my private office slammed open, and Betsy ripped in, raging like a fury, shaking and white; “What is this, you old fool,” she shouted, without even closing the door, “what is this I hear, that you have chosen this proud cold beastly bitch to manage all of us now? Do you think I’m going to let you get away with anything like that? Do you suppose—”

“Close the door, please,” I said quietly, “and moderate your language. Even if you are not a lady, you are addressing a gentleman.”

She laughed, uncaring for the harm she did her own cause by angering me, and I swear that I thought for a moment she might strike me; she came up to the desk and leaned over (and I most heartily grateful to be securely behind such a solid piece of furniture) and shouted into my very face, “Madman! What are you doing to all of us?”

“My dear Betsy,” I said imploringly, “do compose yourself, I beg of you; I cannot possibly discuss the matter with you so long as you are in this overwrought state.”

She quieted somewhat, and stood with her hands shaking and her eyes, flashing, pressed close against the other side of the desk. Still more than half afraid that she might suddenly spring at me, I held myself tense, back against the wall, and with an effort kept my voice quiet and steady as I asked her to sit down. "For," I added, "we cannot talk quietly, you and I, until we sit together like human beings, and do not hold one another at bay like animals."

Apparently seeing that I was not afraid of her, she gave a resigned shrug and threw herself into her usual chair, where she sat with her face turned from me and her hands still clenched into fists. I took the first real breath I had drawn since she entered my office, and passed warily around her to close the door. "Now, my dear," I said, returning to my own chair behind the desk, "tell me what has upset you so."

"Well," said Betsy, as one diagramming an enormous injustice, "Lizzie and Beth and I are all your old friends, and even though you don't like *me,* it's not fair to pick a stranger to take charge of us."

"I am not going to put anyone in charge, as you call it. This Bess is merely another self, just like yourself and Beth and Elizabeth."

"She's not like *me,*" Betsy said. "She's awful."

I smiled at the pot calling the kettle black, and continued, "My intention is not to choose among you, but to coax you all back together into a whole person again. Why should you suppose that I am discriminating against the rest of you in favor of Bess?"

"She says so," Betsy said sullenly.

I was growing excited; somewhere in here it was going to be possible to define the precise area of consciousness of each of these characters, and, when I could break down the barriers of silence between them, my cure was more than half accomplished; "How?" I asked, and then, when Betsy looked up in surprise, I said more evenly, “How do you and Bess communicate?”

“So there *are* things the old man doesn’t know?” said Betsy with sudden amusement. “Well,” she said, lying back in her chair, “why should I tell *you?* Suppose I just don’t tell you anything so long as she’s around? How do you like *that?*” She got to her feet, and looked down at me from across the desk. “You can’t be friends with her *and* me,” she said flatly, and turned toward the door.

“Betsy,” I said urgently, but when she turned her face to me again it was politely disdainful and my heart sank — I confess it — to see that I had for the moment lost Betsy, with our quarrel still unsolved, and was entertaining Bess. “Why don’t you leave me alone?” Bess asked, surveying me without anger, but surely without cordiality.

“I regret,” I told her coldly, “that you were brought here without my desiring it. My patient—”

“Your patients do not concern me,” she said. “I was a little excited a few minutes ago, and I hope you are going to forget what I said. About people being put in charge of other people.”

“You are aware of everything that has been said in this room since you entered?”

“Of course.” She was surprised. “I am sometimes very nervous, and say wild things. My mother’s death—”

“I know,” I said hastily. “Will you come back and sit down? I badly need your assistance.”

She hesitated. “If you need any assistance,” she said, “I will stay for a minute, but since I am not consulting you as a patient—”

“No bill will be sent *you* for my time,” I told her, with absolute conviction, and, reassured, she came back and sat down again. As soon as she was seated, "Tell me, then," I said, "why you deny the actuality of any other personality in yourself?"

She wet her lips, and glanced nervously about her, as though afraid of retaliation from Betsy, perhaps, for what she was about to say. Finally she said haltingly, "I was so sick when my mother died, and I am only beginning to get well again. If I get to thinking that there is some other person making me do things, they will all believe that I'm *really* crazy, and maybe lock me up somewhere, and Aunt Morgen will take all the money."

"I see," I said. "And if I tell you that I do not believe that you are 'crazy,' as you call it, and that together we may overcome this illness of yours, will you then agree to help me?"

"If there really is someone else," she said slowly, "then I was stronger than she was, when we were in New York, because I drove her down. So why should I go to the expense of hiring you to drive her away, if I can do it myself?"

I felt as though I were going mad along with her. "Miss R." I said, "out of the kindness of my heart and friendship for Doctor Ryan I undertook your case. Since I first began, with nothing but the purest scientific integrity, nothing but your own good health my objective, no cause to serve and no glory to gain beyond the sight of Miss Elizabeth R. well and happy and prepared to assume a normal place in the world — since I began, I say, I have met with nothing but insolence and obstruction from you and from your sisters; only Beth has in any way tried to help me and she is too weak to remain consistently loyal. If I had my way—" and I am afraid that, in my turn, I raised my voice— "if I had my way, Miss, you would be soundly whipped and taught to mind your manners. As it is, you leave me no choice but to give up your case; as of this moment, Miss R. my association with you is ended."

"Oh, Doctor Wright," she said in tears, and it was Beth, "what have I done to anger you so?"

I was a man bedeviled. Wordlessly I rose and stamped out of my office, leaving the field to my enemies, whose wild triumphant laughter echoed behind me.

* * *

I do not suppose that even my least cynical reader will expect that my association with Miss R. ended here, on such a strong note of my own; I was prepared without further question to give up Miss R.'s case, upon what I thought full and sufficient provocation, but I could not persuade Miss R.'s case to relinquish me; I might as well have shouted my tirade to an empty office as to Beth, who was as little able to understand me as if I had been babbling Greek, and my heroics went for nothing. Elizabeth presented herself at my office promptly the next day, sat in the chair across the desk, and told me she had a headache.

* * *

Betsy about this time became addicted to a kind of spiteful practical joke, practiced largely against Bess, her particular enemy (it was amusing, incidentally, to see how Betsy's loathing of Elizabeth and Beth had modified itself when Bess appeared on the scene) but sometimes Betsy was not above entertaining herself with dull Elizabeth or guileless Beth; one afternoon Miss R. was extremely late, and I had almost decided to await her no longer, when Beth telephoned; she could not get out of the house, because her aunt had gone out after locking the back door, and someone (and I knew who, although Beth, of course, did not) had pushed a heavy desk before the front door, so that Beth could not get out; she was too weak to move the desk and too self-conscious to be seen climbing from a window, and so home she stayed, until her aunt returned to unlock the back door and help her move the desk. When I scolded Betsy for this prank she explained innocently that she had intended it for Bess, who had planned to go shopping that afternoon, and had thought that if Bess could not move the desk she would remain at home and so permit the other personalities to pay their usual visit to my office.

Again, Betsy was not above a kind of petty dishonesty; several times Elizabeth exhausted her small supply of strength walking to my office because Betsy had stolen all her money and hidden it. Poor Elizabeth would rather walk to my office than not come at all; I think it was one of the few spots where the unfortunate creature was allowed any freedom, with the more powerful personalities lording it over her at home.

Bess was most particularly sensitive about her money, and strongly disliked spending it upon anything but herself; she grudged every penny her aunt spent for household items, but lavished large sums upon clothes and jewelry of her own. One of Betsy’s favorite tricks, and one which never failed of driving Bess to a frenzy, was to assume control of the personality and then, as Miss R. distribute Bess’ possessions generously among everyone she saw; she gave an expensive coat to the old woman who cleaned house for Miss R. and her aunt, and sums of money to beggars on the street (I think, myself, that Betsy was more able to take control of the personality when someone approached who needed money; Bess was very apt to become nervous and excitable when she thought she might be asked to give away her precious pennies, and easier of access to Betsy; this, however, may be pure malicious reasoning on my part); each time, wickedly, bringing Bess back in time to hear the fulsome thanks of the recipient of Betsy’s charity. Bess spent long hours shopping, and many times (since, we discovered, she had still only the most partial access to Betsy's actions), believed she had been shopping when the rest of them were with me at my office; we were something of a clandestine crew, with Betsy on guard. For several months after my last scene with Bess, Betsy took it upon herself to protect the rest of us, and, gleefully, stood watch while I talked with Elizabeth or Beth; at the first sign of Bess' coming Betsy would hastily shepherd Miss R. out of the office and into the street and when Bess arrived she would find herself standing gazing into a shop window safely outside. Betsy's favorite spot, by the way, was the window of a shop across the street from my office, which sold sporting goods, and Betsy reported with mirth that Bess was not able to understand the peculiar fascination the window of the sporting-goods shop held for her; she knew only that several times she had strayed unconsciously toward it, and had found herself gazing raptly at a display of tennis rackets, fishing rods, and golf clubs.

Careful questioning uncovered the reassuring fact that, although Betsy felt perfectly free to play her tricks on her fellows, and to tell me about them, she was enough in awe of her aunt to stay relatively circumspect when there was a chance of her aunt's discovering her. The girls all seemed to behave fairly well around Aunt Morgen, and I am sure that Aunt — although she could hardly have avoided perceiving that her niece was odd — had no notion of the real state of the case.

During all this time Betsy's attitude toward me was changing materially. We could never trust one another entirely, but she knew, of course, of my treatment at Bess' hands, and felt that in any balance of power I would stand on the side of the angels, which, to Betsy's mind, meant no one but Betsy. I was greatly appreciative of the assistance Betsy was giving me, in numberless ways, to enable me to mine information from Elizabeth and

Beth; I still knew that the final personality of Miss R. could only be one which was fully cognizant of Miss R.'s life and experiences, full and entire, and my present hope was to strengthen Beth, by whatever means, and bring her slowly to a complete open realization of the whole personality. Beth already knew of the existence of herself and Elizabeth; I now told both of them about Betsy and Bess, taking a great deal of time, and explaining as slowly and patiently as I could. The minds of Betsy and Bess were still closed to them, of course, just as Bess could still shut Betsy out for spaces of time, exerting maximum control, and Betsy could do the same for Bess. I found that as the four of them became more distinct they drew farther away from one another, also, so that what once might have been mere cracks of cleavage were now gulfs between them.

I grew quite accustomed to my little group of girls and we were frequently very merry; Elizabeth and Beth were astonished at Betsy's knowledge of their actions, and I think she even developed a kind of fondness for them; she never really liked Beth considerably, but she became really quite protective toward Elizabeth, and several times helped Elizabeth, unasked, when Elizabeth was in trouble; being tireless, and given to fits of enthusiasm, she twice did all of Elizabeth's personal laundry, scrubbing and ironing with great fervor and little efficiency; once, when Bess put on a blouse which Betsy had freshly ironed, Betsy irritably poured a bottle of ink on her head; her fondness for Elizabeth did not, of course, exempt Elizabeth from being the victim of various practical jokes which occurred to Betsy, but whenever Elizabeth became innocently entangled in some snare Betsy had set, we were sure of a contrite apology from Betsy, and a wide-eyed declaration that the trap had, of course, been set for Bess.

I have among my notes numberless instances of various possessions spilled, torn, or hidden by the indefatigable Betsy, of the long walks she would take in order to leave Beth or Elizabeth stranded far away in an unfamiliar spot, with no way of getting home except to walk upon legs already wearied by Betsy's brisk pace; she sent Bess screaming hysterically through the house one night, a result of finding her bed full of spiders; she brought me affectionate little gifts stolen from Bess' desk, and a red candy box full of Betsy's own letters which she said she had taken from Elizabeth. When I showed this last to Elizabeth she was utterly taken aback, but confessed that she had received the letters before she had ever begun treatments with me, while she was still employed at the museum. Oddly enough, the discovery that these letters had been composed by Betsy only increased the fondness which they felt for one another. Betsy, unless she was sulking, rarely afflicted Elizabeth now with aches and pains, reserving all her malevolence for Bess, and when Betsy discovered that I disapproved of her pranks against Bess, even though I felt little sympathy for her victim, she stopped reporting these details to me, so that for this period of several weeks I heard little or nothing of Bess, since Betsy would not tell me about her, and Beth and Elizabeth could not.

This period — which I may perhaps be pardoned for calling Miss R.'s golden age — came to an abrupt period one afternoon when, expecting my friends, I was both shocked and surprised when Miss Hartley, announcing Miss R. ushered in Bess. I had almost forgotten the sharp face and the snapping eyes, the unpleasant voice and manner, and it was not a joy to me to see them again; I had hoped to be far better prepared before I tried to deal with Bess. She flounced to the chair, and sat herself down, and gave me a condescending smile, and said at last that she supposed I was surprised to see her and — I admitting this without comment — that she hoped I bore her no malice. I told her that I did not, which was not true, and she explained to me that her mother's recent death had left her very nervous. I told her dryly that I was sorry to see her still grieving and she gave me a suspicious glance and then, settling herself more firmly in her chair, went on, "That's one reason I'm here, you see. I don't seem to be recovering as quickly as I should, and I am a little worried about my health."

"Let me see," I asked her. "How long ago was it? Your mother's death?"

"Three weeks," she said.

"Still three weeks?" I asked. "Surely, a good time ago, you told me—"

"I guess I know when my own mother died," she said flatly.

"Of course," I said. "And the nature of this nervousness of yours?"

"You mean, why do I think I'm nervous? I've *always* been nervous; I was a very nervous child."

"I meant, what particular causes do you have, to worry about your health? Headaches, for instance, or insomnia?"

"I..." She hesitated, and then said rapidly, "I'm just frightened, all the time. Someone is trying to kill me."

"Really?" I asked, thinking of three people who would have enjoyed killing Bess if they could, "why do you imagine such a thing?"

"Because they are. They want my money."

"I see." I thought. "Why?" I asked.

"Because she hates me, and the day before yesterday I was coming down the stairs and she caught my foot and I almost fell, and then today when I was cutting tomatoes for sandwiches for lunch she turned the knife right around in my hand and c-cut me." I thought she was about to cry; she held out her left hand, inadequately bandaged in a handkerchief. I came round the desk and took away the handkerchief and examined the cut; it was neither deep nor serious, but must have bled freely and to Betsy's satisfaction. "It could hardly have proved fatal," I told her. "Betsy would not—"

"Betsy?" she cried out. "Who says it was Betsy? There isn't any such thing."

"Then who do *you* think is trying to harm you — your aunt?"

She could not pretend to believe that, and she dropped her eyes and slowly rewound the handkerchief around her hand. "I'm left-handed," she said. "This is very awkward for me."

This was of some interest to me; Elizabeth and Beth and Betsy were all right-handed. I said to her gently, "I think a great deal of your fear would be dissipated if you could bring yourself to face the reality of Betsy. You could at least give up thinking, then, that your life is in danger; Betsy could not harm you without harming herself."

"There isn't any Betsy."

"Very well. Did you put spiders in your own bed?"

She stared at me. "Who told you that?"

"Betsy did," I said blandly.

She dropped her shoulders and looked away resignedly, and I felt for her. She was taking a bold stand on Betsy, and perhaps by steadfastly refusing to admit the existence of any other personality to Miss R. she might have succeeded eventually in eliminating Elizabeth and Beth, but Betsy was made of stronger stuff and poor Bess was fairly cornered; she had either to bow to the fact of Betsy's existence, and admit that she was not the only Miss R. or explain to herself why it had come about that — say — she had gotten into a bed full of spiders, or cut her own hand, or pushed herself downstairs.

"Look," she said earnestly at last, leaning forward as though she wanted to avoid being overheard, "*I* get the money, no one can take it away; Aunt Morgen even admits that the money is mine. And I'm not going to let any

Betsy or anyone come along and pretend she's me and try to take it all away."

"But surely the money is not that important; consider—"

"Of course the money is important," she said, interrupting me sharply. "You idealists always think you can invent something better, but I notice that when it comes to paying the rent—"

"Young lady," I said, interrupting in my turn, "I do not care to be called names by a person who has only the vaguest idea of what her words entail. I am not interested in whose money it is, or what Aunt Morgen says; I am only interested in—"

"I know you *say* that," she said coolly, "but what you'd better know is, if you've made some arrangement with Aunt Morgen, say, about this Betsy of yours, and you're trying to fix up something to run me out so's I have to give up the money — well, what I want to say is that whatever Aunt Morgen or this Betsy or anyone has promised you, the money is *mine,* and I'll make you a better offer than any of them, and *I*'m the one can back it up."

"Good heavens," I said, hearing her through because I lacked words to speak to her, "Good heavens, my dear Miss R.! What a deplorable... I mean to say, how outrageous!" And I believe I was almost struck dumb; I gasped, and floundered, and have no doubt I turned purple in the face; she apparently accepted my shock as genuine, because she had the grace to hesitate before she continued, "Well, if I'm wrong, I'll be the first to say I'm sorry, doctor. But I do think you ought to get it clear that I'm the only one really able to offer you anything. Because after all, if you were taken in by someone who *said* they'd pay you, I'm just doing you a favor by making sure you know they won't. Because the money—"

I believe that only my knowledge of the fear behind her words saved me from an apoplexy; in spite of my speechless fury, I noted that under her brazen assurance, her lip was trembling, and beyond her arrogant gestures her right hand moved constantly over to touch the bandage on her left hand, to tug at it and fold it back, to move and turn and clench itself, as though it held.... My anger gone, scarcely attending to her unending financial monologue, I carelessly slid a pad of paper across the polished surface of the desk, and sent my pencil after it. When the pencil touched her arm her fingers seized it, and then — poor Bess continuing all this time about the obligations of wealth, and the luxuries she had had to forego because of her aunt's extravagances — Bess' right hand, without her knowledge, took to scribbling on the pad, while I drew a deep sigh and sat back in my chair, smiling and nodding like a great idol who has just seen a whole calf roasted at his altar. (I am not an irreligious man, but I suspect myself occasionally; here the analogy is irresistible, and I think it is because this present satisfaction was utterly worldly, almost akin to spite, and I do not, certainly, find human pettiness an aspect of the Almighty; thus, perhaps, the pagan conception.) At any rate, I eyed the scribbling pencil with far more attention (although disguised, surely) than I gave to Miss R. and her large, if diaphanous, plans for endowing hospitals and setting up charitable institutions for the poor.

"Certainly," I said occasionally, and nodded, and sometimes I said, "By all means," or "Not at all." I have no notion of what I may have agreed to, but I do not think she was listening in any case, any more than she was attending to the earnest labors of her own hand with a pencil. At length, seeing the top page of the pad entirely filled with writing, I reached forth again casually — although I believe I might have snatched the page, without noticeably withdrawing Bess from her monetary devotions — and took off the top page, her hand holding back while I did so, as though waiting to start another.

“Do you not think I have a case, my dear doctor?” Bess asked me just then, and I looked up, and shook my head with great deliberation, and told her I hardly knew what to think, and she sighed, and said it was very hard for a young woman alone, and so went on, and I bent my gaze ardently to the page of paper.

“doctor wrong,” it read, “aunt m lawyers stop money poor bess ask her ask her where is mother what aunt m says ask her ask her she is not saying true ask her i am here and i am here and she is not no money poor bess laughing betsy”

And thus ended my page, but the pencil wrote on and on. I put my hand down firmly and flat on the page I held, and lifted my head, and said, into a pause where Bess stopped to draw breath, “My dear Miss R. what did you do to your mother?”

There was a dead silence, and then she said, whimpering, “You’re angry again, Doctor Wright; what have I done?”

“Nothing, nothing,” I said, as to a fretful child, “nothing, Beth.”

“You don’t always call me the way you used to. I think you don’t like me any more, and I think that now you’d rather talk to Bess, and I never thought you’d like *her* better than you do your own Beth, but I guess that if you’d rather—”

“Oh, Beth,” I said, and sighed. “I only want Bess to tell me about your mother’s death.”

“If I’m in your way,” Beth said, “you just don’t need to call me again. You can spend all your time with Bess; *I*’ll never know. I thought you *liked* me, though.”

“Oh,” I said in weary desperation, “I’d rather have Betsy.”

“Fine,” she said, grinning. “I *never* thought, my dearest doctor, my dearest dearest Doctor Wrong, that I would hear you calling upon Betsy as you would call upon—”

“Stop,” I said, “no blasphemy; is it not enough that I am driven and tormented by all of you; must I be blamed, too?”

She giggled maliciously. “You were clever to give me the pencil,” she said. “I couldn’t get out until you drove *her* away.” She added more seriously. “Aunt Morgen made her come see you today.”

“I rather imagined that there had been some crisis; Bess would not have risked a consultation fee without grave provocation.”

“Well,” said Betsy, consideringly, “first of all, she was scared. She cut her hand, you know,” and the imp glanced at me demurely. “But it was really Aunt Morgen deciding to write to the lawyers that made her come — *I* told you, with the pencil.”

“I don’t really understand it, however; it has to do with her precious money, I assume?”

“Indeed it does; Aunt Morgen wants to tell the lawyers that *she* can’t have the money because...” Betsy hesitated, with a long, innocent face “... because she has been so *very* nervous since her mother died,” said Betsy. Then she asked me bluntly, “Are you going to let her pay you money for telling the lawyers and everyone she’s all right?”

“Certainly I am not going to become involved in any such foolishness. I don’t want any money, or at least not *hers,* and I have no intention of discussing her with lawyers or anyone else, and I am furthermore prepared to abandon the subject of this infernal financial lunacy forever; I am neither an accountant nor a bank clerk, and I am heartily tired of dealing with a ledger when I am concerned with a flesh-and-blood—”

“Fiddle-dee-dee,” said Betsy, “fiddle-dee-dee. The mouse has married the bumblebee.”

“And,” I said roundly, “I fully intend to discover what hand *you,* Miss Betsy, had in all this mischief.”

“Me?” said Betsy. “Fiddle-dee-dee.”

“Did you, for instance,” I wondered aloud, “hint to your aunt of some irrational behavior over expenditures... did you, perhaps, *demonstrate* some such silliness?”

“Fiddle-dee-dee,” said Betsy, eyes cast heavenward in innocence.

“I should not be surprised if you had — say — torn up, or burned, some large bill in your aunt’s presence—”

“You mean,” Betsy asked, “like lighting a cigarette with a ten-dollar bill? Fiddle-dee-dee.”

“I see,” I said.

“I *did,*” Betsy continued with great candor, “put a little notion into Beth’s head about how you were always talking to *her* these days. I thought maybe when you heard how bad it made Beth feel you’d be a little nicer to us all.”

“That was unkind,” I said.

“Tell Beth,” said Betsy, grinning, and turned to me Beth’s tearful face.

“I don’t want to talk to you any more,” Beth said.

“Beth,” I told her with irritation, “I tell you that I have not seen Bess for weeks until this afternoon when she walked into my office. I did not invite her here, and I assure you that I view her with the most sincere dislike. There is no reason in the world for you or anyone else to be upset; I am a doctor and in order to make any progress upon this case—”

“If you don’t like her,” said Beth sullenly, “then why do you talk to her all the time instead of me?”

“Oh, Betsy, Betsy,” I cried, in despair.

“She’s just jealous,” Betsy said. “She’ll get over it. Fiddle-dee-dee,” she added, with a giggle.

“If I could only persuade you to behave,” I said wearily.

“Do you know,” said Betsy, falling suddenly back into her familiar sullenness, “do you know that if you had left me alone I could be free now? I would be with...” She stopped abruptly, and when I looked up questioningly she was turned away.

“Tell me about it, Betsy,” I said.

“No. Besides, if I told you about Robin you’d be angry with me and hate me worse than you do now, even, because that was a *bad* thing. And I wouldn’t tell you about the rest of it because then you’d find out about Robin.”

“And suppose I promise not to be angry?”

She laughed. “Fiddle-dee-dee,” she said. “Said the mouse, ‘Dear bee, will you marry me, will you marry me, sweet bumble-bee?’ Can you sing, Doctor Wrong?”

“Poorly,” I said. “Betsy, I am persuaded that in all of this, even including your nonsense, there is a pattern of sorts to be discovered, and I am determined that it shall not remain hidden. At every crucial point of Miss R.’s life one or another of you steps forward to confuse and bewilder me; you tell me meaningless trifles when I require absolute facts, you babble nonsense at me when I come close to home, you mock me.”

“Fiddle-dee-dee. I treat you very nicely, I think.”

“And,” I continued, “I have observed that whenever I am speaking to you or to Bess, and my searching becomes too sharp for comfort, you withdraw and send Beth with her tenderness and her tears, and evade my questions. I think that you and Bess between you can tell me my story, and I fully intend that you shall. Therefore—”

"Beth won't come, anyway," Betsy interrupted, giggling. "Beth's mad and I'm glad and I know what will please her; a bottle of wine, to make her shine, and Doctor Wrong to—"

"Betsy," I said, "in heaven's name!"

"Now who's blaspheming?" she said pertly.

"I want you to take a note to your aunt," I said in sudden decision. "I'll tell you what I shall write, since I expect you would read it in any case. I shall ask Miss Jones to call here at my office, at any time convenient to her, to discuss the progress of her niece's case."

Although I had serious misgivings about entrusting such an errand to Betsy, I felt that I had no choice; I disliked addressing Miss Jones through the common post, and could not endeavor to communicate through Elizabeth, who would most probably not be allowed to remain conscious long enough to carry a message, or through Beth, who was in the same state of subjection, and angry at me besides, or through Bess, who would surely find the message of ominous import to her security. I might have telephoned Miss Jones, indeed, but, to own it frankly, I was very reluctant to converse with the lady on any grounds but my own, safe in my own office with my own books and my good stout desk before me. I dreaded her mockery, and it was a delicate subject I brought her.

All of these doubts passed swiftly through my mind as I wrote a quick note to Miss Jones, asking only that she call on me to discuss the health of her niece, while Betsy sang to herself in her chair; I then thought to fortify the safe delivery of my message by remarking, as I handed the folded note across the desk, "I expect that you will keep this from Bess."

"I will," she said, and added slowly, "if I can." And then, in a rush of words that seemed born of a terror not until now acknowledged, "I think she is getting stronger all the time."

I glanced up at her frightened face, and said easily, “I believe we shall have her down yet. Don’t be afraid of her.”

“Mother’s Betsy mustn’t cry,” she said, and turned and left me quickly.

Well, then, I sent my note, and had my answer, and my exasperation for my pains; a letter reached me two days later, and a staggering surprise it was — although my reader must do me credit, and suppose that I was not, after the first moment, altogether taken in — to read: “My dear Doctor Wright: I don’t think you seriously meant what you said in your letter, and if you did, you should be horsewhipped. I am a poor lone woman but you are a bad old man. Sincerely yours, Morgen Jones.” This odd document, laboriously composed, had an air unmistakable, and even though it caused me some honest amusement, I was acutely aware of my own folly in supposing that Betsy’s seeming friendliness was to be trusted for a moment; I had been taken in by her cheerfulness and seeming cooperative spirit. When I thought, finally, of what nonsense might even now lie in Miss Jones’ hands, purporting to be from me, I was inclined to berate myself for a madman. I do believe, however, that this superlative insolence of Betsy’s put the final stamp upon my conviction that matters must be brought to a head as soon as possible; I perceived that my present policy of tactful patience had been shortsighted, in allowing Betsy to wander almost freely, and Bess to establish herself almost firmly; knowledge is power, I told myself, and determined to seek my knowledge from Miss Jones, and, armed with my knowledge, lead an unscrupulous flank attack upon her niece.

I was, moreover, deeply concerned at the blatant tricks Betsy seemed willing to employ in order to avoid a meeting between her aunt and myself; I wondered that Betsy so much feared her aunt. That these obstructions came from Betsy I had no reason to doubt, and any question in my mind concerning the author of the letter I received was banished when I discovered, on the afternoon of the same day, that although Elizabeth came in resigned misery to my office, and turned shortly to Beth, from whom I had ten minutes of reproaches and tears, I was not able, that afternoon, to bring Betsy by any ingenuity. I asked her politely to come, I called her, I scolded and entreated, and the best I could do was Bess, who fell immediately to lamenting her aunt's criminal activities with regard to the bank account.

I had never found Bess so trying as on that afternoon; I attempted again and again to drive her away, and she only stayed on like an unwelcome guest, greeting my questions with blank stares or foolish answers, and relating every subject brought forward to her tiresome money. Again and again I tried to bring her to an understanding of the true state of her affairs, again and again I tried to explain to her that she was no more than one-quarter of an individual, that there were three others who shared her life and her person, and must be granted a share in the consciousness of Miss R. but each time I reached a point of final definition, where it seemed that surely this time she must comprehend, she turned aside from me and went back to her unending talk of money; it veritably seemed that she would willingly sacrifice three-quarters of her conscious life, if she might only be allowed to hold onto four-quarters of her money. I had put a pencil close by her hand, but sulky Betsy refused to write, and at last I said in disgust, "Miss R. this cannot continue. I am unable to go on today; we shall take up this conversation at another time, after I have spoken to your aunt."

"What are you going to speak to my aunt about?" Bess demanded with suspicion.

"I must give her a report on your present condition," I said thoughtlessly.

"What will you tell her?" Bess spoke imperatively, and I thought with anxiety; she leaned forward and asked again, "What will you tell her?"

"Merely my own opinions with regard to your mental health," I said; now, indeed, her hand was writing, and I thought more of that than of Bess; this time she caught my glance and looked also down at her hand; "I have done this before," she whispered, gazing in horror at her writing hand, "my hand is moving by itself." She seemed horrified and filled with loathing for her own hand, and yet fascinated, for she made no attempt to lift her hand from the page, but leaned forward to see what was written. A ghostly kind of conversation then commenced, with Bess, speaking in a kind of muted sick voice, communicating with her own right hand. The hand had written: fool fool fool do not let him go he does not love you

Bess: (speaking) Who? Who does not love me?

Hand: (it was clearly Betsy, and so I shall call it) robin does not love you or coffee or tea or girls love me

Bess: What do you want? Why are you writing? (to me) I can't even feel it; it goes right on moving and I can't make it stop.

Doctor Wright: (to Betsy) Indeed, there has been wickedness done.

Betsy: fiddle-dee-dee.

Bess: This is how my hand cut me with the knife, then.

Betsy: cut your head off next time ha ha dear bumblebess

Doctor Wright: Betsy, I think I shall forgive you for your impertinence to me, but will you fare so easily with your aunt?

Betsy: aunties mad and im glad

Bess: *Her* aunt? Does she mean Aunt Morgen?

Betsy: Go marry the mouse you filthy bess

Doctor Wright: (at something of a loss) Here is an honor I had not expected. Bess, this is Betsy; I thought you two had already met.

Bess: This is some kind of a joke, I suppose. Or else you are trying to frighten me, Doctor, and I promise you that I am not going to think better of you for these cruel tricks. You seem to think that all you have to do is say "Betsy" and I'll come running to you for help; I wish I could make you understand that this is not at all the way to deal with me. I am willing to be reasonable and helpful, but I won't have you thinking I'm a fool.

Betsy: foul dirty thing

Bess: I hope, Doctor, that you won't think *I* am as vulgar as this writing; I assure you that —

Doctor Wright: I have known Betsy for a long time.

Betsy: old man knows well i am not tame bess will know someday bess darling go away leave go away live somewhere else never come back find someone richer

Bess: I thought that sooner or later we would come around to talking of money. Just because I will be very rich, everyone thinks they can play tricks on me to get money.

Betsy: poor bess no more money do not let him go

Bess: Who?

Betsy: old doctor money-taker tell aunt m

Doctor Wright: Betsy, I will not endure any more mischief from you, remember.

Betsy: better hide nestegg went together to find

Bess: (lifting her hand violently from the page, and speaking to me) This is more than I can stand, my own fingers holding a pencil and speaking to me so rudely and then you play tricks and try to take away my money and Aunt Morgen is angry, and all I want is to be left alone and not bothered and I would be so happy!

Doctor Wright: I am not able, seemingly, to persuade you of my good intentions; there is nothing more I can do.

Bess: (writing again) My hand won't stay still — Doctor, can you make it stop?

Betsy: all went together to find a nestegg elizabeth beth betsy and bess

Doctor Wright: Betsy, if you will not come yourself, will you send Elizabeth?

Betsy: fiddle-dee-dee

"I think I have overstayed my time, Doctor Wright," Elizabeth said, rising and pulling on her glove. "My aunt will wonder why I am late."

"Will she worry?" I asked, rising.

"No, no," said Elizabeth, "she knows where I am, of course. But she doesn't like waiting dinner."

"Goodbye, then, until day after tomorrow," I said.

She stopped in the doorway and looked at me over her shoulder. "Fiddle-dee-dee," she said, and closed the door behind her.

* * *

I have in my notes the record of the preceding conversation between Betsy and Bess; I naturally preserved Betsy's scrawl, and noted down Bess' remarks in my book. This odd performance was repeated only once, to my knowledge, and at Bess' insistence, on the occasion of Miss R.'s next visit to my office. Betsy had again refused to put in an appearance, and had showed no sign of her presence; I had spoken briefly to Elizabeth and even more briefly to Beth, who was still downcast, and who had broken off in the middle of a sentence to turn abruptly into Bess, who was seemingly so anxious to talk to me that she could not observe even fundamental good manners, but must interrupt her sister to catch my attention. She had been thinking, she informed me earnestly, and had concluded that it was unjust to suspect me of trickery. (She had been very nervous since her mother died three weeks before.) She had, however, been vastly entertained by my cleverness in causing her hand to write of itself, and hoped that I would show it to her again. Could I, did I think? Would I be so kind?

Betsy's writing seemed to have a kind of horrid fascination for her, the kind of delight so many of us experience when told of our babblings when asleep, or the half-wary excitement of having one's fortune told; I suppose there is a kind of stimulation in a stranger's catching one off guard, as it were; I have felt it myself. At any rate, Miss Bess was charmed with the conversation of her own right hand, and eager to test it again. From the nervousness which possessed her I think that she half-hoped, too, to catch Betsy and Doctor Wright in some kind of a conspiracy against her, so that she might triumphantly reveal a plot against herself and her fortune and emerge victorious from our insidious conniving; in this last, I fear, she was sadly disappointed.

We sat ourselves down, then, Bess with the pencil in her right hand (grasped now, I noted, in the clumsy fashion of one who habitually uses her left, and not at all in the easy manner in which Betsy wrote) and a larger pad of paper provided for the purpose; I with my notebook on the shelf below my desk, quite out of Bess' view, since I did not put it past her to suspect me of a kind of written ventriloquism. Then, after waiting for some few minutes, and Bess watching her hand avidly, and I wondering to myself at her eagerness, and Betsy perhaps off chasing butterflies, for all the writing that was being done, finally Bess leaned a little forward and spoke tensely to her hand.

"Now," she said, "you wouldn't do it at home because you were afraid. And *I* wasn't afraid, so I came here and I'm sitting here waiting, and if you're anything at all, show yourself, or I'll laugh myself sick thinking how silly you are."

It seemed to me that this was no way to summon Betsy, who was not, in my experience, intimidated by strong words, so I said quietly, “Perhaps if you spoke more civilly, and called her by name, she might come.”

“She isn’t worth it,” Bess said with contempt. “All I want is to prove she doesn’t exist, and I don’t need to worry anymore. It’s nothing—” she turned the hand holding the pencil over in a gesture of mockery, “nothing but my imagination. And now are *you* convinced, Doctor?”

“Betsy,” I said, half-humorously, “now *you* must defend *me.*”

Immediately her hand turned, and wrote on the page, and I felt an unworthy satisfaction in the thought that Betsy had resisted all challenges until I asked her support. All the hand wrote at first, however, was “Doctor, doctor”

Bess: (ironically) She seems to prefer *you,* Doctor Wright; perhaps *you* would rather hold the pencil?

Betsy: doctor open my eyes

Bess: Betsy darling — if you will not be offended at my speaking familiarly to you?

Betsy: hateful

Bess: Now, that is rude, and I am being so polite. I don’t even believe that you exist, and yet I am far too polite to say so; I am even calling you Betsy to please you and your dear doctor.

Betsy: bumblebess

Bess: I don’t think that’s very polite, either, and I think you and Doctor Wright should know that it’s much better to be polite to *me.*

Betsy: polite to a pig

Bess: That’s much better; at least you show that you can understand what I’m saying. Now listen to this: I am so displeased at your manners that I am quite seriously planning to get rid of you for good, You *and* (to me) your doctor.

Doctor Wright: (without anger) You have tried before, I think.

Bess: But this time little Betsy knows I will manage. Poor Betsy is going to be badly hurt if she troubles me again.

Betsy: cut your head off

Bess: But you can't, can you? You tried again with the knife and I was too quick for you, wasn't I? I was watching for you, wasn't I?

Betsy: sleep

Bess: No, indeed; you aren't strong enough now. I think you are hardly able to keep writing from weakness.

Betsy: fiddle-dee-dee

Bess: I think I hurt you, when I caught you in the hotel, and I think you've been afraid of me ever since because I was stronger and I brought you back from your little escapade; Betsy darling, shall I tell Doctor Wright where you were going and what you were looking for?

Betsy: (suddenly stilled; then) no one knows

Bess: *I* know, darling; you've forgotten that pleasant doctor who treated you to lunch — shall I tell you what he told me?

Betsy: no

Bess: (mocking) You must have told him all sorts of things, Betsy darling.

Betsy: if you tell i will tell too

Bess: And you know how they are all going to laugh at you, when I tell them, Doctor Wright and Aunt Morgen and that nice doctor in New York, that you went wandering and whining all over the city looking for your —

Betsy: now i will tell what you and aunt morgen did and when she came in the door you went to her and said is this true what aunt morgen said and when she looked at you and smiled a little because she was drunk you took your hands —

At this point Bess raised her left hand and dashed the pencil from her right hand, in a gesture of such violence that I was shocked, and half-rose to expostulate.

"This is frightful," she said, her voice still shaking with anger. "That I should have to sit here and read the ravings of a maniac..."

"Then you concede that it is Betsy?" I asked her dryly.

"Indeed not. It is..." She thought deeply. "Hypnotism," she said at last.

"Remarkable," I said. "You make me out an amazing performer."

She reached down slowly and picked up the pencil and put it again into her right hand. Then she said slowly and with venom, "Goodbye, Betsy darling. Say goodbye like a nice girl and I won't hurt you any more."

The pencil wrote, laboriously, "doctor open eyes"

"Betsy," I said sharply, "you may open your eyes."

She took a deep breath and said with relief, "I feel sometimes like I would like to start eating at *her* from the inside and eat away at her until she was nothing but a shell and then I would crack her in half and throw her away. And then I would take the little pieces and—"

"She is not an attractive girl," I conceded with a sigh. "What were you going to write, when she struck you?"

"Nothing." Betsy spoke more quietly than usual, and when I looked at her I could see that she was suffering from this unending battle; more than either Elizabeth or Beth she was dejected, and weaker. She saw my glance, and perhaps read a kind of sympathy into it, for she said, "It's harder now for me to come out, almost as hard as it was at first with Lizzie."

I wondered if Betsy was not perhaps ready to give up, and I said, "Elizabeth and Beth cannot fight her."

Betsy grinned wanly. “I used to want you on my side,” she said. “I always told you she would be worse than I was.”

“Actually,” I said frankly, “she is infinitely worse.”

“I used to know everything,” Betsy said wistfully. “All that Lizzie did and thought and said and dreamed and everything. Now I come out sometimes when *she* lets go for a minute, and it’s harder every time, and harder to stay out, with *her* pushing at me. Funny,” she went on, “if I went back under now, after all I’ve tried.”

“You are none of you going to be ‘under,’ as you call it. When Elizabeth R. is herself again, you will all be part of her.”

“Like raisins in a pudding,” Betsy said.

“You might just tell me,” I suggested, “why you are trying to keep me from your aunt.”

“I’m not sure,” Betsy said, and I think she was telling the truth. “I think it’s because I know something’s going to happen and I’m afraid of Aunt Morgen.”

“What could be going to happen?” I asked cautiously, but Betsy only stretched and made a face at me.

“Fiddle-dee-dee,” she said. “Let *her* walk home; I’m too lazy.”

Bess, sitting in the chair, apparently perceived that she was putting on her gloves, for she rose to go. “I think,” she said, as though nothing at all had happened since she bade goodbye to Betsy, “that I shall not care, Doctor, to try your game again. I am satisfied that it is no more than hypnotism, or a trick like spiritualism.”

Nothing could be more calculated to infuriate me, but I said with restraint, “I am no more anxious to continue than you are, Miss R.”

“Good afternoon, then,” she said.

It was clear to me from her voice and actions that she knew nothing of Betsy's brief visit, and I was greatly relieved to think that, even now, Betsy could still come without Bess' knowledge. I bade her goodbye with some cheerfulness, and took up the telephone to call Miss Jones. I knew that her niece could not reach home, walking, for a good twenty minutes, and I felt that it was no longer possible for me to attempt dealing with my four Miss R.'s without Miss Jones' active and knowledgeable help. If it meant some sacrifice of dignity on my part, that was, I told myself sternly, a minor hazard of my profession, and I kept my voice extremely businesslike, asking Miss Jones only for the privilege of an appointment with her, in order to "discuss the illness of her niece," and adding that, if possible, I should like our conversation to be unattended by Miss R. and, in fact, kept secret from her, since I had medical details to communicate which were best kept, at present, from Miss R.'s hearing. Miss Jones, as icy and formal as I myself, readily agreed to grant me an audience on the following evening, but preferred not to come to my office; would I consent to attend her at home, since her niece would be hearing a concert with friends.

I should point out, I think, that Miss R. was at this time so much quieter than she had been at various previous times — Bess and Betsy having apparently established a kind of equilibrium in their warfare, and both believing that any overt hostile act might endanger the perpetrator more than the victim — that it was felt by Miss Jones, and approved by me when consulted by Elizabeth, that Miss R. might with safety be allowed into public under supervision. As I have pointed out before, no one, without using actual restraint, had much control over her actions generally, and she came and went largely as she pleased when alone. To public functions such as concerts, where she would certainly be seen by people who had known her since childhood, and her slightest abnormality remarked, she went only when accompanied by her aunt, or by trusted old friends. She did not leave her home often, except for visits to my office, and when she went out alone it was always by day, and for never longer than an hour or so; I was confident that, operating under the dangerously poised balance of power between Betsy and Bess, so delicate that neither dared jolt the other unduly, she had heretofore kept her actions under strict control, but I made a point of discovering from Betsy where Miss R.'s journeying had taken her. There was, I thought, no longer any need to fear Betsy's eloping again, with the powerful opposition she must meet from Bess in any such attempt, and when it began to be apparent that Betsy was going to need all her strength to cope with Bess, and so must give up her unkind practical jokes upon Elizabeth and Beth, there was not even any danger of her repeating her favorite prank — taking them too far away to get home, and abandoning them. She spent much time walking, and even more time, when Bess was dominant, in going from one bank to another, where she stood outside and examined the architecture of the institution, presumably trying to decide upon the one least vulnerable to bandits; she sometimes went alone to soda shops — this usually Betsy's doing — where she indulged herself in quantities of chemically sweet concoctions; once she went to the museum and entered as a visitor, going from exhibit to exhibit, and showing the greatest interest, quite as though she had never come near the place before. She never visited any place of amusement, such as a theatre — which I believe she knew instinctively might overexcite her and shake her stability — but spent her time, largely, in mere wandering. She once rode a bus as far as the bay, and spent an afternoon looking out over the water, and, of course, mainly, there were Bess' famous shopping trips, where she went earnestly from store to store, fingering cloth and sniffing perfume, and lavishing upon herself numerous small rich indulgences.

It was thus relatively easy for Miss Jones to guarantee that her niece would be absent during our interview, and my cold tone and insistence upon my entire preoccupation with business had, I think, the effect of persuading her that she was entirely secure in both honor and reputation (oh, that I knew what Betsy had written her in my name!) in permitting me to visit her alone in the evening. Indeed, I felt as I set down the telephone that my disagreeable task was half done.

* * *

Betsy, unchastened still, made one more attempt to prevent my seeing her aunt, although I do not believe that she was aware that our appointment had already been settled. I had half-expected to see Betsy on the afternoon following my conversation with her aunt, but I reached my office late, after having been unavoidably detained by a most disagreeable session at the dentist's, and found upon my desk a note, written in a childish, unformed hand. This note was from poor Beth, and it said, "Dearest dearest Doctor, I did think you liked me in spite of everything and I didn't ever think you would really want me gone, but if you want to there isn't anything poor Beth can do. I guess there's no one in the world who likes me any more now that you have given me up. I guess I will just be lonely and sad all the time. Your own Beth."

I was grieved, and a little perplexed, at this epistle, and at a loss how to reassure the poor child until, happening to glance into the wastebasket to see if my pen had accidently fallen within, I took out several sheets of my office paper. The top one was a note of my own, left on my desk when I went out, and meant to tell Betsy that I would be a few minutes late that afternoon, because of an unavoidable appointment elsewhere. Below this, on the same sheet was scrawled, in the stylish handwriting which Bess affected, “Dear Doctor, just dropped by to say hello. Sorry I missed you. Elizabeth R.”

On another sheet, and written with my pen instead of the pencil which the others had used, I found Betsy’s characteristic blind scrawl: “i wont go i will stay you cant make me remember i can tell” and, again, “i will write what i please you cant hurt me i will tell him about what you did”

And, on still another sheet, in what seemed an attempt at imitating my own handwriting — an attempt, I must confess, which would delude no one but the sillier Miss R.’s — but the same attempt, I reflected wryly, that Miss Jones might have read — was written the following composition:

“Miss R. although I have been patient with you for a long time, and put up with a good deal of your nonsense, I will not stand for your bad habits any longer. This is therefore my final and only notice that I am giving up your case, permanently and for ever. Do not come to my office again, if you please. Notify your aunt. Yrs. very truly, Victor J. Wright.”

Even allowing for the execrable literary style of this masterpiece, I found it one of Betsy’s more entertaining pranks, and amused myself in endeavoring to plot out what had taken place: I imagined that Bess had for some (probably financial) reason come to my office, and found my note. She had, reasonably enough considering that it was Miss Hartley’s day off and the office was therefore empty, jotted down a note telling me she had called, and, of course, once Betsy got the pen between her teeth (oh dear; I am trying to learn to do without metaphors, and would have said I was getting on nicely, but see what comes up here to plague me!) she was off into a conversation with Bess, taunting and tormenting, and driving Bess closer toward that dark area where Bess felt herself in danger and was easily overcome, until, once dominant, Betsy could hold her precarious position for a while. Then, with what malicious gigglings I could only imagine, I thought that Betsy had with loving care composed the pseudo-letter from me in which I so blithely gave up Miss R.'s case. Betsy would then retreat, bring Beth forward, and lie back in delight while Beth remained long enough to read the unkind letter (which by a positive effort of silliness she might believe was actually from me) and write her plaintive answer.

I later learned that my recapitulation was largely correct, although Betsy had, in the refinement of her wickedness, first allowed Elizabeth out to read the letter of dismissal, before she summoned Beth, thus, if I may be permitted to phrase it so, killing two birds with one stone; Elizabeth had been too shocked and hurt to do anything but retreat silently, and Betsy, returning, had with great delight gathered up and thrown away all but Beth's final sad cry, and left *that* one for me.

It is a kind of practical joke of which I must warn the reader to beware, involving as it does the swift and almost certainly bewildering shift in identity of the joker — although if, as in this case, successful, an alarmingly thorough kind of prank! I should call it, as a matter of fact, a completely *practical* practical joke, not for the general order of person, but most effective if one just happens to have four warring personalities, and one pencil.

* * *

Having been so roundly dismissed, I dined pleasantly, and then, donning a dull necktie and a forbidding medical scowl, and forgetting my overshoes, I made for Miss Jones'. My steps were labored, for I went rehearsing the sounding phrases with which I intended to bring Miss Jones to an understanding of the precarious situation of her niece; withdrawn as I tried to hold myself, I could not help an involuntary feeling that we were all “choosing sides,” as the children call it, and Miss Jones was too powerful a figure in our game to remain long unsolicited.

I dare not, in my capacity as writer, essay an attempt at describing either Miss Jones or the house in which she lived with her niece. My feelings with regard to Miss Jones are, I fear, too strongly tinged with prejudice to enable me to picture her with absolute accuracy, and, as for her house, I thought it an abomination. Let me only say, then, that I regard Miss Jones as a singularly unattractive woman, heavy-set and overbearing, with a loud laugh and a gaudy taste in clothes, as much unlike the prettier aspects of her niece as could be conceived, although it must be admitted that Betsy bore a strong family resemblance to her aunt. The house where they lived, in a neighborhood generally regarded as the most exclusive in our town, had, I thought, been put together by some family eccentric whose taste found its most perfect expression in the bleak, pudding-colored style so popular not too long ago among our grandparents, when taste and financial security were felt to be most surely expressed by a kind of ruthless ornamentation. I do not mean to say merely that Miss Jones’ home was ugly; to my mind it was hideous. It had been freely embellished outside with many of the small details which so depress a lover of the classic in architecture; it was heavy with wooden lace and startling turrets, and gave the impression (and here I confess I am malicious) of having been assembled by the same unartistic hand as Miss Jones.

Miss Jones was, I should think, an accurate heir of the designer of the house, for she had assumed its aesthetic education in much the same state of mind as must have fired the dream which first envisaged those turrets, and Miss Jones had at her disposal fashions more repelling than were dreamed of a hundred years ago. (And, before Madam approaches me with a fire in her eye and a swatch of turkey-red in her fingers, let me hasten to admit that

I, a peace-loving man, spend my leisure hours in a room executed by a woman's taste: my late wife, whose silken dreams were luckily limited by her means; I am still however, in undisputed possession of my worn leathery old chair, sir — are you?) Where the original Mrs. Jones had hung brocade at the narrow windows of her new house, the present Miss Jones had substituted a calico kind of thing, with great hideous "modern" designs; she had tried to compensate for the turrets outside by an equally fungoid growth within, a kind of embellishment which I have heard her describe as "art"; in the front hall, where one of my pedestrian generation would fully have expected to find, say, a marble urn, or a hatrack, or even a mirror (and I am persuaded, myself, that Mrs. Jones kept there some sort of inlaid table which held some sort of beaded and painted card tray) — in the front hall Miss Jones had settled a lifesize (I *presume* that it was lifesize) figure of black wood, unclad, and exhibiting much the same random unbeautiful physique as Miss Jones (and I have caught myself forcibly withdrawing my mind from the irresistible sense that it may very well have been a representation of Miss Jones; in that case it would have been only just barely lifesize, but I have no grounds whatsoever for this supposition which, as I say, I have steadfastly refused to entertain; for one thing, the statue had no hair and Miss Jones had). Beyond the hall, the stairway, once certainly handsome and sweeping, was now utterly vulgarized by a series of paintings on the wall supporting it, which I am not willing to suppose the work of Miss Jones' own hand. I used to shudder when I remembered those paintings, and think of the many Misses Jones who must have come as brides, blushing and smiling beneath their veils, decked in the pearls which I am positive good Mr. Jones hung about the necks of his daughters on their wedding days, down that staircase to pause and toss a bridal bouquet, and then I would try to picture a contemporary bride, perhaps our own Betsy, grinning like a jackanapes, turning under those unmaidenly paintings to hurl her flowers into the hall, where they would be caught, surely, by the black outstretched hand of the wooden figure below.

Oh, well. I have taken a roundabout way to get me to Miss Jones' house, but I have outgrown the minor vices of my youth, and am unwilling to find them painted on people's walls today. Enough; I have brought myself with laggard steps (and without my overshoes!) from my own fireside and into Miss Jones' front hall, and am regarding the black wooden figure with misgivings while Miss Jones gallantly takes my hat and coat and throws them, with an incomparable air, roughly over the end of the balustrade; and I, all unmanned, must needs follow her into her living room, a spot uninhabitable for human creatures. I wondered irreverently at the comparative mildness of Miss R.'s mental illness, looking at the great mounds and masses of bright colors, the overlarge furniture (overlarge for me, overlarge for Miss R. but of course suited nicely to Miss Jones), the great splashing decorations, of which the "modern" design upon the curtains was not the least, the bizarre ornaments. I sat myself down timidly upon a chair covered over with orange peacocks and found at my elbow a shivering creation composed entirely of wire and bright metals; as I breathed this airy creature moved and fluttered, swung half around and back, and continued pendulum, while I hesitated to breathe again, for fear I should send it lofting altogether out of sight and lose Miss Jones a precious object. I had hoped briefly that there might be some spot in it for a man to lay his pipe, but no: the ashtray was a hand, reaching out avariciously as though to snatch away my pipe — and indeed, my pouch and matches, too — in its porcelain grasp, and I thought, again in wonder, of how everything in this house seemed to have an air of seizing at a person, and I put my pipe away. It is a fine pipe, and I should hate to have it taken from me, but I had then perforce to accept a cigarette from Miss Jones and allow her to light it for me. During all this time — since she was of course not utterly insensate — she had kept up a kind of conversation, wanting to know how I did, and how I liked the weather, and did I find my chair to my taste, and would I take brandy?

When, thoroughly wound about with spider webs, I consented to a glass of brandy, she poured me a generous share in a goblet which, it pleased me to fancy, the grandfather of the patriarchal Jones had brought home in his piratical loot, and I set it upon the table next me, where it provoked my airy acquaintance into a frenzy of oscillation. Miss Jones, then, composed herself with her own brandy and the bottle with it, onto a sofa of radiant pink and green, which did not become her; "Well?" she said squarely, "what do you have to say for yourself?"

"Madam," I said (and I had upon her very step concluded upon addressing her as "Madam"; I feared that too free an address might defeat my end, and mark me as much interested in "Miss Jones" as "Miss R.'s aunt"; "Madam," therefore, I began), "I cannot imagine that you have gone for this long time in entire ignorance of your niece's deteriorating mental health." (Thinking, you see, that by an implied reproach over lack of interest I might compel her to listen to me respectfully, since surely no one could accuse *me* of lack of interest, or of ignorance on the subject!) She signified slightly that she conceded the first point — if I may so call it — to me, and I continued as delicately as I could manage in my formal, prepared speech: "I have been most anxious to discuss these matters with you, since it is now apparent to me that Miss R. is approaching a climax in her illness, and one of which we must take immediate advantage. I propose, if you will allow me, to lay before you the full history" (the devil; I had absolutely decided to use some such phrase as "ensure that you have been fully informed,” in order to drive home the point about her lack of interest, and even hint that her niece may not have been entirely truthful with her always; but it was done now, and I continued fairly smoothly) “of the various manifestations of Miss R.’s illness during this period when she has been my patient, and to see if you will agree with me in my outline for further treatment” (should we have at Bess, all together, I was asking her, but hardly liked to phrase it so) “and to ask, naturally, for your assistance in bringing about a complete and final cure.”

There, I thought; she cannot complain of a lack of polish in me; surely she has not for a long time sat patiently under such a well-turned speech, or one, I must admit in honesty (and you thought, reader, that *I* did not know it?) so entirely meaningless.

There was a short silence, during which Miss Jones, apparently in meditation, sipped of her brandy, and touched her necklace, and regarded the floor, and nodded slowly, and then she raised her eyes candidly to me, and began with a grave inclination, “My dear doctor, in the past few years with my niece, I have frequently thought of — and even suggested — her taking professional advice. Believe me, I should not have recommended what is for me such an extreme step (and you will forgive me, I know, for this attitude, understandable in a layman) if I had not felt that a person better qualified would better understand and assist my niece than one who, like myself, has had little or no experience with the mentally ill. Except,” Miss Jones continued reflectively, “with her goddamned mother. But certainly I believe that your superior judgment must be consulted first, and I shall of course be prepared to follow through on any course of action suggested by yourself.”

Score one for Miss Jones, I thought, a veritable tiger among women; I myself would have shaded the ironic inflection upon “layman,” but it is of course a matter of taste; we all have our preferences and I would be the last to deny my own; now I said smilingly, “Then you will not prevent me from describing to you what gives me a good deal of understandable satisfaction — my own conduct of Miss R.’s case so far?”

“Indeed not,” she said. “More brandy?”

I permitted her to refill my glass, and most generously, too, and then launched — having come already prepared with my notebooks — into a detailed account of Miss R.’s case, omitting only those factors which might prove distressing to Miss R.’s own aunt — an occasional off-color reference in Betsy’s activities, and of course the greater part of her animadversions upon myself, and various slighting remarks upon her aunt and, naturally, all reflections upon the unfortunate dead woman who had been mother to the one, and sister to the other. As I spoke — and I spoke well, having so thoroughly rehearsed myself, and having my notes besides — Miss Jones listened attentively, with every appearance of great fascination; she interrupted me once with a question about Betsy’s early appearance — whether it was possible that Betsy had been able to express herself briefly and violently before my first awareness of her; she recounted to me the incidents of an evening spent by herself and her niece at a friend’s house, which had directly influenced her in seeking medical assistance. I listened to her with patience, since of course all facts are vital, but during her interruption I was strongly afraid of losing the thread of my own narrative, and its perfect balance, and had at last to cut her off in order that I might continue. Again, she asked and insisted on a more detailed and simpler description of the dissociated personality, as described by Doctor Prince, and again I must break off and give it her. We were wasting time, I thought, since I knew the subject perfectly and she need not know any more than she did, and always present in my mind was the approaching return of Miss R.

so I said at last, “Then, Miss Jones, you agree with me that an attempt must be made to force these various personalities into assimilation?”

“Your superior judgment...” she murmured. “More brandy?”

I had by his time taken so much of Miss Jones’ keen potations: her flattery, her brandy, her stimulating intelligence, that I was perhaps a little heady; at any rate, I permitted her to fill my glass again, and I continued, “My dear,” and then stopped, with my face no doubt as scarlet as I felt it to be, “I *beg* your pardon,” and I stumbled. “I am afraid that I was assuming, most unintentionally, the tone and manner which I employ for your niece. I *do* beg your pardon.”

The amiable woman laughed outright. “It is not an address which I hear often,” she said. “By all means feel free to honor me as your dear.”

I laughed in turn, and felt most comfortable; we were beginning to understand one another better, I felt, and was moved to say in a kind of sadness, “Our generation, madam, yours and mine, was a kinder one as regards the small graceful ways of life...”

“I never found it so,” she said. “Indeed, when I think back on my own youth—”

“But to Miss R.” I said. “I look forward to seeing *her,* at any rate, gay, and happy, and free of worries and pain; it is within *our* power, my dear Miss Jones, to set her free.”

“Work together, and bring a new being into the world?” asked Miss Jones, without inflection.

“Ah... precisely,” I said. “In a manner of speaking.”

“I would be pleased,” said the girl’s aunt, “if she could just get around the house without falling over the furniture. First I couldn’t talk to her because she used to sit there with her mouth open and her hands hanging down like paws, and then she goes wild, laughing and yelling and all cheerful and fine, and then she runs away and when I bring her back...” She shivered dramatically. “Look,” she said finally (and I sitting speechless) “try to understand my position, if you can.” She smiled at me winningly. “You know that I have no knowledge about these things, and I am afraid very little sympathy; I have always been very sound, I think, and have the ordinary person’s feeling that being cr — mentally ill is a disgrace.” She held up her hand as I was about to interrupt. “No,” she said. “I realize perfectly how foolish I sound. But kindly do not forget that all the time Elizabeth was growing up, and having the devil’s own time with adolescence and getting into all this mess without anyone even noticing — and you can thank *me* for that, I guess; *I’m* the one who cared for her, really; anyway, during all this time, I was not only trying to keep a decent home here for the child, and something she could be proud of, but I was also taking care of a brutal, unprincipled, drunken, vice-ridden beast. Her mother.”

Miss Jones stopped abruptly, overcome by emotion, and for a moment I only sat helpless, avoiding looking at her as she sat with her hand over her eyes; at last she sighed deeply, and lifted her head. “Sorry,” she said. “I guess confessions like this are the usual thing for you, doctor, but it hurts me to have to speak so of my own sister. Brandy, I think.”

For a few minutes we sat in silence, sipping our brandy and I, for one, brooding upon the mournful revelation of the character of Miss R.’s parent; at last poor Miss Jones sighed again, and then laughed a little. “Well,” she said, “I’ve told you our secret, and I think I feel better. I suppose I’ve spent so long trying to forget what my sister was like, and trying to believe it couldn’t touch Elizabeth...” She let her voice trail off, and I could only nod sympathetically.

Finally I shook myself together, and set down my glass with a sigh of my own. “I appreciate your distress,” I said. “Why did you lock Elizabeth in her room while her mother was dying?”

“Well, goddam,” she said. “You *have* been getting it out of the girl.” She laughed, as though I had made some huge joke, and then finally she began, not, perhaps, so solemnly as before, “All right, then, but I warn you it was better the other way. I didn’t want Elizabeth around when I saw her mother that morning, because I was honestly scared of the effect her mother’s dangerous state — dangerous, I mean, because she was dying; not her moral state *that* time — might have on a girl of Elizabeth’s delicacy. She had been through a severe nervous strain during early adolescence, and I thought...” She looked up and saw my smile, and shrugged. “Well,” she said defensively, “she *did* have a hell of a time when she was about fifteen.”

“I am sure you did your best for her,” I said obscurely.

“I’m sure I did better than that,” she said. “And I find I am beginning to like you, doctor, so I have decided that I will be doing my best still if I tell you the truth, which I suppose is what you want.”

“If you can bring yourself to it,” I said, and she grinned, reminding me of Betsy again.

“Well,” she said, looking deep into her glass, “maybe you’d better know what kind of a person my sister was.” She looked up at me curiously. “You know the kind of person who walks all over other people without really meaning to, and then goes back to pick them up and apologize and steps on their heads again? She was like that, a really pretty girl, and delicate and fragile — not like me.” She stopped for a minute, until I thought that she had forgotten the train of her narrative. Then, when she went on, her tone was colder, almost dispassionate. “She just seemed to do everything the wrong way. When she wanted a new dress, it always turned out to be just the only dress that would have looked nice on someone else, if *she* hadn't gotten it first. She contaminated everything, even when she didn't know she was doing it. Whenever she decided to go to a dance or a party or a picnic, it always turned out that her going would mean inconvenience or trouble for someone else — maybe someone had to stay home because there wasn't room for everyone on the hay wagon, or the only fellow left to take her was just getting ready to ask someone else... I remember once," she added with an odd smile, "there just weren't enough sandwiches to go round. Anyway, no matter what she did, even when she picked out a man to marry, she always managed to do it at the worst possible time, in the worst possible style. I didn't really hate her, you see," she said, raising her eyes to mine. "No one could."

"Was she older than you?"

"Yes." She was surprised. "But only a year or so." Silently she rose and poured more brandy into my glass, and filled her own. "When — when her husband died, she left the place where they had been living in New York and came back here to live with me, and she brought Elizabeth with her. Elizabeth was only two then, named after her mother, naturally. Who would ever think of naming a baby Morgen?" Again she was silent, thinking, and then after a minute she went on. "It was the only time in her life she couldn't get her own way, with Ernest's money. Even Ernest," she continued slowly, "wasn't completely taken in by her, and he figured just the way everyone else always did — when you have trouble with Morgen's pretty sister, get Morgen to take care of it for you. Anyway, if *you* had a lot of money and wanted to be reasonably sure your baby daughter would get some of it when she grew up and needed it, Elizabeth Jones would be the last person you'd think of giving it to. I think," she said, "that he tried to tell me *then* how much he had always cared for me, but the lawyers made him take it out."

"Then your niece is actually an heiress?"

"In about two months, when she's twenty-five. And," said her aunt darkly, "when she gets it she won't find a penny of it wasted unless you count what was spent on educating her a waste of money. In *spite* of what she says."

Miss Jones scowled fearsomely, and I said in haste, "Miss R. has mentioned her inheritance to me. I believe, however, that when she is herself again you will find her more just with regard to your management."

"If Ernest ever thought I wanted the money," Miss Jones said plaintively, "he would have given it directly to me."

"It certainly is a pity," I agreed, "that the question of this money has entered into Miss R.'s case; we were quite confused enough without it, and it can certainly have no bearing upon her cure, except insofar as a feeling of personal security can help to tranquilize her mind."

"She had the gall to tell me that she was going to spend whatever she liked anyway, and buy all the clothes and things she wanted no matter who paid. As if I hadn't always let her do what she pleased, for no thanks either, and given up all the dresses and picnics all the time, because Morgen was so good-humored and didn't care whether she stayed home or not; at least," said Miss Jones with satisfaction, "I outlived her."

"But how did she die?" I asked at last, softly.

"Badly. As I knew she would — whining and saying it wasn't her fault and she was sorry and if she didn't die everything was going to be different." Miss Jones looked up at me grinning, although I think she had largely forgotten who she was talking to, and even, indeed, if she was addressing anyone at all; "She was mud clear up to the neck," Miss Jones said. “I told her I was sorry she was dying, too, and I cried for her. It was the best I could do. And of course I insisted upon Elizabeth’s grieving for her too.”

“Quite natural.”

“Certainly. I don’t know what people would have thought. Anyway, Elizabeth *was* sick again for a while, the way she was before, what everyone kept saying was growing pains. A kind of nervous fever, *I* called it, and it was good enough for my mother.”

Not caring to unravel this dubious piece of medical effrontery, I said, “I suppose the actual death of her mother was most trying for your niece.”

“Most trying,” she agreed solemnly. “As a matter of fact, I cannot remember a time when my niece behaved better.”

“It happened... when? In the morning, I believe you said?”

“About eleven, I think. I remember I was having a hell of a time with Elizabeth about where her mother *was* that morning; there was some foolishness about a party, or something — as a matter of fact, it may have been my sister’s birthday, although I’m not sure — they had so *many* little things together — anyway, *I* couldn’t give the girl any new story about where her mother had been all morning and all night and all the day before. I knew she was out somewhere, that’s all, but it’s a *hell* of a thing to have to explain to her own daughter, when she’s seen enough of it already to begin to wonder a lot. And then the door opens very softly, like she hoped to get in before we noticed, and she was standing there...”

“Smiling,” I said softly.

“Smiling, kind of fearful, and wondering, hoping she’d gotten away with it one more time. She had to hold onto the door to keep from falling. And I’d just been saying to Elizabeth...” She stopped, and shook her head, and took up her glass.

“And?”

“Well,” said Miss Jones, “Elizabeth was very upset, naturally, when we realized that there was something wrong — really *wrong,* that is, this time — and I took her right upstairs and told her to lie down and I’d take care of things, and naturally I called Harold Ryan and he came over. *He* can tell you more about it than I can, naturally. When Elizabeth was told, it was, naturally, a great shock to her. Another nervous fever, as a matter of fact.”

“Unfortunate,” I said prudently. “And terribly hard on you.”

“I enjoyed every minute of it,” said Miss Jones. “I felt kind of sorry for Elizabeth, of course, losing her mother so suddenly, but we were both better off afterward. You can’t bring up a child in an environment like that, not that I condemn my sister for her way of life, but she should have given the child to me outright. *He* wanted me to have her. It was like my own child.”

I was suddenly seriously alarmed for fear she might begin to cry, and was hardly reassured when she chose, instead, to refill my glass and her own, moving with a steadiness which I found, even then, impressive. When she had settled down again and taken up her glass she looked at me dreamily for a moment and then, fetching a deep breath, smiled and said. “Let’s not talk about it any more. It makes Morgen very unhappy. So tell me about *your* wife.”

“*My* wife, madam?”

She smiled still. “Yes,” she said, “tell me about your wife.”

“She is dead, madam.”

“I know.” She looked up at me with surprise. “But what did she use to be like?”

“She was a fine woman,” I said, and then, because I thought that I had perhaps shown a shade more curtness than was my wont when discussing my unfortunate wife, I went on more gently, “she was a woman of intelligence, of spirit, and of kindness. A truly great helpmeet, and a sincere loss to those she left behind."

"Ah," Miss Jones said happily. "And who did she leave behind?"

"Myself," I said. "She was a great loss to me."

"Ah," said Miss Jones. "Irremediable, I suppose?"

"Precisely, madam."

"I wonder sometimes what it would be like to suffer from the loss of a loved one. Does one tend to become reconciled?"

"Indeed, madam, I cannot tell. For my own part... in any case, your sister, madam. Surely. A woman among thousands..."

"And who gave you the idea she was among thousands?" Miss Jones laughed rudely. "I knew some of them," she said, "the thousands she was among." She laughed again. "I wouldn't be caught dead with any of them," she said.

She lost herself again in her obscure musings, and I, sitting back in my chair, touched briefly by the aerial creature at my elbow, pipeless and overfull of bad brandy, endeavored to clarify my mind and decide whether I might with politeness take my departure. It did not seem that Miss Jones had any further information she was prepared to give me, but from what I already knew I was able, I thought, to define my next attack upon Miss R. Carefully, my eye fixed almost unseeing upon a painting which may have been black polka dots on a red background, or a red field filled with black holes — and my eyes, without my mind's attention, focusing in and out, from holes to polka dots and back again — I set up my little mental figures: Elizabeth, relaxing into stupor, situated between a foul-living mother and a foul-tongued aunt; Bess, grieving for a mother only three weeks dead; Betsy, not grieving for a mother she had never believed she had; could I bring these three, together, face to face with their mother, let them see her clear, if I dared?

I know myself, surely, and not at any time with more accuracy than at that moment; I am a man easily weakened, and by nothing more surely than the temptation to yield. I could not afford the picture of Miss R.'s stalwart knight, the road behind him strewn with dragonish corpses, bringing his princess safely home and then, full within the citadel, turning her over once more to the wicked enchanter who had first put her into jeopardy; if I had time, I thought, it might almost be safer to bring Bess cautiously along the narrow path of days and years into the present. But there was not time —

"And then, by the great god, I *told* her so," remarked Miss Jones, turning violently at me, and seeming to think that she had been speaking aloud all this time, "and I will not hear any voice that says I did wrong."

"My dear madam, I—"

"I have *never* admitted to doing wrong, not in my whole rotten misbegotten sodden flodden ambergodden life, not wrong, not evil, not trespass against, no, nor adultery neither."

"Surely you do not accuse me of—"

"And now I will be heard." And with a great shout Miss Jones arose, towering in that great room, and lifting a voice almost great enough to shatter her fragile ornaments, some of them so dangerously close to my person, "and when I choose to be heard, the lowest legions of hell may turn in vain to silence me and when I choose to speak not all the winds of earth can drown my voice for I speak truly and well and raise not your hand to me, sirrah, for I might strike you down as a reptile or a craven bellyful wanderer upon my green earth if you so much as whimper; I charge you, sirrah, look not on me."

“Indeed, madam....” I was dismayed, and hoped, somehow, for some auspicious catastrophe; one of her feet to smash through the floor, perhaps, or a flailing arm to crash down a wall; “Indeed...”

“Now listen, rascal, and be alarmed, for I shall not be tampered with nor restrained; when I speak, you will tremble and be afraid.”

Good heavens, I thought, trembling in verity; might I with any optimism anticipate an apoplexy? After the quantities of brandy she had taken, if she continued thus...

“And now I tell you that having let your devils loose upon me you look to see me fall, and your horrid revenge accomplished, and filthy and crawling you hope to spit and gulp at my blood and snarl over my flesh and scratch and claw at one another to catch your teeth in my bones and I will not have it, for I alone and in myself will defy you and your legions, and defy me if you will! For I challenge you and I dare you here on this spot and I challenge you — do you dare to touch me? Will you defile me in the manner of *my* death? Am I to be done by children and by changelings, by yappings and by mutterings, by blood-drinkers and by bone-suckers, am I to die underfoot? Indeed, am *I* your little creature, to suffer whimpering under your hands and submit with tears to your hardness and take joy in my lowness? Surely when you question *me* you mistake; surely there are those who bow lovingly to your words and your sharp looks and your little touchings and will talk and talk and talk and I charge you here, sir, look well before you come to me! For I have done it, and I say I have, and I tell you here in my own voice that I have—”

“Goodnight, Miss Jones,” I said, offended at last — as who would not be, since she had in so many words announced that she despised my questions? — and making ready to leave her.

“You are not half a man, clown, and not worth my presence!”

“Madam,” I told her civilly enough, “if you were half a woman you would have had your sister’s husband.” I thought this a final shot, and would have fled hard upon it, but she shouted after me, “I had her child — will you deny it? I stole my sister’s child—”

“Morgen *dear.*” It was a voice cool, and dispassionate, and I turned, thinking to find a stranger (and in confession I will say here that I, too, had touched too heavily upon the Jones brandy, for I could not at once determine who stood in the doorway, fresh from outdoors, and icy).

“Doctor Wright will have a very bad opinion of our family,” she said, coming forward into the silence which was, after that peroration, overwhelming.

“Not at all,” I said, caught off balance.

“I hope you weren’t listening to Aunt Morgen, doctor. She is worried about me, and I think she has been losing sleep, listening at my door all night.”

“Go away,” said Miss Jones flatly.

“Doctor Wright came to see me, you know; he is my physician. I think he would be relieved if you went to bed.”

“Of course,” I said, with almost unseemly haste. “But I greatly fear that I also—”

“I shall stay, until I have told what I have to tell, and I defy the legions of...” But it was weaker.

“Now, please, both of you.” She turned, holding out her hands prettily to her aunt and to me. “I know how worried you both are over my health, and I would be the first to admit that I haven’t been entirely certain of *myself,* but now you must both stop fretting yourselves; you are two dear people, and I love you both very much, and it makes me very happy to know that I can promise you both that there isn't going to be any more trouble. I'm all well now."

"My God, she looks like her mother," Miss Jones said to me. "All these years I've been trying to make her see what her mother was like, and now she *looks* like her."

"My mother was your sister," her niece said reprovingly, "and you're not going to talk like that any more, with her only three weeks dead. Morgen, will you leave us, please?"

"Now you see her," Miss Jones said to me. "Help me."

"Not I," I said, honest to the last; I would not have given her the aid of my hand for worlds; I was seeing defeat as possible for the first time, and knew it; I had no strength to spare for another dragon. "Indeed, madam," I said, "we must leave her."

"I defy—"

"Not *me,* Morgen."

"Betsy," I said wildly, "Betsy."

"Please." Her voice was quiet, and contained; I should not, even without the brandy, have recognized it; I am a man deeply afraid of failure, and yet I would not even have recognized her voice. "This is going to be the end of it," she said. "I tried to be nice about it, and yet here is Aunt Morgen shouting at me and calling me names, when I would have treated her kindly and never said a word against her, and here are *you,* doctor, and I thought better of you, I admit, but now you're after me again. I am going to tell you both, finally and flatly, that I do not need anything from either of you. I," and her voice grew very cold, "am going to get along very much better without you two."

I looked at Morgen; speech — although she had denied it me, when in full possession of the room and the air in it — seemed now to be *my* prerogative, and I knew that if I spoke, defeat for me was certain, for I was genuinely and honestly and sincerely angry; I had been insulted in my profession, my manhood, and my associates, and was in no temper to submit quietly to this impertinent girl; I can, however, neither justify nor explain myself by admitting that I knew in advance that submission at the moment was my wiser course; all the cures for all the Miss R.'s in the world would not, I think, have at that moment moderated my rage. "My dear young lady," I said then, in a voice full as measured as her own, "I assure you that this kind of childish insolence will gain you nothing save further misery; you will not speak again in my presence unless it be an apology; consider that it is only through my misguided sufferance that you continue to exist at all. This temporary power, this brief and insecure dominance, will not endure; take thought now of the months of preparation which brought you into being, kept you safe when you could not defend yourself, preserved you without harm until this moment; do you think that you may with impunity bring your pert words to bear against a power like that? If I relinquish you — and I am going to; I tell you now, Miss Bess, you have made your last charge against me — how long do you think you will survive, alone, without a guide or a friend or an ally? You are at best, young lady, only a slight, only a poor and partial creature, and for all your fine words, you will not stay long; I am leaving you in the entire conviction that without my aid you will only for a while be suffered to trouble your friends with your arrogance; I promise you, here and now, that you as a person will, with the knowledge of you I have, cease, absolutely and finally and without possibility of petition, cease, I tell you, unalterably cease to exist!"

Surely — I can see it now — a very substantial and well-rounded diatribe for a doctor dedicated to quiet and stealth; I confess to a little adjusting at this distance — surely no one, possessed of such an opportunity for such a fine speech, could resist altering a period here and there — but in truth I was very angry, angrier than I believe I have ever been before, and rendered reckless besides. I stormed out of the house — had I ever left it in peace? — and the black figure in the hall caught my coat sleeve as I passed.

I thought to myself as I came into the cool evening air that I would be repentant soon enough, and I believe the first coherent thought I knew reached me as I came off the Jones walk onto the street; I heard clearly the name of my wicked enchanter, to enrich whom I had slain so many dragons — it was Victor Wright. Thus comforted, I could spare a pang for poor Bess, blundering through another girl's life inadequately equipped; had I the temper, I thought, I might have stayed by her, coaxing her back into Betsy, and been impervious to her clawed words; she, on her side, had no such recourse, and could only, by calling my name, bring an even more unsympathetic, if less brandied, Doctor Wright.

Understand, then, reader — if you have stayed with me, cheek unreddened, all this while — I, too, repudiate all of this; it was a shameful scene for a quiet man whose pipe had been forcibly taken from him; I am now, thinking of it, still embarrassed at the picture of myself standing, eyes blazing and posture threatening, against these two women, one of whom I loathed and the other of whom I often dominated; I cannot believe that I so stood, and declared myself, and laid myself low; I hope — I appeal it to you — that you cannot so see me, driven by anger into outrage and repudiation.

We are all measured, good or evil, by the wrong we do to others; I had made a monster and turned it loose upon the world and — since recognition is, after all, the cruelest pain — had seen it clearly and with understanding; Elizabeth R. was gone; I had corrupted her beyond redemption and in the cool eyes which now belonged entirely to Bess I read my own vanity and my own arrogance. I reveal myself, then, at last: I am a villain, for I created wantonly, and a blackguard, for I destroyed without compassion; I have no excuse.

5. AUNT MORGEN

BREAKFAST, NEVER AT all an auspicious meal for Morgen Jones, was never less ingratiating than the morning after her talk with Doctor Wright, only half-remembered in this cold spring sunlight, but disagreeably vivid in many aspects; Morgen recalled, for instance, that the doctor had left in a rage, nearly toppling the Nigerian ancestor figure in the hall, that someone had been making a good deal of noise, and that her niece had been insolent again. Her intended breakfast this morning had included warm sweet buns and butter, somehow reminiscent in spiced richness of the impractical meals she might have if she were — say — living alone on a tropical island, tasting fruit hot from the sun, or lying upon cushions in a tented harem, accepting lazily of comfits from a sandaled eunuch; the doctor had been poor company last night, she thought, and set aside her cinnamon buns, unwarmed. In her most optimistic recollections she could not believe that the interview had gone well; even before the doctor had become so unaccountably angry there had been a flavor of disagreeable insistence about the evening. Morgen had spoken at length about her sister Elizabeth, when, actually, Elizabeth was easily the least interesting subject to be taken up; at the thought of the untraveled countries of their conversation Morgen sighed, and looked at the clock to see if she might safely have three more aspirin. The sight of her niece entering the kitchen was not calculated to brighten Morgen's breakfast, and she watched with a cold and resentful eye as her niece poured a cup of coffee at the stove and then sat down at the table. She avoided her aunt's eye and did not speak, and at last Morgen — knowing that surely, as the day bore on, she would get to further aspirin and an eventual return of her good humor — said darkly into her coffee, “Thought of putting out four cups. One,” she explained with care, “for each of you.”

Her niece looked at her speculatively. “He likes to hear himself talk,” she said. “I didn’t think *you’d* get taken in by it, though.”

“Then do me a favor,” Morgen begged. “I promise to keep it a secret, but I’ve got too bad a headache for arithmetic this morning. Just tell me how many of you there really are.”

“Me. Your niece Elizabeth.”

“Well, now, *there’s* something *doesn’t* take me in.” Morgen said, setting down her cup to nod, and then regret it. “Something I *know,*” she went on, holding her head still, “is, you’re not *Elizabeth,* anyway.”

“Don’t be silly, Aunt Morgen. Just because I used to—”

“You used to be well-behaved and a lady; no matter what other damn fool things you did, you knew how to behave. And now, you sweet baby, you act like your mother.”

“I refuse to discuss my mother with you. I am still too deep in grief—”

“Oh, shut up,” said Morgen. “I can get awful sick of hearing you blabber about your grief. Anyway, the doc says you’re only a splinter named Bess.”

“Well,” said Bess, stung, “he called *you* Madam and you’re—”

“Common civility is as much beyond your infantile comprehension,” Morgen said grandly, “as... as... oh, hell. Anyway,” she went on, amused, “maybe I *am* a Madam, for all you know. I’ve got a house full of nice girls.” And she laughed in spite of her headache.

“I don’t know how you can *talk* like this,” Bess said viciously, “with your sister just dead, in a house of mourning, and me an orphan.”

“Look,” Morgen said, “I’m going to go right on talking however I please, and it’s *my* house and there’s no mourning in it, for your mother or anyone else, and I would like to take this unparalleled opportunity of letting you know that, orphan or not, I have been for the past six years feeding you and dressing you and doing everything but wiping your nose and all of a sudden you turn around and try to tell me I don’t know what year it is and you’re an orphan. Orphan!”

“I tell you this,” said her niece, pointing a butter knife at her aunt, “it may be a good story about feeding and dressing me and spending my money for me, but pretty soon you and a lawyer are going to have a little talk about what’s been happening to that money since my father died. Because I’m going to get a lawyer to make you give it all back.”

Morgen snorted. “You’re going to get a spanking, better,” she said. “And stop fidgeting with the silverware, because it’s mine.”

“Nothing is yours,” said Bess, “and if I don’t see an accounting of my —”

“You know,” said Morgen, leaning back with some pleasure, “if you don’t watch yourself with all that wild talk one of these days Auntie is going to get *really* mad and let you have it. And if you don’t stop scrabbling that butter knife around right now my headache is liable to get worse and then I will take that thing out of your hand and slice off your fingers one by one.”

She giggled. “You scare her with that kind of talk,” she said. “She hates people talking about hurting her.”

“Hello,” said Morgen agreeably. “You’re supposed to be another one, aren’t you?”

“Betsy,” she said. “I’m the one you like best.”

“Well, keep mighty quiet, then. Auntie feels like hell.”

“Too bad,” Betsy said. “I don’t *ever* feel bad; I don’t even know what it’s like to feel bad.”

“Dandy,” said Morgan heartily. “I wish it was you instead of me.”

“Poor Morgen.”

“That damned doctor,” Morgen said. “Why couldn’t he stay where he belongs?”

There was a silence, and then Betsy said fearfully, “You mean Doctor *Wrong?* Was he *here?*”

“Last night. We had a long heart-to-heart-to-heart-to-heart little talk. Oh, lord,” said Morgen, putting her hand over her eyes.

Betsy was quiet for so long this time that Morgen uncovered her eyes to see if Betsy was still there. “What’s the matter, kiddo?” Morgen asked. “You don’t like him either?”

“He doesn’t want anyone to enjoy themselves,” Betsy said. She leaned forward across the table and said persuasively, “Look, Morgen, first thing you know he’ll be lecturing and ranting at *you,* too. Don’t you talk to him any more.”

“Couldn’t if I wanted to,” Morgen said, remembering. “He’s not coming back any more. He doesn’t like any of us much.”

“Who cares?” said Betsy. “Good riddance to bad rubbish.”

“I wish he’d gone before he came,” Morgen said. “I *do* feel sad.” She closed her eyes and rested her head against the back of her chair.

“*I* know,” Betsy said brightly, “I’ll send you someone feels worse than you do.” Her eyes fell, and lifted timidly and the smile died on her face, and she looked up apprehensively at her aunt. “Hello,” she said. “Aunt Morgen.”

Aunt Morgen opened her eyes, and closed them again. “No,” she said. “Go away, child. Auntie loves you but she’s already got troubles enough. Just go away.”

“I’m sorry,” Elizabeth said falteringly.

"God almighty holy God almighty go away," Morgen said. "You make a big horrible muddy dirty black cloud come down over the whole goddam world when you give me that long face; go away go away go away go away go—"

"All *right,*" said Betsy, coming back laughing. "Now don't you like your nice Betsy?"

"You just stay around for a while," Morgan said earnestly, "and don't leave me with that clam again."

"Be nice or I'll send Beth," Betsy said. "She's the one who calls you 'Auntie darling' and says you're all she has in the world and do you still love her?"

Morgen groaned.

"Tell you about that doctor," Betsy said conversationally, "what *he* wanted to do was set Bess up as me, and let her go on pretending to *be* me all the time, so's they could share up all that money."

"I'm going to give that money to a home for stray cats," said Morgen. "So help me."

"Well, *I* don't want it," Betsy said.

"*That* one," said Morgen, as one to whom a vast injury has been done, "that puny white-faced slimy bitch, she doesn't think Auntie ought to take a glass of brandy after meals. Account for every penny!" She glared at her niece. "Me!" she said.

"*I* wouldn't do that," Betsy said. "I don't want the money at all."

"Look," Morgen said with great reasonableness, "I'm a simple character. All I want is to be comfortable, and sleep and eat and drink and talk the way I always have, the way I *like* to eat and drink and sleep and talk. For a long time I got along fine. I had this niece, and she wasn't much good to anyone, but I liked her fine, and I thought she liked me, and we used to talk to each other and she listened to me when I got sounding off and maybe I wasn't always careful to be so delicate with her, but I always thought things were going along all right. I just thought that if I liked her and she liked me and we got along together it didn't matter if maybe some people thought she was lacking a little, so long as I kept an eye out for signs that she was going like her mother. Because one thing I *did* know," said Morgen with a sigh, "was that *there* she needed watching. But I wasn't bright enough to see how things were going till it was too late, so now I've got *you.* I'm not complaining, and I brought it on myself, and anyway you're a little brighter than she — you — used to be, but I spent a long time with her. The way I see it, no matter what the doc says or you say or old moneybags says, you're all of you still my niece, and I'm responsible for you. But I'm not used to being teased and defied and coaxed and whined at, and I like people to keep their voices down when I have a headache, and I don't like having people's problems dumped in my lap, and one thing I've got to say for the old Elizabeth I had for so many years — she never had any problems *I* knew about, except how to sit down in a chair without falling off the seat."

"Well," said Betsy, with something of embarrassment, "of course, a lot of that was me. I guess she would have gotten along a little bit better if it hadn't been for me."

"Don't tell *me* about it," Morgen said. "You kids can fight your own battles. I don't care if there are twenty of you, what you all boil down to is still my niece Elizabeth, and you can play all the games you want with yourself, so long as you lay off me."

"Perhaps," she said sweetly, "if I were dead?"

Aunt Morgen raised her eyes briefly, and then dropped them again. "If you were dead," she said, "I could maybe get a little quiet to drink my coffee. In case you care."

"I don't," she said. "And don't *you* think for a moment that I was joking about that lawyer. Because if I don't get an accounting—"

"Why was I ever born?" Morgen asked rhetorically, and got up and left the table. "I am going back to bed," she said over her shoulder. "Soak your head in the coffee pot."

Left alone, Bess poured herself out a fresh cup of coffee, and sat down again at the table. After a minute she got up again to search for a pad of paper and a pencil in a corner of the kitchen counter, and then sat down again and tried to figure, starting with the estimated amount of her father's fortune and, trying to remember all she could about interest and capital, and puzzling over what it might cost Morgen to run this house, and feed and clothe both of them, and how much Morgen had probably used of her own money, and how much from her niece's inheritance. The terms of her inheritance were not at all clear to Bess, and she had been unsuccessful in any attempt to learn more from her aunt; she knew only that what sounded like a vast sum of money was waiting for her, and that Aunt Morgen had probably helped herself freely by pretending to buy clothes and food for her niece; Bess had been vainly hoping to make Aunt Morgen give her a lot of money in advance, but Aunt Morgen was quite unreasonably stubborn about allowing her niece access to liquid funds since they had come back together from New York, and the best Bess had been able to manage was the ability to buy whatever she pleased from the stores in town on her aunt's accounts. Lately, however, since various small silly things had been happening — like the time Aunt Morgen had walked in and found Bess taking money from Morgen's pocketbook, although Bess had surely no intention of stealing, and had, in fact, no actual consciousness of being anywhere near Morgen's room — anyway, lately, Morgen had closed all the accounts and hidden her household cash, and now Bess couldn't buy the smallest thing unless she got permission first, and couldn't even have carfare unless she begged it from Morgen. It was no way to treat a nineteen-year-old girl who was going to have all the money she wanted someday. Bess sat back and looked at her page scribbled with figures. They *looked* like money, all with dollar signs in front, and decimal points; a good lawyer would know what to make of them. Suddenly, with curiosity, Bess switched the pencil to her right hand and held it over the pad.

"Come on, silly," she whispered. "A penny for your thoughts."

The pencil stayed unmoving in her relaxed hand, and Bess, looking at it, fell to wondering about rings, when she had her money. She did not care for diamonds, she thought, and most rings she had seen in the jewelry stores had such small stones it was hard to see them, much less know whether they were real or not; something like a ruby was more to her taste, but a big one. She fell back then before Betsy, who thoughtfully took up the pencil and drew heavy black lines through all of Bess' figures, tasted her coffee, and then dosed it richly with sugar and cream. For a few minutes Betsy amused herself with the pencil and paper, drawing circle heads with eyes and noses and mouths, which she labeled "Doctor Wrong" and "Aunt Morgen" and "Bess." After a few minutes Betsy wearied of the pencil and paper, yawned, and disappeared before Elizabeth, who touched the back of her neck daintily, looked with nausea on the coffee, and got up to take the cup and saucer to the sink, where she rinsed it out thoroughly, and then moved back to the table to gather up the coffeepot and Aunt Morgen's breakfast dishes. When she had washed and dried the dishes, and while she was on her way to the refrigerator for a glass of milk, Bess reestablished herself and took herself into the hall where she listened carefully for a minute to hear if Aunt Morgen was stirring, then put on her coat and hat and left the house softly.

* * *

When Morgen came downstairs again, early in the afternoon, it was with the deep sense of well-being which comes with the general over-all effect of many aspirin judiciously administered, and the consequent rosy and painless impression of walking in a cloud; her headache was gone, as was her humiliating consciousness of the night before, and so, as a matter of fact, was her ordinary conviction that her feet were touching the floor as she walked. Her hand, as she opened the refrigerator door, was independent and intelligent, and the smile upon her face was beatific. I shall have a little something to eat, Morgen was thinking; soft-boiled eggs? I am an invalid, barely convalescent, and something buttery and soft...

The refrigerator was full of mud. Morgen stood for a minute staring at it, not at all comprehending the ugly slimy mess where she had expected to find white and shining shelves, with eggs and butter and cheeses neatly arranged; the inside of the door was smeared and the ice trays were oozing, and somewhere within, where the cold meats were kept, a worm stirred, almost frozen and yet still moving, turning blindly toward the light. Morgen stepped back, her stomach turning, and then without closing the door fled. She could not dress, could not wash; when she looked at her hands she thought there were worms on her fingers, working their way in and out and between and over, wet and cold, and she put her hands under her pillow and closed her eyes and held her mouth tight shut to keep the worms out, and screamed silently in her bed. I am all alone and I am an old woman and I will die without love, she thought, with her face hidden in the pillow, and at last slept again.

When she awakened she was well, without the intercession of aspirin, and she rose firmly, straightened her clothes and her hair, looked at her hands carefully, and told herself she was an old fool, and ten times an old fool. She went downstairs into her spotless kitchen, where the refrigerator stood clean and immaculate, regarding her askance, and the breakfast dishes were neatly back on the shelves, and the coffeepot scrubbed and put away. After a minute Morgen (I am an old fool, she thought) touched the handle of the refrigerator and pressed it and swung open the door, and inside the white eggs and clean yellow butter box shone on her, although she knew without question that she did not care for food. A drink, she thought, not daring to put her hand or even a finger to the ice trays; a glass of brandy to insure that I am well now, and she took down the brandy bottle from the shelf and poured steadily into a glass. Your health, she thought, raising her glass to herself.

Morgen Jones, of the Owenstown Joneses, was not by any means to be described as a fool. Her life was circumspect, rigid, and extremely private, because she found very little in the world outside to tempt her into mingling with its people. A woman well-educated when a good education was still thought of among her mother's friends as somehow the best possible occupation for an unmarried girl — better, surely than going out as a governess, or taking up the painting of china — she had been bred to reason and comprehend and read whatever she pleased, and in the very particular workings of her mind now, there was much humor, some tolerance, a great deal of unexpressed affection, and no space whatever for the appreciation of the remarkable. Morgen had been, for a very long time, the most remarkable object in her own landscape, and anything stranger than herself was, to her mind, either an obvious sham, or non-existent.

She was, therefore, unprepared to accept in her niece any more startling manifestation than an entirely ladylike "nervous breakdown," and in all that she had seen of Elizabeth, and in all that she had been told by Doctor Wright, she found nothing to worry her. She had watched, and nodded, and her mind had been actively dismembering, analyzing, separating, and scrutinizing, grinding up all information into a palatable mixture of nervous illness in her niece and fanciful phraseology in the doctor; she was confident, finally, of her stern ability to bring a sensible matter-of-fact eye to bear upon the situation, and in short order reduce the niece and the doctor to separate embarrassed creatures, wholly well, and slinking away to bury their romances realistically in everyday life. If Morgen's practical eye could be said to perceive a cure where she did not acknowledge a disease, it might be phrased as "Don't appear to notice," or "They're only doing it to get attention," or even — in extreme cases— "Humor them."

She had not materially altered herself in more years than she chose to remember. Her manner of dress, of speech, of doing her hair, of spending her time, had not changed since it first became apparent to a far younger Morgen that in all her life to come no one was, in all probability, going to care in the slightest how she looked, or what she did, and the minor wrench of leaving humanity behind was more than compensated for by her complacent freedom from a thousand small irritations. At first she had found it necessary to remind herself often of the clamors and demands other people made upon one another, the attentions expected, the answers awaited, the gifts and visits and good wishes to be returned, the affections to be reciprocated, but with the securing of her niece she found at last that there was nothing other people had which she needed to regard, any more, with a longing eye. Elizabeth immediately assumed the position of most importance in the little group of mortal folk with whom Morgen still held converse of one kind or another, and it was assumed by all of them that Elizabeth felt as much deep affection for her aunt as Morgen felt for her niece.

Although Morgen had not changed in so many years that she had fallen to regarding the world outside her windows as in a state of constant fevered activity, she was fond of her own whims — changes in the decorations of the house, for instance, which, although in a world of styles and ages, never strayed from the basic pattern of the architecture: one of extreme and loving ugliness — and did not take kindly to having them disputed. One of Morgen's notions had set up the Nigerian ancestor figure in her front hall, and she disliked having her niece's doctor jostle it when he left in anger. She was deeply pleased with the sound of her own voice, and did not care to be interrupted; she had been prepared to frown upon Doctor Wright because she felt that in some obscure fashion he was responsible for the change in her life which came with the change in her niece. She discovered herself, in all honesty, to be further annoyed with Doctor Wright because he seemed to regard her without proper attention to her uniqueness — surely ungallant in a man so prepared to find realms in her niece — and had, finally, showed himself as almost entirely devoid of meekness and sweetness of temper, qualities which Morgen admired to excess in people with whom she came into intimate contact.

When she learned that Doctor Wright and her niece were conspiring between themselves over the romantic idea that Morgen had a niece Elizabeth, a niece Beth, a niece Betsy, and a niece Bess, she was first of all startled, and then enchanted with the novelty of a chameleon personality, reflecting that this was a highly-colored version of an idea she had sometimes used to deck herself. She thought with humorous self-deprecation of the times she had seen in herself a Jekyll-and-brandy personality, of the wise Morgen at midday who at evening turned into a cynical Morgen and at morning became a snarler over breakfast, and when she had identified this in herself, she was prepared to countenance it in Elizabeth. When she found herself angry at Elizabeth, she thought, she need only remind herself of the morning Morgen to speak more gently, and when

Elizabeth whined or spoke rudely or smirked, it must be recalled that the girl had spent many years with the many Morgens and so, perhaps, deserved a turn of her own. Then, having reasoned to this point, pleased with her own perception and more pleased than not with her niece's unexpected variety of imagination, Morgen came downstairs with the drag end of a bad hangover and found her refrigerator full of mud.

Swift-change artists she could countenance, mad doctors and fiendish scientists she might accept, burbling nieces with notions of stolen inheritances she could regard with composure, but she could not and would not endure any tampering with her refrigerator, which was where she kept the greater part of her food. Moreover, her mind was where she lived the greater part of her life, and the cleaning of the refrigerator before she came back a second time was a deliberate attempt to clog up the workings of her mind. Although she would sooner have given up thinking than eating, she resented being pushed into depriving herself of either; she had no difficulty whatsoever in reassuring herself that she was sane, hangover-Morgen or not, and she was thus the victim of a wicked trick, performed in a cruel and vicious manner which would automatically set a distinction between the reasonable, regular alterings of a sensible person — Morgen — and the unreasonable, erratic alterings of a non-sensible person — Elizabeth.

Morgen's first sensible thought — to slap Elizabeth's head right off her shoulders — was quickly abandoned in favor of saying nothing and waiting; Morgen was a splendid person at getting even with people, and if she accused her niece of filling the refrigerator with mud and Elizabeth denied it, revenge would be far less satisfactory, and would probably have to be taken in a more subtle form than if the subject were never mentioned or dealt with until an opportunity turned up. Musing thus, drinking her brandy, Morgen sat at ease in her own living room, among her own possessions, which she felt for the first time she was called upon, vitally, to defend.

When a key turned in the door and she heard her niece's step in the hall, Morgen was quiet for a minute, listening; her niece closed the door gently, and set her pocketbook down on the hall table. Then, from the sounds, she opened the door of the hall closet to hang up her coat and hat; such neatness and order established that either Elizabeth, who was neat from bewilderment, or Bess, who was neat because of a profound respect for her own property, had come in; the quietness and ease with which the actions were performed argued with certainty that it was not Elizabeth.

"Bess?" said Morgen, raising her voice.

"Yes?"

"Will you come in here for a minute, please?"

Bess came to the living room doorway, narrowing her eyes to see in the darkened room. "What's the matter with *you?*" she asked, without rudeness, but without solicitude.

"A slight malaise," said Morgen comfortably, "the weakness of the living and the sight of death, the abandonment of worldly care in the face of holiness; I decided that you were going to make dinner tonight."

"Go to a restaurant," said her niece. "I've already had dinner."

"Who with?"

"None of your business."

"Someone must have paid," said Morgen. She sat up. "Have you been into my pocketbook again?"

"Certainly not," said Bess, and then, after a minute, added reluctantly, "I found an old penny bank, if you must know."

Morgen began to laugh, and swung around to turn on the lamp on the table next to her. "You poor baby," she said. "You can have dinner anywhere you like. Tell me next time and I'll give you a couple of dollars."

"You don't know how I'm going to get even with you someday," Bess said. She spoke slowly, and she looked at her aunt with hatred. "You don't know all the things I've been thinking of to do to you. When I have all my money, and I don't have to live with you anymore, I'm going to spend half my time doing nasty things to you."

"All right." Morgen was unconcerned. "Seems to *me,* though, my pretty wealthy darling, that you've started out fairly well, on that refrigerator."

"What refrigerator?" said Bess innocently.

"Know what I ought to do with you?" Morgen said, lying back to look up at her, "I ought to take you and rub your nose in it, and maybe I will. Or maybe I'll just turn you over my knee and spank the hell out of you."

"You wouldn't dare," said Bess, backing away.

"Indeed I would," said Morgen, genuinely surprised; she had in all her life found few things she did not dare to do, although there had been a number of things, which, fortunately, had not occurred to her. "I'll do just as I please, as a matter of fact," said Morgen, "with you or anyone else."

"I don't care what you do to anyone else," Bess said. "But when I get a lawyer—"

Aunt Morgen laughed again, with such honest and uncontrollable hilarity that tears came into her eyes and she had to sip at her brandy to keep from choking. "You'll have a sweet time with a lawyer," she said helplessly, "when you can't even find out what year it is. *My* problem, sir," she went on in a mincing voice parodying Bess, "is that I'm going to come into all this money when I'm twenty-five years old, and I'm going to *be* twenty-five in a few months, but I *think* I'm still *nineteen,* and *no* one can tell me any *different...* Oh, lord." And Aunt Morgen sighed weakly, while Bess sat tense and angry and looked at her. "Anyway," Morgen said at last, more firmly, "you let me know when you get your lawyer, kiddo, and I'll pay his bill for you."

"I wish my mother was alive to see how you treat me," Bess said, and her aunt looked up angrily.

"Maybe you've forgotten how your *mother* treated you," she said. "When you talk like that you make me mad enough to—"

She sighed; Bess had turned abruptly into Elizabeth, who was sitting watching her aunt with numb fear.

"Who *you* staring at?" Morgen demanded, annoyed at herself for having, as always, said more than she intended to.

"Nothing. I mean, I guess I don't feel very well."

"Well, go to bed, for God's sake," Morgen said, turning impatiently away.

"May I make myself something to eat?"

"I thought you had dinner."

Elizabeth shook her head miserably. "If you'll let me, I'll have a sandwich or something."

"Go ahead," said Morgen. "Make me something, too."

Elizabeth got up with eagerness. "I'll make you something nice," she said. "I think I'd feel better if I ate something."

Wearily Morgen took up the magazine she had been reading last night when the doctor came. "Don't knock yourself out," she said, and then, with some remorse, "If you need any help, yell."

"I'll be all right." Elizabeth went busily away, and Morgen hesitated, and then refused herself more brandy. For a few minutes she half-listened, wondering if Elizabeth would be able to manage, and then she shrugged and told herself that Elizabeth had been capable of feeding herself for a long time now, and she gave only a fragment of her attention to the faint sounds from the kitchen, alert for a fall or a scream. After a while, when she heard returning footsteps, she set her magazine aside with pleasure, and turned to the doorway to watch her niece entering with a tray. “What you got?” Morgen inquired.

Betsy giggled, tilting the tray dangerously. “That *Elizabeth,*” she said. “You could starve to death before she got around the kitchen; I finally had to come and do it myself. Cheese sandwiches and milk.”

“Mustard?” said Morgen.

“She did most of it, though, really,” Betsy said. “It isn’t fair to say she didn’t. I poured the milk, anyway.”

She set the tray down on the coffee table which Morgen cleared for her, and drew up a chair on the other side. “You know,” Morgen said, taking a napkin, “this is the first food I’ve had since... oh, Jesus.” She sat, staring for a minute, and then began frantically brushing the bite of sandwich from her mouth, choking and making frightful sounds of disgust.

“What is it?” Betsy half-rose, backing away. “Robin?”

Morgen threw the sandwich across the room and emptied her mouth into the paper napkin. “Bitch,” she said, “bitch, nasty bitch.”

Betsy looked at her own sandwich. “What?” she said.

“Mud,” said Morgen, “sandwich full of mud.” She twisted her face and looked away. “I’m sick,” she said.

“Mine’s all right,” Betsy said. “Eat it.” She held her sandwich out but Morgen pushed her hand away. “I’m sick,” she said, “go away.”

“What’s wrong, Morgen dear? Has something upset you?”

“Get out of here,” Morgen said wildly, “get out of here before I throw something at you, you dirty filthy bitch.”

“Really,” said Bess, “I should think you’d make an effort to behave yourself; throwing food around and making horrible noises; it sounds perfectly—”

“Will you get out of here?” Morgen demanded, rising and lifting her hand, “you lying monster—”

Elizabeth began to cry. “You’re always picking on me,” she said. “I didn’t do anything.”

Morgen caught her breath and was silent; perhaps she was saying “morning-Morgen, morning-Morgen” over and over to herself, because after a few minutes she spoke gently. “Sorry,” she said. “I was upset. I don’t mean to frighten you, kiddo. Come on, I’m going to see you safely in bed before I do another thing.” She rose, and Elizabeth followed her almost cheerfully. “I’ll be glad to go to bed,” Elizabeth said, coming after her aunt to the stairs, “I’m tired and I haven’t been sleeping well again. Maybe I could take a hot bath.”

“Good idea.” Morgen was remorseful, and brought a quality of unfamiliar enthusiasm to the prospect of a hot bath. “Just what you need to make you sleep, a hot bath and I’ll give you a little blue pill.”

“All right.” Elizabeth went toward the door of her room, and Morgen, saying “I’ll start your water,” went into the bathroom. She started the water in the tub and then, because she was truly sorry to have made Elizabeth cry, she got a jar of pine bath salts from her own dressing table; it had not yet been opened and Morgen had been promising it to herself as a particular luxury tonight, bath salts being a fanciness for which she ordinarily did not have time; now, however, it was no more than what was due to Elizabeth, and she poured a generous helping of pine bath salts into the tub. When Elizabeth came into the bathroom the air was already warm and rich with an odor only faintly reminiscent of outdoors and trees and growing things; Elizabeth bent over the tub to turn the water off and smiled gratefully.

“Wonderful,” she said. “Just what I needed.” She hesitated, standing beside the tub in her robe and slippers, and from the timid smile she turned on her aunt it seemed that she was almost going to speak with tenderness; at last, with an effort, she said, “Won’t you... Aunt Morgen, won’t you stay in here and talk to me while I bathe?”

Morgen, perceiving without effort Elizabeth’s attempt at affection, and moved by it, said, touching her niece on the shoulder, “Sure, kiddo. I used to give you a bath all the time, you know.”

She sat uncomfortably on the bathroom stool and caught Elizabeth’s robe from the floor and held it. “Warm enough?” she asked as Elizabeth got into the tub, and Elizabeth nodded and said “Fine, thanks.”

“You feeling any better?”

“I think so, Morgen,” and she stopped, soap in hand. “Did the doctor tell you about... about the others?” she asked.

“How do you know the doctor was here?” Morgen said.

Elizabeth stared. “I guess I heard you say so.”

“He made me mad. But yes, he told me.”

“Did he say I was going to be... well?”

“Depends on what you mean by well,” Morgen said cautiously.

“Like I was before.”

“Well,” said Morgen, “you weren’t so well then.” She was wondering, now, what to say; she had a clear idea that in a spot like this the most reasonable, the most sensible, the most reassuring statements were invariably the most dangerous, and she very much did not want to frighten Elizabeth again; it came to her with an acute, almost physical pain, that the reason Elizabeth spoke so much more fluently and freely tonight might be that it was the first time in many months she had found tenderness in her aunt. “I want you *really* well,” she said awkwardly, and then found

Elizabeth looking at her with eyes full of tears. “What’d I say *now?*” Morgen demanded.

“It’s because...” Elizabeth faltered, and patted the water with her hand. “He said, the doctor, that when I was cured it would be that all of us, Betsy and Beth and all, were all back together. He said I was one of them. Not myself, just one more of them. He said he was going to put us all back together into one person.”

“So?” Should Elizabeth be speaking of this, concerning herself over it? Even haltingly, clumsily as she spoke, should she be allowed to continue? “Why not wait and see what happens?” Morgen suggested, inspired.

“Look.” Elizabeth turned and looked at her. “I’m just one of them, one *part.* I think and I feel and I talk and I walk and I look at things and I hear things and I eat and I take baths—”

“All right,” Morgen said. “Conceded that you do it all, what’s wrong with it? I do too.”

“But I do it all with *my* mind.” Elizabeth spoke very slowly, feeling her way. “What he’s going to have when he’s through is a new Elizabeth Richmond, with *her* mind. *She* will think and eat and hear and walk and take baths. Not me. I’ll maybe be a part of her, but *I* won’t know it — *she* will.”

“I don’t get it,” said Morgen.

“Well,” said Elizabeth, “when *she* does all the thinking and knowing, won’t *I* be... dead?”

“Oh, now, look,” said Morgen, and then sat helplessly, facing the definition of annihilation. Finally she shook herself, and said with great briskness, “Now, look, kiddo, *I* don’t know anything about these things, and neither do *you.* You just figure that everything’s going to turn out for the best, that’s all.”

"I guess so." Laboriously, Elizabeth rose and stepped out of the tub and took the towel Morgen handed her. She turned the handle which let the water out of the tub, and began to dry herself. When she finally had her robe and slippers on again she spoke. "Anyway," she said, "when you've got her you won't have someone sick all the time."

"I won't think about it, and neither will you," Morgen said, but she was speaking to Bess.

"What are you doing in here?" Bess demanded. "Watching me every minute?"

"I came in," Morgen said, "to draw your bath for you."

"Well, do it," Bess said. "I don't mind."

"Look," Morgen said, "what makes you think I wouldn't drown you?"

"You couldn't get the money *that* way," Bess said. She turned around and bent down to start the water in the tub, and said, "Mind if I use your bath salts?"

"Not at all," Morgen said. "Help yourself." She watched, speechless, while Bess put bath salts in the tub, and got in herself, handing Morgen her robe to hold. Bess scrubbed herself diligently and thoroughly, chattering all the time. "This *is* nice of you, Morgen," she said. "There isn't really any reason why we can't be friends, you and me, you know, even if I *do* get the money. Maybe I sometimes say things I don't mean, but so do you, you know, and if I'm willing to make allowances for *you,* I guess you ought to do the same for me. Besides, I'm going to be wealthy, and the way I see it I'll have a position of great responsibility — the responsibility of wealth, you know — and I can't afford to hold grudges and hate people, even you. A person in my position has to keep the same distance from everyone — no enemies, and no friends, because of course if they pretend to be friends it's really only the money they're after. Because—"

"Indeed yes," said Morgen earnestly. "And no one in your position can *ever* be *too* careful."

"Of course not," Bess agreed. "Morgen, I've been thinking that I'd like to get you something, pay you back, sort of, for taking care of me all these years. A nice pair of gloves, maybe, or some handkerchiefs. What would you like?"

"Well," said Morgen thoughtfully, "I *have* been needing a new nail file. But whatever *you* say."

Bess rose and stepped out of the tub. She waited for a minute until Morgen reached over and found her a dry towel, and then she began to dry herself. "Something to remember me by," she said. "Because of course we won't be seeing much of each other when I get my money. I'll be too busy with charitable pursuits and shopping, and things."

Morgen rose, taking a deep breath. "I've decided that I *will* drown you, after all," she said. "Better than a new pair of gloves, even."

As she had expected, Bess fled when Morgen approached, and Beth, untying the cord of the bathrobe which Bess had just tied, said happily, "Did you come to see me have my bath? How *nice,* Aunt Morgen dear."

"Just came to start the water for you," Morgen said straight-faced. "I thought you'd sleep better for a hot bath."

"You darling." Morgen successfully dodged as Beth tried to kiss her, and leaned past Beth to turn on the hot water tap. "Do not," Morgen said, "forget your bath salts."

"These for me? Morgen, how *lovely.*"

"Not at all," Morgen said, going back to her stool. She watched in a kind of stupor as Beth filled the tub, got in, and deliberately soaped and scrubbed the same neck and feet and legs and arms and ears that Elizabeth and Bess had been scrubbing for the past forty minutes. “Bath feels good,” Beth said, flicking a bubble with her finger. “I’m glad I thought of it.”

“It’s very relaxing at bedtime, a hot bath,” Morgen said.

“It’s nice to have you sit here while I take my bath, the way you used to.”

“Oh,” said Morgen, “I’ve watched you take a lot of baths.”

“I don’t get much chance to talk to you anymore,” Beth said, turning her wide, innocent eyes to her aunt. “I wish I *did,* Aunt Morgen. I wish we were more intimate, because I *do* think just the world of you, and *I* wish we could be... well... *pals.*”

“Pals,” said Aunt Morgen.

“I could take *such* good care of you, if you’d only let me. We could have real fun together.”

“Yes,” said Aunt Morgen. “Well, we must try to see a lot more of each other from now on.”

Beth turned to her, eyes tearful among the soap bubbles. “You *don’t* really like me,” she said. “No one *ever* does. I don’t have a single friend in all this whole wide world, because no one loves me, not even my own *aunt*.”

“I gave you my bath salts,” Aunt Morgen pointed out.

Beth sniffled, and then wiped the soap off her face with the back of her hand and stood up in the tub. “Don’t want any bath,” she said. “I’m just too *miserable* to take a bath.”

“You weren’t very dirty anyway,” Aunt Morgen said heartlessly.

By the time the water had gone out of the tub and Beth was dressed in her robe again she had recovered her usual silly self, and she was just saying, “But Auntie, we’ve got to get you some *clothes,*” when she vanished and Betsy, clean and scrubbed, turned and bowed ironically to her aunt.

“Well,” said Betsy, “everyone wash behind their ears?”

Morgen began, at last, to laugh. “Betsy, my girl,” she said, “come on downstairs and have a spot of brandy with Auntie.”

“Can’t,” said Betsy. “Got to have my bath.”

“Heaven save me,” said Morgen, “I will go mad if I watch you scrub your feet again. Couldn’t you give up your bath just this one night?”

“No, oh, no,” said Betsy, “what would the rest of them think?”

“I thought,” Morgen said with curiosity, pausing on her way to the bathroom door, “I thought Bess always knew all that the rest of you were doing?”

Betsy shook her head, her look of ironic amusement fading before a kind of puzzlement. “She used to, most of the time,” Betsy said. “The last few days, though, she hasn’t been any better than the rest of us. That’s why she’s so scared, too,” and Betsy capered on the wet floor.

“Betsy,” Morgen said slowly, “what did you have to do with all that mud?”

“Mud?” said Betsy, “what mud?” She looked complacently down at her naked body. “No mud on *me,*” she said.

“Yeah,” said Morgen. “I’ll be downstairs, kiddo. Get nice and clean.”

As she went down the stairs toward the living room the bathroom door behind her opened and Betsy shouted, “Say, Morg — you mind if I use the rest of your bath salts? There’s only a little left.”

* * *

Morgen awakened the next morning out of sorts and worn with a weakness which she finally identified as hunger; for a minute she lay in bed, thinking that she had not eaten anything at all the day before, that someone had once told her that brandy contained all the necessary minerals and vitamins to sustain life for an indefinite length of time, that she might, had she been born somehow differently, been at this moment awakening into the boudoir of Madame de Pompadour, a jeweled page kneeling beside her bed proffering chocolate. She rose, fancying herself among turquoise satin hangings, and asked herself, whistling, whether milady would wear the ruby tiara or the pearl stomacher. Dressed at last, in the corduroy housecoat she always wore in the mornings, her hair combed and her feet in splendidly comfortable old sheepskin slippers, she went, still whistling, down the hall to the bathroom, amused at the thought that her niece might be still in the tub, and washed her face and hands and took up her toothbrush, which she held under the running water to wash the mud out of it. Then she dropped it, and moved back and held her hands, trembling, against the lock of the door and wanted to cry and heard herself whimpering, “I’m an old woman.”

“No more, no more, no more,” she said at last, and unlocked the door, leaving her toothbrush where it lay in the basin, and went stamping downstairs to the kitchen. She looked carefully into the coffeepot and rinsed it out thoroughly before starting the coffee, and during the time the coffee was cooking she stayed in the kitchen all the time, and did not touch anything without looking at it twice. When the coffee was done she poured herself a cupful, after washing the cup, and drew out a chair at the table and looked carefully at the seat of the chair and at the floor under the table before she sat down. Then, in a clean chair with a clean cup of coffee, she leaned her head down to let the hot clean fragrance come freshly to her, and tried to think.

First of all, it didn’t matter, not at all, whether it was Elizabeth or Bess or Beth or Betsy fouling her, dirtying everything she touched; it wasn’t important, because the whole pack of them were leaving. For the first time Morgen isolated and looked clearly at what she now knew she intended to do; she had, in the back of her mind, a confused and terrible picture of what she called an "institution," which had until this minute revolted her because of a medieval uneasiness about chains and barred windows and dark wormy food; now that the Richmond fortune had been brought into such prominence, it seemed an equivocal thing for an aunt to send her only niece off to be bound in chains in darkness, and continue to live alone with that niece's money. For the moment there was no mud anywhere in sight, however, and Aunt Morgen endeavored to see the question impartially. There are places, she thought, I've certainly heard of places like country clubs, where they live in luxury and get the best of care and food, and places like that cost plenty, too, so she'd be getting her share of the money after all. I'd probably have to cut down here considerably, as a matter of fact, to keep her in a place like that, and no one could say... We could both go, Morgen thought wryly; one more mouthful of mud and I'd be ready; maybe I could leave her here and go myself, and get the best of care and food. She laughed, thinking of what people would say then: of course, Morgen got the money and all, and there she is, off in that loony-bin, living on the fat of the land, and her poor crazy niece half-starving at home....

No, Morgen thought suddenly and firmly. She's infected me; I can't even think about what's best to do for her without beginning to wonder what people will say about the money; this is not intelligent of me. No one *needs* it, she thought, no one *cares,* only Bess, and then the minute she mentioned the money we all stopped being able to think about good things like eating and drinking and being well, and just started squabbling; I'll give her a big bag of silver dollars, Morgen thought; she can take it in her suitcase when she goes. I'll tell her she's got it all. No, *no,* Morgen thought, I will decide this without ever once thinking again about that money. Now. In order to take any steps at all in even locating the proper place — one near enough for visiting, where Morgen might, personally, inspect at regular intervals the quality of the food, the cleanliness of the floors, the servility of the attendants, one where the lawns were green and the tennis courts well rolled, where Bess could stroll and Betsy could romp; where, to put it most distinctly, Morgen might visit without feeling uncomfortably under restraint — in order to find such a place, it was distressingly necessary to apply to Doctor Wright; Harold Ryan would know, too, of course, but to Doctor Wright Morgen's decision would seem fair, without justification or explanation, might even seem humorously overdue. Harold Ryan would have to have too much talking done at him, and it was important, Morgen thought, to get moving at once on a thing like this; if 'twere done, she thought, surprising herself, 'twere well it were done quickly.

She laughed, tasting her coffee, and began aloud, declaiming " — that struts and frets his little hour upon the stage; it is a tale—"

"Good morning, Morgen," said Bess, from the kitchen doorway. "You praying or something?"

"Good morning," Morgen said, thinking, I know now that she is going soon; done quickly.

"Did you make coffee? Fine." Bess poured herself a cup of coffee and came to sit down at the table. "Before I forget," she said, looking delicately at her spread fingers, "I want you to pay for some things I ordered sent home. They'll probably be coming today."

"What?"

"Some clothes. A few things for my room. Nothing that really need concern *you.*"

"They don't concern me at all," Morgen said, "because I won't pay for them."

Bess smiled. "Morgen, *dear,*" she said, "*I* am paying for them. You just give the man the money."

"I won't *do* it," Morgen said flatly, and then rage caught her again and she slammed her hand down onto the table and opened her mouth to shout, and then was quiet at Bess' smile. "If I get sore," Morgen said, "you'll run away. And if I can't get sore, what *can* I do?"

"Try to behave like a lady, dear," said Bess. "Try to behave like *me.*"

"Tell you what I'll do," Morgen said, controlling herself and thinking: how soon she will be gone, "We'll compromise. Some of the things you ordered—" (the ones you can take with you, she was thinking) " — you can keep, and the others we'll send back. That way, each of us is giving in to the other, and we can both be satisfied."

Bess thought. "All right," she said at last, "but *I* do the deciding."

"We'll make a list of everything," Morgen said. She left the table and went to her desk in the living room to get a pencil and paper; when she came back Elizabeth was heating herself some milk at the stove and Morgen's coffee was suspiciously thick and dark; without tasting it Morgen made a mouth of disgust and set the cup in the sink. "How'd *you* get here?" she asked Elizabeth.

"Good morning, Aunt Morgen," Elizabeth said. "I had a wonderful sleep last night."

"Fine," Morgen said, "fine." She hesitated, not knowing how to say it, and then began carefully, "Elizabeth, I hope you'll try to understand when you know what I'm doing. If I didn't think that it was the only possible way —"

Elizabeth poured her hot milk into a cup and sat down at the table, and said, looking wistfully at her milk, “I wish just once they’d let me stay long enough to eat something *I* like.”

“Why not try?” Morgen asked with interest. “I mean — when they push at you, push back.”

“I guess so,” Elizabeth said vaguely; “I wish you wouldn’t keep *meddling,*” she said. “I’m perfectly all right.”

“I’m waiting for you to tell me what you ordered,” Morgen said. “We’ll have to send back anything too expensive, because we simply can’t afford it.”

“Don’t be silly,” Bess said. “I can afford anything I want.”

“Yeah,” Morgen said.

“Well, a little radio,” Bess said. “It’s coming from that big store. I had lunch there,” she said, “and there’s a fountain in the restaurant, and goldfish.”

“Arnold’s,” said Morgen, writing. “Radio. I thought you had a radio?”

“This was smaller than mine,” Bess said. “And I ordered a coat, dark green with a fur collar, leopard, and a little hat to match.”

“Green’s not a good color on you, anyway,” Morgen said.

“And some stockings and underwear and gloves... I don’t know. I went around picking out things and the girl was going to put them all in a package together and send them.”

“And I’ll keep them all in a package together and send them back,” Morgen said.

“And some costume jewelry. I even ordered a necklace for *you,* Morgen. Little shells.”

“Great,” Morgen said. “So I could hear the sound of the sea?”

“I beg your pardon?”

"Never mind. Is that everything?"

"Yes," said Bess, looking away.

Morgen put the pencil down and sat back, looking at the list. "Not too bad," she said. "You don't need the radio and you can't have the coat. I don't want the jewelry, and you have more underwear and stockings and gloves now than you can wear. We'll send it all back."

"If you expect any favors from me," Bess said, "you'd better be careful now."

"What favors?" Morgen laughed rudely.

"I was going to let you go on living here," Bess said. "Last night, when you promised to treat me better, I half-decided to give you an allowance."

"Generous of you," Morgen said. "That's more than I'd do for *you.*"

Bess took up Morgen's pencil and pointed it dangerously across the table. "Someday," she said, "you are going to come crying to me, and then —"

"All right," Morgen said agreeably. "When I come crying to you for a dark green coat with a leopard collar and a little hat to match, you may take great pleasure in denying it me. As," she said, "I am doing to you."

"Morgen," Bess said, "if you won't let me get what I want today, then tomorrow I'll go again and order the same things sent all over again, and if I can't get them from the same store I'll get them somewhere else, because I plan to have what is due me, and I'm just going to go on and on buying whatever I please with my money."

"So long as it keeps you happy," Morgen said, watching Bess' hand and the pencil and paper. While Bess was talking her hand had added, not neatly but clearly, "wristwatch," "cigarette case," "pocketbook" to the list of items Bess had bought, and Morgen began to laugh. Bess looked down and saw her hand writing, and scowled.

"Stop," she said in a whisper, and tried to unclench her fingers from the pencil; while Morgen, sitting back, watched without expression, Bess tried with her left hand to twist the fingers of her right hand away from the pencil, tried to lift her arm from the table, whispering, "Stop, stop, I won't *let* you."

"hahaha," Bess' right hand wrote, the letters scrawling across the page as Bess tried to drag her hand away.

"Morgen," Bess said in appeal.

"*I* won't help you," Morgen said, and grinned. "After you changed your mind about my allowance?"

Bess abandoned her struggle with her hand to look long and angrily at Morgen. "I suppose you think this is going to work out fine for you," she said, and her hand wrote freely; Morgen looked away from Bess' hand, sickened at seeing the thing released and capering off in pursuit of its own mad ends; "I can't make it stop," Bess said, looking at her hand.

Morgen rose and came around the table to lean over Bess' shoulder and read what Bess' hand was writing. "It's beastly," Bess said.

"It's loathsome," Morgen said. The hand had written: "poor cinderella bess poor cinderbess no pumpkin coat no ball"

"It never writes anything but nonsense," Bess said.

"cinderbess sitting in ashes and mud up to neck."

"Mud up to the neck," Morgen said. "That's funny." She smiled down at the back of Bess' head. "*I* say that," she said.

"cruel sisters," said the hand, and made a kind of final heavy line, as though a telling point had been made.

"Someone," said Bess, very carelessly, "keeps a suitcase all packed in my room. I don't know who it belongs to, but it looks like someone is planning to sneak away some night. Again," she finished.

"no morgen no morgen no morgen poor betsy ask bess mud."

"This is silly," Bess said, trying again to lift her hand.

Morgen laughed. "You girls keep telling on each other," she said, "first thing you know, no one's going to have any secrets left."

"poor lizzie," the hand wrote, "poor lizzie poor morgen poor betsy not paris never now"

"Are you Betsy?" Morgen asked, leaning forward.

"betsy over ocean betsy over sea"

"Betsy broke a teacup, and blamed it all on me," Bess said. She tried to lift her hand again, "I cant *stand* those things," she said.

"What things?" Morgen was puzzled.

"Nursery rhymes," Bess said. "She does it—" She stopped abruptly.

"hahaha," Bess' hand wrote.

"I remember your mother teasing you with that rhyme," Morgen said, looking from Bess to Bess' hand and back again. "When you were a baby."

"Kindly do not recall my grief," Bess said grandly.

"Rubbish," Morgen said, and then, "She's gone." The pencil lay idly in Bess' hand. "Well," Morgen said at last, "I've got to make a phone call. And I don't want you listening."

"I? Aunt *Morgen!*"

Morgen closed the kitchen door with a slam, leaving Beth in tears at the table, and went into the hall to the phone. When she took up the receiver it slipped and turned in her hands and she let it drop and sat for a minute, choking back nausea and whispering to herself. Then, valiantly, she found her handkerchief and used it to hold the phone, almost amused at herself for dialing the doctor's number without having to look it up. When his nurse answered, Morgen said, keeping her voice low, "Doctor Wright, please. This is Morgen Jones."

And, after a minute, the doctor's sharp voice said, "Good morning, Miss Jones. Doctor Wright here."

"I'm sorry to disturb you, doctor, but I badly need your help."

There was a silence, and then he said, "I am extremely sorry, Miss Jones, but I could not be of any possible assistance to you. Perhaps Doctor Ryan?"

"No," she said. "I have..." she thought, searching for a noncommittal phrase, aware with certainty of Bess pressing her head against the kitchen door to listen. "I have decided," Morgen said, "to follow your example." An idea came to her. "Birnam wood has come to Dunsinane," she said.

"I beg your pardon? Is this Miss Jones?"

"Don't be an idiot," she said. "I'm trying to tell you something."

"I assure you that if you are in this manner endeavoring to revive my interest in your niece—"

"Look," said Morgen dangerously, "I am most goddamn certainly in this manner endeavoring to whatever you call it. The fact that I can forget my own dignity long enough to listen to you chattering ought to convince you that you're just as much tangled up in this as any of us, and I want you over here *fast.*"

"You do not mean to be impolite, I am convinced," the doctor said coldly. "And if you stop to think for a minute you must certainly agree that my objections to seeing your niece again are legitimate; I can be of no conceivable help to either her or you."

"To *me,* you can," Morgen said. "As a matter of fact, now I think of it, I don't believe you *can* get things into a muddle like this and then quit on me. So I think if you don't get over here as fast as you can travel I'll call Harold Ryan and get you unfrocked."

"Disbarred from practice," said Doctor Wright with some amusement. "I can hardly come if you threaten me."

"I take it back," Morgen said. "It's almost impossible for me to talk clearly."

"There has been trouble?"

"Yes. I am—" She glanced back over her shoulder at the kitchen door " — very much disturbed."

"I can appreciate that," said the doctor. "I can be there within an hour."

"Right," said Morgen.

"I hope you realize," the doctor said, "what violence I am doing to my own pride in resuming the care of your niece, Miss Jones. Only my conscience—"

"If you're worried about violence," said Morgen evilly, "you'd better keep quiet to me about your conscience." And she hung up, pleased to think that she had had the last word, but that he would be coming anyway.

The kitchen door was shut tight, and Morgen turned her back on it and went into the living room, where she sat tiredly on the couch and wondered what was best to do. She had a fear of putting into motion, through Doctor Wright, legal forces overwhelming and uncombatable; it was one thing to take your niece, nervous and failing in health, to a highly recommended physician, but another thing entirely to turn her over to a faceless, mechanical operation of papers and committments and, perhaps, publicity; I'll tell everyone she's gone off to have an illegitimate child, Morgen told herself consolingly; it's better than admitting I had her locked up. She looked up, then, and said, "What do you want now? Or are you just following me?"

"There's a man here," Elizabeth said. "He has a package to be paid for."

"And she sent you to tell me, did she? Well." Morgen got up heavily and went into the front hall, where a delivery man stood with a package which might have held a radio or a green coat with a fur collar or even a cigarette case. “The order,” Morgen told him moderately, “has been cancelled. I’m sorry.”

“Sure.” He took up his package and put his hand on the door. “You don’t want it now?” he said, looking back over his shoulder.

“We don’t want it now,” Morgen said firmly.

“You’re the boss.” He opened the door and was turning to shut it behind him when Bess pushed Morgen aside and called out, “Wait — wait a minute!”

“Yeah?” said the delivery man, pausing.

“We *do* want it; bring it back.”

“Okay,” said the delivery man, turning.

“We *don’t* want it,” Morgen said. “Take it away.”

The delivery man hesitated, holding the package without affection. “Look,” he began reproachfully. He gave a little shove with the package, as though to toss it out through the door. “*I* don’t want the package,” he said to Bess, “*she* don’t want it,” and he gestured with his head at Morgen, “*you* say wait, wait, you *do* want it. All right. There’s thirty-seven dollars and eighty-five cents on this package. Tell me now, I either go out the door with the package or I leave the package here and I go out the door with thirty-seven dollars and eighty-five cents. Well?” He stopped, holding the package out ingratiatingly.

Morgen cocked her head at Bess. “Well?”

Bess stood undecided, her face flushed and angry. She was unused to easy communication, and she did not think quickly. She looked from the man to Morgen, both watching her with interest, and then turned abruptly into Beth, who was first aware of Morgen’s regard, and then perceived the delivery man and the package.

"Ooh," said Beth, "is it something for me? Morgen, did you get me a present?"

"No," Morgen said. "The man is going to take it away."

After a minute the delivery man shifted the package, sighed, and opened the door again, waiting for a minute on the threshold as though expecting to be called back again. "You never get *me* anything," Beth said. Two large tears started down her cheeks. "Everyone gets presents but me, and I guess no one likes me, because no one *ever* gives *me* presents."

The door closed gently. Through the glass of the door Morgen could see the delivery man going down the steps to his truck. He stopped once, and looked back at the house for a minute, and then shrugged and tossed the package into the truck.

"Someday I'll get even with you, Morgen."

"Oh, stop *talking* like that." Morgen stamped back into the living room and felt that Bess was following her without sound; Morgen turned, with a faint cold chill going up her back and said, over-heartily, "Come on, Bess, be reasonable; I *told* you the stuff was going back."

"You said I could keep half of it."

"You said you had given me the whole list."

"Who'd tell the truth to *you?*" Bess said scornfully. "You never heard of the truth in your life — you tell lies and you make up lies and you try to hurt people with lies, and you won't let anyone come around you unless they tell you ties. You're a bad bad bad—"

"Now look," Morgen said. The quick apprehension she had felt at Bess' approach stayed with her; she was a little bit unsure, and she raised her voice. "Now look," she said, standing with defiance in the middle of her own living-room carpet, chosen and put down under her supervision, surrounded by walls whose color she had dictated, and windows whose view met with her approval, standing firm and not to be shaken by any alien fear, "now look," she said, "this is all I am going to take from you." She swept her arm largely around, as one who calls forces to her support, and said in a less emphatic tone than she intended, "You've driven me out of patience, the way your mother did before you. You blame me the way she did, and call me names, and when I look at you all I can see is her whining face. And do not—" she said, gesturing, "try to give me any phony tears or stories about your grief; I know what you thought of your mother."

Bess wavered, on the edge of tears, or perhaps on the edge of Elizabeth; she brought up her handkerchief and looked from side to side, but Morgen said, "If you send Elizabeth and run away, now, you'd better not come back. Because if you ever *do* come back, I'm going to be waiting right here for you, like a cat on a mousehole, and the minute I see you looking out at me, I'm going to be after you; so, if you want to go, go, but remember I tell you not to come back once you're gone."

"I'm not going," Bess said, taking down the handkerchief. "I," she said, smiling at Morgen, "am not *ever* going. You can just plan, Morgen, on having me from now on, thinking of anything I can do to make you miserable, lying awake nights hating you, and wishing you were dead. You won't," she finished, with loving slowness, "you won't *ever* be rid of *me.*"

"You sound like your *mother,*" Morgen said. "You sound exactly precisely not to be mistakenly like your goddamn whining mother and if I were you I would stop it right there because, believe me, Miss Elizabeth Beth Betsy Bess, your mother is the last person I want to hear talking right now — you hear? I spent one rotten lifetime with her and I was just as glad to see the last of her as I'm going to be to see the last of you." Shouting, Morgen turned and swept wildly up and down the room, but never came close to her niece. "We're going to put you in a place," Morgen said, speaking quietly again, her voice shaking, “into an institution, a madhouse, a head-whorehouse, where you can take yourself apart and put yourself together again like a goddamn jigsaw puzzle and all the pretty doctors will stand around and clap their hands when you subdivide like a building lot and all the nice nurses will pat your head when you split four ways from Sunday and then they’ll all giggle and drag you off and lock you up and *I*’ll be rid of you and the *world* will be rid of you, and your precious doctor will be rid of you and the world will be a better place with you going to pieces in private. And, now I think of it, just to make you happy I’ll take your piles and piles of money and I’ll buy up a couple of acres of swampland and I’ll dig it up and go and pour it on your late lamented mother’s grave, so the world will know what I think of what she did to you and me. And if they ever let you out again — which they won’t, I tell you — and you come all whining and old to me and begging for me to take care of you — which I can tell you *I* won’t — and your mouthing doctor to come and put the pieces back together — which I will just bet *he* won’t — we can shove the mud off your mother’s last resting place and dig up enough of it to put you in, and your poor old Auntie will buy a marble bench to come and sit on and snicker over the two of you dead. And to think,” Morgen said at last, and wearily, “that I thought your father was the finest man who ever lived.”

She sat down on the couch, tired and miserable and afraid. I can’t back out now, she was thinking, and she moved defensively as Bess took a step forward.

“I don’t believe you,” Bess said flatly. “You won’t in all your life be as good or as nice as one-*quarter* of my mother. It’s true,” she insisted defiantly, as Morgen raised her head in fury, “and *you* know it too. And everyone else knows it, and I’d even rather go to... go to a place like you said, than stay here with you. Even Betsy,” she cried wildly, crossing her arms and holding her shoulders, as though keeping herself compact, and solid, "*she* wants to run away again, doesn't she? Away from you? *She* hates it here, doesn't she? She wants to get away and find her mother again, doesn't she? What do you suppose she wants from *you* — love?"

"What mother?" Morgen said softly, looking up. "Whose mother?"

"*Betsy's* mother, in New York. That's what she was looking for, and she's going back as soon as she can, and when she finds her mother *she* won't ever come back here because her mother wouldn't let her near you."

"*Her* mother?" Aunt Morgen's voice was enormous. "*Her* mother? That foul thing that married her father? She wants *that?*"

"Give me a pencil, and ask her."

"Bring Betsy here." Aunt Morgen was commanding, imperial. "Bring that girl to me at once."

"But you said—"

"Bring me Betsy."

"Well?" Betsy smiled provokingly.

Morgen leaned back and breathed heavily. With Betsy, at least, she need not be so on guard; Betsy represented no danger and brought no hatred. "Why did you go to New York?" Morgen asked quietly.

"None of your business," said Betsy.

"Betsy, I want to know."

"None of your business."

"Were you listening while I talked to Bess?"

"Couldn't. Tried, but couldn't, I heard you yelling, though." Betsy giggled. "Even *that* far down I couldn't miss your yelling."

"Tell me this, then, Betsy, honestly. Are you going to try and run away again?"

Betsy tossed her head. “In came the doctor, in came the nurse, in came the lady with the big fat purse.”

“Betsy, I command you—”

“Try and make me.”

“Doctor Wright is coming,” said Morgen, who found herself wanting almost irresistibly to laugh. “He’ll keep you in line, young lady.”

“I won’t stay,” Betsy said. “How’s he going to make me?”

Elizabeth, coming to the surface, found herself chanting, “... Maw told Paw; Johnnie got a licking, hee haw haw.” She turned red, looking at her aunt. “I’m sorry,” she said.

Aunt Morgen suddenly found it safe to laugh. “You silly baby,” she said, laughing and full of relief.

“You’re not mad at me?”

“Not at you, I’m not. How do you feel?”

“Fine,” said Elizabeth, pleased. “I really do feel fine. Except,” she added, after a minute and with reluctance, “I guess I do have a headache.”

“Well, take something for it,” Morgen said. “There’s going to be a lot of noise around here for a while.”

“Have I done something?”

“Nope.” Morgen sighed, and looked at the clock. “Your doctor’s on his way.”

“To see you, Aunt? I never thought—”

“Kiddo.” Aunt Morgen sighed again, and then said, “Another ten minutes, and I’d pass for a patient. They could give us a room together, maybe.”

“I don’t understand,” said Elizabeth, falteringly.

“I didn’t know when I was well off, is all,” Morgen said. “I had to send you to a doctor, we were doing all right till then.”

“I won’t go any more if you don’t want me to. I only went to please you, anyway. I always...” Elizabeth came forward timidly and touched her aunt on the arm. “I always tried to do what you wanted me to.”

“Why, kiddo?” Morgen looked at her clearly for a minute. “*I* never did anything *you* wanted me to; why would you want to be nice to me?”

Elizabeth smiled shyly. “Just because my black hen laid eggs for gentlemen; I always thought you lashed him and you slashed him and you laid him through the mire—”

“Will you please shut *up?*” Morgen said. “I don’t really think I can stand —”

“I’m sorry.” Elizabeth’s eyes filled with tears. “I only wanted to—”

“Oh, lord.” Morgen patted her on the head. “I wasn’t talking to you, kiddo, I was talking to—”

“Me, dear?”

“Yes, *you,* goddamn it. Oh, *lord.*” Stamping, Morgen made for the kitchen and came back with the brandy bottle. “Eleven o’clock in the morning or not eleven o’clock in the morning, Morgen is going to have a big full intoxicating glass of brandy and I defy the pack of you to stop me.”

“Sot,” said Elizabeth, but when Morgen swung on her she was standing, unaware, smiling fearfully through her tears.

“Oh god oh god,” said Morgen, sitting down on the couch. “Elizabeth, do Auntie a favor, will you?”

“Yes?” said Elizabeth, coming forward eagerly.

“Just don’t *talk* to me anymore, not for a while, not till the doc gets here, will you?”

“Jumped into a bramble bush and scratched out both his eyes. Of course not,” said Elizabeth. “I mean, if you *want* me to be quiet, I’ll keep perfectly —”

“Thanks,” said Morgen.

“There was an old woman lived under the hill,” said Elizabeth. “If she’s not moved away—”

“Brandy, brandy,” said Morgen. “Food for the mad.”

“ — got a licking, hee haw haw.”

“Elizabeth, sister Elizabeth,” Morgen said, “is that the doctor coming?”

Elizabeth went to the window and looked out carefully, as she had been taught, between the curtains. “I think so,” she said doubtfully. “I’ve never seen him with a hat on before.”

“He can keep his hat on if he wants,” Morgen said. She rose and Elizabeth turned from the window and came over to her and put her hands firmly on Morgen’s shoulders and pushed her down again onto the couch. “What the devil?” said Morgen, struggling, stunned because for a few minutes she had forgotten to be afraid. “What the devil are you *doing?*”

Bess laughed, one knee on Morgen’s chest. “You’re *old*,” she said, in pleased surprise. “I’m stronger than you.”

“Get out of my way, you misbegotten jellyfish,” Morgen said fiercely, “I’ll step on you.”

“I don’t think so,” Bess said, and laughed again. “Poor Morgen,” she said. “He’ll ring the doorbell and ring the doorbell and *ring* the doorbell, and he’ll decide that it’s another of Betsy’s tricks and he’ll go away again. And then when he’s gone I’ll let you get up again. Maybe.”

Morgen was helplessly caught, as much by the indignity as by the weight of her niece pressing her down; she looked up into the flushed, wicked face of her niece, and closed her eyes in distaste, trying to gather her strength, to move, without even breath to shout.

“Now you know how *I* feel,” Bess said, “when you’re talking to Betsy.”

“Betsy,” Morgen said. “Betsy.”

Betsy gasped, and moved aside, scraping her shoes against Morgen's legs, digging in her elbows trying to scramble off; "You're lucky she was frightened," Betsy said. "I almost couldn't get out."

"*She* was frightened!" said Morgen fervently.

Betsy looked around at her nervously, and shivered. "I can't stay," she said. "I almost couldn't get here at all. Everything's mixed up." The doorbell rang, and Morgen, who had put her arm affectionately around Betsy's shoulders, found that she was embracing Bess, and drew back violently. "Don't think I'll forget this," Morgen said quietly to Bess, standing off. "Laying hands on *me*." She started carefully around Bess, out of reach, to get to the door, but Bess moved quickly, and darted past her, screaming, "I'll kill her, I won't let her do it anymore — I'll *make* her stop it," and Morgen could not catch her before she ran down the hall and threw open the front door and then fell back before Doctor Wright.

"Good morning," said Doctor Wright civilly, and then, to Morgen, "Good morning, Miss Jones."

"Good morning, Doctor Wright," said Morgen, blowing slightly, "nice of you to drop in."

"No trouble at all, I assure you. Although I ordinarily see patients only in my office, in this case, naturally I was willing to make an — Bess? Is something wrong?"

"Where did you put her?" Bess demanded, staring from one to the other of them.

"Odd," said the doctor. "Where *would* I put her? Since I assume you mean your aunt?"

"I thought she was coming again," said Bess, breathless, and staring wide-eyed.

"The chances are remote. Since I assume you mean your mother," said the doctor. "May I put my own coat on the bannister rail, Miss Jones?"

"By all means," said Morgen. "My niece and I were just talking of you."

"Complimentary, I hope." The doctor beamed genially at both of them. "Now, then," he said. "Bess upset?"

"Overexertion," said Morgen evilly. "Shadow-boxing."

"Pity," said the doctor. "Come in and sit down, Miss Bess. If you will forgive," he said over his shoulder, "my presumption in making free with your house."

"Certainly," said Morgen. "Not at all."

"Now, then," Doctor Wright said, and gestured Bess to go ahead of him, but she pushed him aside and turned wildly to the door. "I *can't* talk to you," she said, "don't you see that she's got to be stopped? She'll ruin us all... it's her birthday," she told the doctor tearfully. "No one remembered."

"It was, too," said Morgen. "I had a present for her and afterwards I took it out and threw it in the trash."

"My mother's coming home," said Bess, and turned unexpectedly, saying it, into Betsy, who made a face at Morgen. "I got back after all," she said, pleased.

"Good morning, Betsy," said Doctor Wright.

"You here at last? Good morning, wondrous-wise."

"Betsy," said the doctor urgently, "tell us what Bess was trying to do — do you know?"

"She wanted," said Betsy hesitantly, "to... to walk a crooked mile and find a crooked sixpence."

They were still standing, the three of them, in Morgen Jones' front hall; behind the doctor the Nigerian ancestor figure grinned and waited and held out its hand, and Betsy sat down on the low bench near the door and looked up at Morgen. “I can’t tell you,” she said finally.

“Why not, Betsy?” asked the doctor, but Morgen came forward and said angrily, “I don’t see why you won’t, Betsy, my girl — *she* told on *you*.”

“Told what?” Betsy, sitting on the bench between them, shrank back and seemed to cower. “Told what?” she asked, but her fear seemed to be of Morgen. “I was just going to go away,” she said. “I wasn’t going to do anything bad, I was just lonesome. *You’d* go away if you weren’t happy.”

Morgen smiled sadly. “I would if I could,” she said. “But you can’t go anywhere, Betsy, because there’s one thing you don’t know. When Bess went running to the door, ready to hurt someone, she was... looking for *your* mother.”

Betsy shook her head wisely. “Not *my* mother,” she said with confidence. “*My* mother is safe.”

“No longer.” The doctor stepped aside as Aunt Morgen kneeled beside Betsy. “Your mother is gone, Betsy. Elizabeth Jones, my sister, the prettiest girl in town, Elizabeth Richmond. She’s gone.”

“Elizabeth Richmond? There were four of them in the telephone book.”

“I was with her when she died,” Morgen said helplessly.

“Not *my* mother,” Betsy said.

“She stood right there in the doorway,” Morgen said insistently, “you remember it as well as I do, smiling and kind of frightened, because she knew she’d done something terrible, with your birthday celebration waiting here for her, and no one even knowing where she was for two days — not worse than she’d done before, in a dozen different ways, but this time you were waiting and waiting and waiting for her, and I kept telling you kiddo, be patient, she’ll come; don’t you remember — I said we’d pretend it was *my* birthday, instead? And you sat there and looked out the window and waited and waited and then we heard her coming?"

"I remember," Betsy said, moving uneasily. "It was *her* mother who came."

"No," said Morgen, "it wasn't. We heard her key and the front door slammed open and you went running down the hall and there she was standing there smiling and frightened, and that was when I knew you were angry, because she could see your face, and I couldn't, and she was frightened — and she said—"

"She said," said Betsy levelly, "she said, 'Hello, am I late for the birthday party?'"

"No, she didn't," Morgen said. "She said, 'Hello, Betsy my darling, am I late for the—'"

"She *didn't,*" said Betsy, rising and catching at the doctor's hand, "she didn't because *my* mother loved her Betsy and I was her darling and when *she* was there *I* was inside laughing because I wasn't *her* darling, she didn't *say* Betsy darling..." She turned in frantic urgency to the doctor, and he shook his head, watching Morgen.

"You were her darling, you were her baby darling," said Morgen tonelessly. "It was all I ever liked in her. She used to sing to you and dance with you and you wouldn't let anyone else near you. Even when she was out somewhere, you wouldn't let me sing to you."

"Who shook her and shook her and shook her?" Betsy demanded, pulling at the doctor's hand, "who ran at her and hurt her?"

"Bess." Aunt Morgen made a gesture of helplessness and spoke to the doctor. "I took her up and locked her in her room," she said. "And please don't think that I believe for a minute that my niece..." she took a breath "... killed my sister," she said. "My sister was a strong woman, and the shaking she got from her daughter was nothing, really. When I talked to Harold Ryan afterward he said it was bound to happen anyway, it was no one's fault, not to worry, and not to trouble the child with guilt she couldn't understand. He said it wasn't anyone's fault."

She might have gone on talking endlessly, saying these things which of all things had not been spoken of in years, but the doctor touched her on the shoulder, and she followed his glance down to Betsy, who was sitting crying broken-heartedly, as a baby cried. "She believes you now," said the doctor.

And when Betsy raised her eyes, tear-stained, she was Bess, looking at Morgen with eyes wide and blank and clear. "You told her," Bess said to Morgen, "you told her, and you blamed *me.*"

"It was you," Morgen said.

"No, it wasn't," Bess said. "Because I waited and I looked out the window, and I knew she was coming soon, and you told me, 'She's off with some man; you think she ever cares for *you* when there's a man hanging around?' And you said she never loved me, only because of the money, because she couldn't ever get the money unless she stayed with me, and you said if it wasn't for the money she'd go and never come back. You said not even when my father was alive—"

"Don't you talk about your father, you foul bitch," said Morgen.

"Poor Morgen," said Bess to Doctor Wright, "she wanted my father and she wanted me and all she's going to get is the money; I wish *I* had the money," she said wistfully.

Morgen stood up suddenly and walked across the hall; she stood with her back towards both of them, looking up into the black wooden face, her hand almost resting in the outstretched wooden hand, and said quietly, "I cannot believe, somehow, that I have managed all this very well, Doctor Wright. I have never tried to make any secret of the way I felt about my sister, or the way I felt about her husband. I always loved my niece, too, and all those times when I used to wish that we were alone together, Elizabeth and I, I pictured our life, I am afraid, as pleasant and peaceful. Not the way it is now. I thought that once my sister was gone, all her badness would go with her; I was afraid of what was happening to my niece because she loved her mother. I suppose," she said, without turning, "you've heard about this fellow Robin, Doctor Wright. That was entirely her mother's fault, keeping a child around the two of them all the time, letting her see and hear things she shouldn't, until she got herself in real trouble."

"Robin," said Bess, and laughed.

"Well," said Morgen, turning to smile tiredly at her niece, "I suppose you're right. That kind of thing looks worse to someone outside it, like me. But," she went on, raising her voice a little, "it was *me* Robin called to come and get you that night, and it was *me* took care of you when your mother died, and ever since, and before you were old enough to know the difference, it was *me,* plenty of times, who dressed you and put you to bed and saw you got fed. And it's me," she said, "who's going to help Doctor Wright lock you up forever. That's what I want to do," she said to the doctor.

The doctor came over and touched Morgen's arm reassuringly. "I don't think," he said, "that you need feel *quite* so desolate. Bess, after all, does not represent your niece in a state of health, and what she says is motivated largely by malice; surely your own heart will acquit—"

"Morgen!" Bess said, and Morgen and the doctor turned, startled at what had seemed almost a cry for help. Bess was standing, looking at them fearfully; her hands were clasped in front of her, and as they watched, her right hand got free.

"Hold Betsy!" the doctor shouted, and Morgen, thinking, now *I* have lost my mind, ran to Bess and caught her right arm and held it, pulling and straining against its strength. The doctor had thrown his arms around Bess, holding her still and away from Morgen, who clung desperately onto Bess' right arm; how could she be so strong, Morgen wondered, how is it I can hardly hold her? "We're going to rip her in half," Morgen said, gasping, and the doctor answered grimly, "I wish we could."

Then the strength pulling against Morgen slackened, and she looked up to see that Betsy lay, relaxed and grinning, in the doctor's arms; "Don't *pull* so, Morgen," Betsy said with amusement, "you'll have us all on the floor." She stayed so quiet for a minute that involuntarily they loosened their hold on her and then suddenly, without warning, she was scratching at her eyes and Morgen sobbed and strained to get her hands down; "I don't want to hurt you, Morgen," Betsy said, "so let go."

"No," said Morgen doggedly.

"*Please,* Morgen." Betsy's voice rose entreatingly. "I never did anything to *you,* Morgen, and I don't think I'll get any more chances... Morgen, *please* let go."

"No," said Morgen. She looked beyond Betsy to the doctor, who had his arms tight around Betsy, imprisoning her other arm, and he shook his head violently.

"Morgen," Betsy said quietly, "I'll get rid of her for you. She'll be gone, and never come back. Because I don't think I'm coming back any more, either."

"Goodbye," said Morgen, setting her teeth.

"Morgen," said Betsy despairingly, and fled.

Morgen looked up again, thinking that they were again holding Bess, but it was Elizabeth, white-faced and helpless, lying back against the doctor; it seemed suddenly laughable to be clinging madly to Elizabeth's limp arm, and Morgen stood back, letting the arm drop to Elizabeth's side. The doctor relaxed his hold and stood free, but cautiously close.

"Elizabeth," said Morgen weakly, "how do you feel?"

"Fine." Elizabeth looked uncertainly from Morgen to the doctor and back to Morgen again. "I'm sorry," she said.

"My dear child," said the doctor, breathing hard, "you have little to be sorry for."

Morgen put her hands behind her because they were shaking, and Elizabeth said, "They all went together to find a bird's nest. Aunt Morgen," she went on seriously, "you were always very kind to me."

"Thank you," said Morgen, past surprise.

"And Doctor Wrong," said Elizabeth, "thank *you,* too."

Her face seemed to waver; she half-grinned, and swayed. "The money," she said. "No one likes me."

"Not Bess," said the doctor, "I pray that it may not be Bess; Morgen, can you influence her?"

"Elizabeth," said Morgen, "Elizabeth, come back."

"I'm back," Elizabeth said. "I never went away, auntie dear, I never never did." She looked at the doctor and said clearly and without faltering, "I did it. I'm the real one, Doctor Wrong, I am the one who gets the money and who never did anything, and I jumped into a bramble bush and I am going to close my eyes now and you will never see me again."

"God *almighty,*" said Morgen. She turned and moved to the other side of the hall and leaned her head despairingly against the shoulder of the black wooden figure, who had seen and heard everything. I was wrong, she thought, I did harm; I coveted.

"You will never see me again any more," said her niece.

Quickly, Morgen came back to put her arm around her niece and hold her tight. “Baby darling,” she said, “Morgen’s here.”

Between them they carried her into Morgen’s living room and set her on the couch. She opened her eyes once and smiled at them together, and then slept.

“What do we do now?” Morgen asked, whispering, and the doctor laughed.

“When she awakens,” he said dryly, “we can ask her. Meanwhile, we, you and I, can wait.”

“We’ll make coffee,” Morgen said. “Maybe she’ll want some when she wakes up.” Turning to follow the doctor out of the room, she stumbled and was made aware of her old robe and battered slippers; it was probable, she thought, that the doctor had not noticed, but when she came into the hall she said to him with some awkwardness, “I’ll dress, if you’ll excuse me.”

“Morgen?” said the doctor; he was standing looking with dislike into the face of the black Nigerian figure.

“Yes?”

“I want you to get rid of this fellow,” the doctor said. Then he turned and smiled. “I beg your pardon,” he said. “I should put that more tactfully; I am not myself. But he offends me, this creature; he does nothing but watch and listen and wait hopefully to snatch at people.”

“All right,” said Morgen lifelessly.

“A good many of our sins may go with him,” the doctor said, and he reached out brazenly, and patted her on the shoulder.

6. THE NAMING OF AN HEIRESS

THREE MONTHS LATER, when the warm weather had really come to stay, and rain and cold and dismal dark days seemed set aside forever, Doctor Wright's patient, who had been his patient for a little more than two years, Aunt Morgen's niece, who had been her niece for a little more than twenty-five years, found unexpectedly that she wanted to run down the sidewalk, instead of pursuing the sedate crisp walk she had heretofore found so fitting. She wanted to pick flowers and feel grass under her feet, and she stopped not half a block from Doctor Wright's office and turned slowly and wonderingly around in a full circle, approving even the geraniums staunchly blooming in the doctor's windowbox; it was the first time she had looked at anything with her own true eyes; I am — and it was her first privately phrased thought — all alone; it was clear and sparkling as cold water, and she said it again to herself: I am all alone.

She had come up and down this street many times, and the geraniums were not strangers to her. Gropingly, holding firmly to Doctor Wright's hand, keeping her eyes upon Aunt Morgen, wandering and bewildered and faltering, she had been brought slowly to remembrance; much of what she recalled now was sharply distinct, present in her mind as it would have been if it had really happened to her; she could remember the outlines of emotions, and the looks of places, and the gestures of yearning, and the patterns of movements. She could lift her head, still, and hear sweetly the far faint sound of music (I was in a hotel, she would notify herself, that was when I was in a hotel) and see far away the diminishing figure of the doctor (of course; I was in a bus, and thought I saw him) and sometimes, superimposed over other pictures, tennis rackets and boxing gloves and saddle soap (in the window of the sporting goods store, naturally; I looked often into that window); she could remember in perfect detail the room at the hospital, and the Nigerian ancestor figure that Doctor Wright had made Aunt Morgen put away in the attic, and she could, moreover, answer freely all their questions: "Who put the mud in the refrigerator?" Aunt Morgen asked her, and she answered, with simple truth, "I did."

The act of recollection, at first halting and uncertain, had soon become compulsive; now, when she looked at the doorway to the doctor's office, she saw reflected against it the countless entrances she had made; Aunt Morgen's eyes were layers of doubt and surprise and love and anger, Aunt Morgen's voice echoed in infinite turned phrases, from as far back as time stretched; the doctor's office was crowded and shifting, kaleidescopic with her own visits there, and during the past week or so, when she sat down in the doctor's office she wondered always if she was sitting down this time or just remembering sitting down the last time, if she had come at all, or if she had perhaps made only one compressed actual visit, to be expanded infinitely in her memories of it. She was clouded with memory, bemused with the need for discovering reason and coherence in a patternless time; she was lost in an endless reflecting world, where only Aunt Morgen and Doctor Wright followed her, as she pursued them. When she turned to Aunt Morgen, crying her name, Aunt Morgen might answer from fifteen years ago, her voice clear but her arms never reaching far enough to provide a refuge; when she clung to Doctor Wright his hands might hold her steady, but his voice came to her from some pinnacle of mockery, rounding a splendid period of nonsense.

She was awakened from her enchantment at a quarter to four on an afternoon in July, brought back from a weary contemplation of the composition of her own mind. Her first clear thought was that she was all alone; it had been preceded by a rebellious, not-clear feeling that she had succeeded in remembering absolutely all her mind would hold; the second thought she ever phrased clearly she phrased almost aloud: I haven't any name, she told herself, here I am, all alone and without any name.

Everything was astonishingly bright and rich; all about her were the commonplaces of the present, the one-at-a-time actions which had no echoes in the past, the thoughts which were new, and the streets not habitually followed. She perceived this with genuine pleasure, and walked past the doctor's office. The sidewalk on the untraveled section beyond the doctor's office was a little more carefully put down: one block of cement met the next block of cement without more than the slightest line to trouble the eye with uneasiness; although she knew that she had come along here before she realized without question that it was not necessary, any more, to make an effort to remember the precise time and occasion; I am through with remembering, she thought. Turning the corner onto a busier street she went more slowly, and stopped at last because she had come to a shop where she might have her hair cut. She had not before felt any intention of cutting her hair, but, once conceived, the idea would not die, and she went into the shop, and smiled at the pretty young woman dressed in blue, who came forward through the fragrant dimness to speak to her.

"I would like to have my hair cut, please."

"Surely," said the young woman, as though people had their hair cut every day, and they both laughed, because everything was working out so nicely, and so agreeably.

She sat in a chair with a blue bib around her, and the cold scissors against her neck made her shiver suddenly; "I've never cut my hair in my life," she said, and the young woman murmured, "In this heat... so refreshing." She watched herself from out of the mirror, watching the young woman in blue move the flashing scissors, and cut off the hair she had worn when she was a small baby and her mother touched it gently with a soft brush, the hair which had curled around her face when she came down the stairs and down the stairs and *down* the stairs, and cut off the hair which had been growing when she gathered seashells on the beach and the hair which had been long and gathered back with a ribbon when Aunt Morgen said not to cry over spilled milk and which had been braided and folded over itself but still growing when Doctor Wright asked her if she was afraid, and growing still and not well combed when she met the strange man at lunch in the hotel, and brushed by the nurses in the hospital and pulled and tangled and washed and wound around her head for all the twenty-five years of her life, and the pleasant young woman in blue pushed it aside on the floor with her foot, and held up a mirror behind and said, "Well, how do we like ourselves *now?*"

"So that's what I'm going to look like," she said.

"You'll find it makes a difference, getting rid of that weight of hair." The young woman shook her head approvingly. "You *are* a different girl," she said.

She was entertained, walking back down the street, to find that now she had to think constantly of holding her head high, because she had no weight of hair to pull back against her, and she felt an inch or so taller without any hair, the top of her head closer to the stars. Best of all, when she turned and started up the steps to the doctor's office, she knew that now, of all times, she was coming in actuality, since in all her pictures and reflections of herself coming to the doctor, and sitting with him inside, there was no time when she had come with her hair short and her head high.

Doctor Wright was cross. He rose briefly when she entered, nodded at her, and sat, unsmiling and wordless, at his desk. He noticed that her hair was cut, she knew, because he was accustomed to noticing everything about her, and when at last she said, “Well, good afternoon, Doctor Wright,” he glanced up, his eyes touching the top of her head, and then looked down again.

“It is five and twenty after four,” he said at last. “I am able to recollect, much as you may doubt it, that youth feels little sense of time, with all the future at its beck and call; regrettably, we who have had the pressure of years forced upon us—”

“I had to have my hair cut,” she said.

“*Had* to have your hair cut? Did you gain your aunt’s permission? Because, to my knowledge, you had not mine.”

“It’s such a lovely day.”

“Hardly relevant,” he said dryly. “Such a lovely day for disposing of one’s hair? A sacrifice, might be, to ensure a temperate summer? Or perhaps, a shorn lamb, you hope to appease a wintry blast?” He sighed, and set straight the inkwell on his desk. “I am annoyed with you,” he said. “We will not spend a great deal of time today; I am annoyed, it is late, I preferred your hair the way I was used to it. What is the state of your health — aside —” his glance touched her head, briefly, again— “aside from the probability of your catching cold?”

“Excellent. And if you insist, I shall wear a hat until the rigors of the July climate have abated.”

“You are mocking me, young woman. You are shorn and bold.”

She laughed, and he looked at her in surprise. “I’m happy,” she said, and then stopped and listened to the echo of her words, surprised in turn as she became aware of their meaning. “I am,” she confirmed.

"I have no objection," he said. "You may even laugh if you like. Has there been any difficulty with your aunt? Any quarrels? Embarrassment?"

"No." She was uncertain. "She seems quieter, though."

"Her experiences, recently, may have been somewhat unsettling for one of your aunt's... ah... placid temperament. You treated her unkindly, I think."

"The mud?" She frowned, puzzling out a way to explain. "I don't think that was *against* Aunt Morgen, exactly. I can remember doing it, and it seems to me that it wasn't to hurt her or anything, but just because something *had* to happen, there had to be some kind of explosion, and it had to come from outside, because there wasn't any force in me."

"Perhaps." The doctor, who much preferred doing the talking himself, cut her short and went on, "A decisive gesture was necessary, certainly, to bring matters to a climax, and the struggle between personalities had reached a point where their very counter-tensions made them static. The balance between them had to be shaken, weight had to be thrown on one side or another: Aunt Morgen had to be brought into the fray, to shatter the violent equilibrium in which they were locked. A..." he paused, and looked up at her speculatively. "A death struggle," he said, and then nodded, amused. "The two cats of Kilkenny," he said. "Instead of two cats, there weren't any."

Could I have behaved like that? she wondered, was that *really* what I did? With my own hands, wearing my own face, walking on my own feet, using my own head (and she could still feel the mud on her fingers, hear herself laughing), did I really *think* of things like that? She looked down at her clothes, and remembered with an odd kind of tenderness that her own hands had torn this blouse when she was angry in New York, and ironed this skirt in a deep rush of love toward herself; she had scratched her own face.

She looked at her hands with their round nails and their soft fingers, and lifted her right hand and put it gently around her throat, tightening the fingers with slow care; the doctor spoke quickly, sharply, and she shook her head (its hair cut short), and laughed. "I'm just playing," she explained. "I can *remember,* but I can't think *why.*"

He was lighting his pipe, not looking at her. "Do *you* think they are gone?" he asked; he had not, in all this time, asked her pointblank before.

"Yes," she said. "Gone," and she thought, searching down and half closing her eyes and feeling, as one moving in the dark with hands outstretched to touch a solid object; "Melting together," she said, "like snowmen."

He nodded, his pipe going satisfactorily. "I suppose we could say that you had absorbed them," he said.

"Eaten them all," she amended, and sighed again happily.

"We are not out of the woods *yet,* by any means. You are confident, you cut your hair, you are easy with me, you call yourself 'happy.' But may I point out that you have just eaten your four sisters?"

"You can't catch me, I'm the gingerbread man," she said impudently. "Doctor Wrong."

He frowned at her. "We are not, as I say, out of the woods yet. At the moment you may choose to amuse yourself at the expense of your doctor, but — since you at the same time assure me of your great good health — we may plan to commence, at your next visit, a severe and thorough series of treatments and hypnotic explorations; we shall scrutinize with extreme and tiresome exactitude every aspect of your illness, until we have determined the *why* which you say you do not know; we will not rest until —"

"A punishment?" she asked. "Just because I laughed?"

“Have a care, my dear young lady. You have interrupted me again, and you speak pertly. I am attempting to describe a great concern for your future welfare. We shall study your past in order to discover—”

“My future? But suppose *I*—”

“There,” he said. “You have interrupted me once again. Three times in ten minutes. I think it is easily time you went back to your aunt. I hope that by the time we meet this evening you will have somewhat recovered your usual good manners.”

“I may be worse,” she said, still possessed of an irresistible tendency to giggle. “I’ve run away from a little old woman and a little old man.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“I’m the gingerbread man,” she said.

He shook his head, and rose to show her to the door. “It is gratifying, I must confess, to see you cheerful,” he said. “Although I am not fond of good humor at my own expense. Until this evening, then.”

“When we’re with Aunt Morgen I can interrupt you all I want to.”

“On the contrary,” he said. “When we’re with Aunt Morgen, it is Aunt who interrupts. A splendid woman,” he said, “but overly fond of talk.”

She came out of the doctor’s office laughing, feeling her head cool and aware for the first time of this day as separate from all other days; she walked lingeringly toward the corner where she would catch her bus, thinking, I am all alone and I have no name; I have cut my hair, I’m the gingerbread man, and wanting to prolong this little time of perfect freedom, although she thought that she would never lose it completely now; without more concrete thought than, it’s Thursday, closing’s not till seven, she crossed the street to wait for a bus that would take her to the museum.

She could remember, of course, that she had gone to the museum every day, and she could remember whole paragraphs and pages of letters and lists she had written; she knew perfectly the look of the desk where she had worked, and she knew, too, that she had gone, afterwards, to the museum one afternoon, but had not gone above the first floor; had wandered without purpose or interest through the most available rooms. If she had known that day what she was looking for, she could have remembered it now, but all that that grey afternoon brought back was an intense loneliness, untouched by the people who walked through the rooms with her; she had sat on a bench and watched others go by, stepping firmly through a world to them almost secure. I wonder why I went that day, she thought, leaning forward in the bus to see where she was; she remembered all the other buses, and all the running away. She was simultaneously awake and asleep; she was talking with a lady in green silk; she was holding tight to her suitcase.

The bus stopped directly in front of the museum, and she came down from the high bus step and turned to look at the austere white stone of the building. It looks well, she thought, it hasn't changed since I left; how pleasant, she thought, to come calling on the scenes of one's past, and find the past of all the ages there too; how can I tell that the girl who used to come here and call herself me was not just a remnant of a stone age culture — no, a glacial deposit?

Just outside the museum entrance was the white stone statue of General Zaccheus Owen, in whose questionable honor the museum had been erected; General Owen sat as he always had, not having even recrossed his legs in all this time (although, of course, he *could* have crossed and recrossed them any number of times, so long as he finished with them the same way he began), and he still rested his head on his hand and his elbows on a white stone table, and he studied still in his white stone book, weary and bored and hopeless, although he might very well have turned over a page or two in all this time. He was not a proper general, she thought, to sit reading while the battle surely raged; he had been thought to represent the conquest of brute force by intellect, and his sword, unwieldy with its great ribbons of white stone, lay idle at his feet.

"Good afternoon, general," she said at last. "If you belonged to Aunt Morgen, Doctor Wright would put you in the attic." There was no one around at the moment — or else, naturally, she would not have spoken aloud — but the general apparently did not dare risk turning over another page; he bent his eyes down doggedly, and perhaps only glanced at her for one swift second. "I probably won't be seeing you again, general," she said, "so goodbye."

The general did not speak as she went on inside, suddenly aware that she had not come to see the general, but to visit a particular painting on the second floor. The painting had never attracted her before with any personal communication, and she did not know why she wanted to see it now, but, coming through the museum entrance, she suddenly wanted to go and look at it, and she remembered where it was and how to turn to reach it, how to go up the main wide staircase with her hand on the wide stone balustrade, and she remembered, with a kind of sadness, that she had never before come to look at this picture, although she had passed by it many times. Here at last, she thought, is a choice entirely my own.

When she stood before the picture she thought only, at first: I would like to have that; then she looked at it more carefully, wondering why she had longed for it so, and telling herself at the same time that for a long time to come she must study every thought carefully, and test its reality, and examine it for flaws and for traces of weakness or sentiment, for invitations to turn back. The picture was bright and lovely against a background of black silk, a thing of small jeweled greens and blues and scarlets and yellows; an Indian prince sat in contemplative happiness against a clean colored pattern of eight-petaled flowers, with his feet close together on a tiny mosaic floor and his small hand open before him. He was touched with gold, on the belt of his robe, at the corners of his eyes, and beyond him lay a green meadow ending in a row of even little trees topped by precise little mountains, and at his feet lay a basket of oranges. She stood and looked at him, deeply satisfied with the clarity of the tiny jewels glowing against the black silk, and when she turned away her eyes, blinded by the colored flowers, there was a reflected light in the white stone ceiling of the museum, and a glitter along the floor.

She knew the hidden stairway that led to the third floor of the museum, and went up its iron steps without hesitation, although she had not been up here for a very long time. It, too, had not changed, and she turned with assurance down the hallway and to the door of the big office room where she had at one time come every day, and, entering, looked at once to the last desk on the left, where she suddenly half-expected to find her work set out as she had left it, her letters demolished by crude messages, her back still aching. The office was empty, because it was late, and the desks were neat and bare; she did not want at first to leave the shelter of the doorway and then perceived that it was because she badly wanted to turn to her right and hang her hat and coat on the rack ready there for them. Not ever again, she thought, and moved resolutely forward toward her own desk.

“Were you looking for someone?” She turned, and smiled. There was a girl standing in the doorway, looking severe because of course visitors were not allowed on the third floor, and yet tentative, because her jurisdiction extended only so far as the third floor went, and visitors to the museum were a special order of trespasser, and a girl who might freely order strangers away from the third floor must herself leave the museum by the iron stairway which, hidden, went all the way down through the museum to the employees’ entrance in the back basement; she was carrying a flower in her hand, far too small for the buttonhole of General Owen and overblown for the garden of the jeweled prince. She held the flower with care, because it was made of metal and had been carved and fashioned and created with the hands and so was very likely worth money; the stem had been sharply broken off and as the girl stood, staring but patient, she caressed the hard petals, running the tip of one finger around them.

“I’m sorry to walk in like this. I used to work here, and I just wanted to look around again.”

“Yes?” said the girl, undecided. (There *was* another way to get off the third floor, then?)

“*That* was my desk, the last one on the left.”

“That’s Emmy’s desk,” said the girl defensively, holding the flower close to her.

“Really?” There was nothing more to say; she had seen her desk, and the flower was broken off, and Emmy had gone home for the day; there was nothing new to be found up here. She nodded her head at the desk, remembering, and said, “Once there was a big hole in that wall. It went right down through the whole building.”

“A hole?” said the girl. “In the wall?”

* * *

Aunt Morgen was in the doorway, peering out, tapping her fingers, biting her lip, frowning. “God almighty,” Aunt Morgen said, “am I going to spend all my *life* — what in sweet heaven’s name have you done to your head?”

“I’ve been to the doctor’s. I cut my hair.”

“I called the doctor. You left there an hour ago. He said you were—” Aunt Morgen broke off, and made a small ceremony of closing the door behind her niece. “Have you and the doc been squabbling?” she asked, once the door was safely closed behind her, and dropping her voice a little, as though the very air might carry her irreverent words to the doctor’s ear; “he said you were light-headed.”

“And so I am. Look at me.”

“It doesn’t suit you,” Aunt Morgen said, after a minute. “You’ll have to let it grow again.”

“I can’t; I’m the gingerbread man.”

“What?”

“I’ve run away from a little old woman and a little old man.”

“I sometimes think,” Aunt Morgen said amiably, following her into the kitchen, “that a nice home for old ladies is what I really need. The kind of a place where they play croquet. And wear brooches made out of the hair of all their dead friends.”

“And Doctor Wright would come every Sunday evening to call on you,” said her niece, settling happily into her place at the kitchen table.

“For our weekly hymn sing,” said Aunt Morgen. “I made cabbage and sour cream, merely because you *used* to like it, although I must say that with your majesty’s tastes shifting the way they do, I hardly dare—”

“You suppose they’ll let you cook in the old ladies’ home? You’re one of the best cooks in the world.”

The table looked pretty and warm in the soft light of the kitchen corner. Aunt Morgen was using new dishes, yellow on a brown cloth, and when she touched the round edge of her yellow cup she wondered that she had not noticed it sooner; Aunt Morgen had changed a number of small things, relinquishing, it seemed, the harsh defiant colors, the sharp, out-flung angles, the obtrusive patterns; “Morgen,” she said, “you’re getting mellow.”

“Hm?”

"Your new dishes. And the tablecloth. The front hall."

Sitting, Morgen said, " — lives to thy service," and passed the rolls to her niece. "I didn't know you noticed," she said, and sighed, looking without enthusiasm at her butter plate. "I don't suppose you want to talk about it," she went on finally. "I've been waiting until you said something, or the doc, and I figured I'd spent so long never catching up with what was going on that I could afford to hang on a while longer. But." She put her fork down with sudden determination, and looked sternly at her niece. "All these jokes about old ladies' homes," she said. "I keep feeling as though the house was empty now, everyone gone for the summer, place closed up, windows boarded, everyone off in the country. Like I was left all alone, sitting here wondering where in hell everyone's got to. Did you know I went and bought you that green coat you wanted and it's been hanging in your closet for three weeks?"

"I didn't even see it," said her niece blankly.

"That's what I mean," Aunt Morgen said. "I thought you really *wanted* that coat. I've been waiting for you to mention it. And now you've gone and cut your hair," she finished helplessly, and pushed her plate away.

"You thought I really wanted that awful coat?"

"You either really wanted the coat, or else you were trying to buy it to show me who was boss or to make me miserable or maybe just to make up to yourself for all the things you figured I should have done for you and gotten you and never did. So I talked myself into thinking you really wanted a new coat."

"I suppose it's too late to take it back to the store."

There was a silence, and then Aunt Morgen said, "Yes, it's too late to take it back. You'll have to wear it and maybe pretend you like it. Pretend," she went on carefully, "that it was a gift from a doting old relative in the old ladies' home and you have to wear it to avoid giving offense. Because," she said, "with a thing like that it is very easy indeed to give offense; you have really no idea how touchy old ladies get about their gifts." Shutting her lips tight, Morgen held her breath for a minute, and then got up without speaking and took her plate over to the sink. "I'll leave the dishes," she said in a voice almost normal. "We're a little late; the doc should be here any minute."

"I'll help you with the dishes when we get back."

"Thank you," said Aunt Morgen. "Thank you very much." Silently she cleared the dishes from the table and put them in the sink. Then, impulsively, she turned and came back to the table and sat down next to her niece. "Look," she said, and stopped, and put her elbows down on the table, and lighted a cigarette, and fussed with the ashtray, and rubbed her nose foolishly with the back of her hand. "I'm *damned* if *I* know how to say it," she said. "I keep trying and trying — maybe the doc can get a straight answer from you; maybe *he* can get to you. Me, all I keep doing is wondering and worrying and praying it's all going to come out all right, and maybe I'm wrecking everything speaking out like this — *I* know I'm clumsy and silly and I've got no head for all this fancy figuring you do with the doc, but here all of a sudden, here I never had any trouble in all my *life* making myself understood and my wants known, and here all of a sudden I can't even *talk* to you after all these years. All I want to know is this." She stopped, and carefully set her cigarette down in the ashtray so she could fold her hands and turn attentively to her niece. "Where do I fit in?" she asked.

Seeing her niece regarding her with curiosity, but without comprehension, Morgen faltered, and gestured, a pathetic little turn of her hand. "You don't understand," she said. "I suppose I *am* really talking? I'm not just moving my mouth and waving my arms and not making any noise? You *do* hear me? Because it is beginning to look to me like you don't care in the least whether I talk or not, or whether the doc sees you or not, or whether we go out or stay in or whether we eat or don't eat or whether I live or don't live or whether I'm happy or not; I keep feeling that when I work to make something special for your dinner that you used to like once and then forget to tell you what it is you don't even know what you're eating."

"Dinner was very nice, Aunt Morgen."

"I *know* it was very nice, I made it and it was very very very damned nice and if Í hadn't told you what it was you could honest to God have sat there all through dinner moving your fork and putting it in your mouth and maybe if it's my lucky day just happening to notice that for the past month we've been using new dishes. I keep telling myself it isn't *possible,* not after all this time." Morgen put out her cigarette with care, and said, "I don't want to sound like the kind of person who says I've got a right to your affection just because I've spent a lot of time taking care of you as though you were my own child. I'd have to be pretty damn silly to think that people had *rights* to other people's love; in my life I've earned more love and got less than anyone I know. But I could have sworn," she said, making her tone light, and smiling a little, "I could have sworn *you* wouldn't let me go off alone to an old ladies' home."

She was watching Aunt Morgen carefully, looking at the big earnest ugly face and the false little smile and the mouth still a little open, and she thought, people shouldn't ever look closely at one another, they're not like pictures. There was not any sure way to know, from the eyes of her aunt or the mouth of her aunt or the hair or the eyebrows or the lines in the face of her aunt, whether the expression stated by her aunt's face was a faithful delineation of fear or anxiety or expectancy; it might be a kind of ecstasy, or it might be wholly false, and not at all the expression corresponding to Aunt Morgen's thoughts. There was too much there to be defined clearly; the jeweled prince was beautiful, General Owen was tired, but Aunt Morgen's face was a portrait too heavily shaded, with too much detail. And that is because, she thought, in a picture all the unnecessary misleading parts of the face have been eliminated, all the extra lines are gone and the painter has only left in the useful things; painting Aunt Morgen's face and calling it *Agony,* she thought, one would probably have to eliminate the greater part of the nose, which detracted sensibly from the composition of the whole, and surely avoid the sense of bestial, inarticulate pain introduced by the eyebrows, which were overheavy; a general thinning of the design...

"I think I'm being patient," Aunt Morgen said, and her voice was cold.

"Aunt Morgen," she said slowly, "you know what I was thinking, today in the museum?"

"No," Aunt Morgen said, "*what* were you thinking, today in the museum?"

"I was thinking what it must feel like to be a prisoner going to die; you stand there looking at the sun and the sky and the grass and the trees, and because it's the last time you're going to see them they're wonderful, full of colors you never noticed before, and bright and beautiful and terribly hard to leave behind. And then, suppose you're reprieved, and you get up the next morning and you're not dead; could you look again at the sun and the trees and the sky and think they're the same old sun and sky and trees, nothing special at all, just the same old things you've seen every day? Not changed at all, just because you don't have to give them up?"

"Well?" said Aunt Morgen when she stopped.

"That's what I was thinking today in the museum."

“Were you now?” said Aunt Morgen, rising heavily. “Well, if you don’t mind,” she said, taking up the coffee cups, “I’ll save it. Think about it some other time, when I’m not so worried about my own affairs. My own *tawdry* affairs,” she said, and slammed the new cups into the sink with a crash.

* * *

“She has still a great deal to learn,” said the doctor soothingly, and quite as though he and Aunt Morgen were walking all alone; “she has a long path to retrace. We must not make too many demands upon her.”

“Goddamn unfeeling heartless icicle,” said Aunt Morgen roundly. “I mean *you,*” she said over her shoulder to her niece.

“I have the constant impression,” the doctor went on, “that she is... how shall I say it?... as a vessel emptied, if she can forgive me such a graceless comparison. Although she seems to be, my dear Morgen, in undisputed possession of the citadel, too many of its defenses are down, too much has been lost in victory.” He stopped, and for a minute they walked on, unperceiving, and then realized, and turned to him as he gestured at them eloquently with his rolled umbrella. “Such a pleasant evening for a walk,” he said, “you must not stomp along, Morgen. Let us put it this way, then. Much of what was *emotion* has been lost; the facts are there, the memory clear, but the feeling for these things is suspended. Take, for instance, some person toward whom she has displayed, in these troubled times, mixed reactions.” He thought, started to speak, stopped, and thought again. “Doctor Ryan,” he said at last, with satisfaction. “At different times, she has felt differently toward Doctor Ryan; under one influence she very likely hated him violently, and under another influence she may even have valued him enormously. Now, suppose her to remember perfectly the circumstances under which she at one time admired, and at another time detested, Doctor Ryan; the circumstances recalled, which emotion, presuming them equally strong, which emotion might be expected to remain with her?"

"Who *cares* about Ryan?" Morgen demanded. "For twenty-odd years I've been—"

"If you please," said the doctor, holding up his umbrella, but falling into step again with Aunt Morgen, "allow me to continue. You will recall that there was — I believe I may say this with entire safety from contradiction, even from *you,* Morgen — no area so far explored in which there was not dissension. Almost, if I may be permitted the term, open warfare. Absolute diametric opposition," said the doctor, walking rhythmically, "on every point. Thus," he continued, holding up his umbrella again at Aunt Morgen, who had raised her arm to gesture, "emotion has been, so to speak, cancelled out. No resolution has taken place, no compromise has been reached, no workable truce declared in that warfare. And *our* responsibility, Morgen," he went on, raising his voice slightly, "*our* responsibility is, clearly, to people this vacant landscape — fill this empty vessel, I think I said before — and, with our own deep emotional reserves, enable the child to rebuild. We have a sobering duty. She will owe to us her opinions, her discriminations, her reflections; we are able, as few others have ever been, to re-create, entire, a human being, in the most proper and reasonable mold, to select what is finest and most elevating from our own experience and bestow!"

Morgen said disagreeably, "You can be her mommy, and I'll be her daddy, and what I am going to bestow on her is a good swift—"

"We always quarrel," the doctor said ruefully. "We strongly resemble an old married pair, I think. The wicked enchanter marries the dragon, after all, and they live happily ever after."

Aunt Morgen laughed. “You and your empty vessels,” she said, suddenly good-humored again. “Hollering down a rain barrel, *I* call it. Well, come on,” she said to her niece, catching her niece’s hand and holding it, “we’ll start all over again like friends. You like the hair?” she asked the doctor across her niece.

“Unwomanly,” said the doctor, “but not unbecoming, I think.”

“I suppose I’ll get used to it,” said Morgen. She turned, taking precedence going up the narrow walk to the front door, and said, stopping and turning, “Now, remember, for heaven’s sake, *don’t* ask Vergil to sing.”

“Morgen!” said Mrs. Arrow with delight, as she opened the front door for them, “and it’s Doctor Wright, too, isn’t it? So dark, with no moon, but of course I *did* know you were coming, didn’t I? So how could it be anyone else? And how are *you,* my dear?”

“A lovely night, lovely,” said Mr. Arrow, with his back to the door, and standing with both arms out ready to receive the coats his wife took away from their guests and handed to him; he held his arms wide and even their three light coats seemed heavy for him, with Doctor Wright’s hat and umbrella neatly on top; he seemed wondering, suddenly, where to put all of this, and he turned vaguely around and around until Mrs. Arrow led him to the closet, and took everything away from him, lifting carefully from the bottom, and then Mr. Arrow stood the doctor’s umbrella in the umbrella stand and hung the doctor’s hat on a peg and then carefully put the coats one by one onto hangers.

While Mr. and Mrs. Arrow were giving the coats back and forth, and making small anxious gestures at one another, in extreme concern lest the tail of Doctor Wright’s coat should touch the floor or Aunt Morgen’s scarf mingle commonly among the Arrow mufflers, Aunt Morgen, as senior guest, who had known Ruth and Vergil Arrow since they were all children together and had been free with their house for long years, led the way into the Arrows' living room, followed by her niece and the doctor. "Well," said Aunt Morgen, touched with a faint embarrassment because these people were her friends and Doctor Wright had not been here before, "here we are." She sat down without looking, as one who knows absolutely that in a room belonging to the Arrows the furniture does not permit itself to be moved from one place to another; "sit here, kiddo, beside me," she said, and bit her lip. "In case you should feel called upon to repeat your remarks on Vergil's singing," she said, and grinned at her niece.

"Perhaps she would be more comfortable over here," said the doctor; he was poised uncertainly between the sofa, which showed by a deep indentation in one corner that it was dedicated to an Arrow, and a chair whose trim lines bespoke, at first glance, a background not in keeping with the rest of the furniture, until a second, and more critical, observation showed its unmistakable ripeness, the line too long, the curve too full, which had surely brought it favor in Mrs. Arrow's eye; "would you sit by me?" the doctor asked.

"Leave her here," said Aunt Morgen. "She's all right."

"Near me, if you please," said the doctor.

They looked at one another, in a kind of quick wonder, and then Mrs. Arrow came between them, gay, and almost clapping her hands. "I'm so *glad* you came at *last,*" she said. "Morgen, it's been *years!* And the doctor, too, of course." She turned, admiring everyone. "And I do believe *you've* cut your hair," she said.

"This afternoon."

"So nice. And it *looks* nice, too; Vergil?"

"Very pretty indeed. Sit down, doctor, sit down."

Pressed, the doctor made his decision and reconciled himself to the ill-made chair. He adjusted his well-proportioned limbs with difficulty to the inaccurate composition of the chair, wriggled uncontrollably once and then, never utterly inarticulate, turned politely to Mrs. Arrow. “A charming home,” he said. “So conveniently located.”

Mrs. Arrow, who was about to regret their long walk coming, was caught unprepared, and could only say, “So nice that you came. And Morgen, too.”

“Kiddo,” Morgen said, turning to look over her shoulder, “won’t you light somewhere? Makes me nervous, you wandering like that.”

“It’s such a lovely night; I’m looking out at the garden.”

Mr. and Mrs. Arrow, who had confidently supposed that all their windows were securely blockaded with the backs of chairs, and small tables holding potted ferns, rose immediately and approached from opposite sides of the room, Mr. Arrow intending to move a chair a little sideways to clear a passage to a window, Mrs. Arrow offering to loop back the curtain; “The roses are not as rich as usual this year,” Mrs. Arrow said apologetically, and Mr. Arrow pointed out that the lilac had not done as expected, “but the hedge,” he said, “the hedge is coming marvelously well. That back privet,” he said, turning, to Morgen, “would amaze you; you wouldn’t believe it.”

“Edmund is there,” Mrs. Arrow said softly, “in the back, under the roses.”

“Could I go out for a while? It looks so quiet.”

“That’s kind of you.” Mrs. Arrow was touched. “Come along, dear; I’ll take you through the back.” She nodded reassuringly at Morgen. “It’s perfectly all right,” she said, “we’ve got that high fence,” and then, turning red, said, “I mean, no one can get *in* or anything,” and went hastily out of the room.

“Put on a sweater, kiddo,” Morgen said.

“Veil that naked head,” said the doctor.

“It’s a nice night for the garden,” said Mr. Arrow. “Often spend a few minutes out there myself. Bench, and all.” He sat down again, on the end of the couch near Doctor Wright, and turned to say, with masculine concern, “You given any thought, Doctor, to this new idea about street lighting? Waste of money, *I* call it; when you consider—”

Mrs. Arrow hurried back into the room and over to Morgen. “*Perfectly* happy,” she said. “Quite warm enough, sheltered, quiet, and I thought she was so sweet about Edmund. He was genuinely fond of her, you know.”

“We let her do pretty much as she pleases,” Morgen said solemnly.

“You know, she *looks* better,” Mrs. Arrow said confidentially. “Tell you the truth, Morgen, last time *I* saw her — that must have been nearly a year ago, wasn’t it? that day I met you two in the restaurant, and she was laughing so? — well, anyway, I thought *then* she seemed poorly, not at *all* herself. Has she been...” Mrs. Arrow paused delicately, and lifted her eyebrows at Doctor Wright inquiringly.

“A nervous fever,” said Aunt Morgen smoothly.

Mrs. Arrow turned and looked openly at Doctor Wright. “I would have thought,” she said, “that Doctor Ryan... of course, he’s a *younger* man.”

“We have the greatest confidence in Doctor Wright,” said Morgen, raising her voice slightly to be heard with clarity across the room. “*Complete* confidence.”

“Not unlike,” said Doctor Wright to Mr. Arrow, “the familiar practice of impaling a living man on a maypole. Disagreeable only to the victim, if, indeed, he himself is not transported with ecstasy. I would not suppose, however, that in the present day...”

“Not,” said Mr. Arrow valiantly, “with the town manager system the way it’s set up most places.”

Mrs. Arrow put her hand over Morgen’s. “I just want to say that I think you’ve been pretty brave, Morgen, just pretty brave. There aren’t many people,” she finished, and nodded emphatically. “I wonder,” said Morgen, half-rising. “I’ll just take a look at her through the kitchen window.”

“Of course.” Mrs. Arrow smiled sympathetically. “I *know* she’s all right, though; you mustn’t worry so.”

“I just want to know if she’s still there,” Morgen said.

Mrs. Arrow smiled at Morgen’s back, shook her head with a tender little sigh, and turned to the gentlemen; “A glass of sherry?” she asked brightly.

“Ah?” said Mr. Arrow dimly.

“Sherry, Doctor Wright?”

“Thank you, thank you. On the other hand, although I am at best only very slightly informed in these matters, I would suppose that the mandrake, which shrieks, you will recall, only when uprooted—”

“You all right, kiddo?” Aunt Morgen said, looking down from the kitchen window.

“Yes, thank you, Aunt Morgen.”

“What you doing?”

“Sitting on the bench. The roses are lovely.”

“You warm enough?”

“Yes, thank you.”

“All right. Call me if you need anything.”

“ — And I think Morgen will bear me out in my theory that witchcraft is little more than the judicious administration of the bizarre.”

“Yes, indeed,” said Morgen, seating herself. “She’s fine,” she told the doctor.

“Certainly. This is overprotection, Morgen; our lamb will not leave the fold, particularly since the fence is so high. Morgen’s interest in what is called ‘modern’ art—”

“Modern rubbish, *I* call it,” said Mr. Arrow, stung to vehemence. “I don’t know about your interest in music, sir, but I always say that a ten-year-old *boy* could do better.”

“You’re talking to the man who wanted to burn all my paintings, Vergil,” said Morgen. “Until I offered to throw him in after them.”

“I have very little desire,” said the doctor dryly, “to stand in as a human sacrifice to ensure the fertility of Morgen’s artistic self-expression.” He gave a pleased little wriggle in his uncomfortable chair.

“*I* wouldn’t have minded,” Morgen said.

“Each life, I think,” said the doctor, “asks the devouring of other lives for its own continuance; the radical aspect of ritual sacrifice, the performance of a group, its great step ahead, was in organization; *sharing* the victim was so eminently practical.”

“And such a social occasion,” Morgen murmured. “I can just see you, Victor.”

“And you wouldn’t be the first, either,” said Mr. Arrow, coming squarely to grips with the conversation. “You take Kipling, and all the great musicians. *They* didn’t have anyone to help them.”

“Kipling?” said Doctor Wright injudiciously.

“Mandalay, I was thinking of. Maybe, if you haven’t ever heard it, I could—”

“Lovely,” said Morgen, looking at the doctor with evil intensity. “Victor would love to hear you sing.”

“I should be delighted,” said the doctor. “I was speaking of the custom of human sacrifice; I have been led to understand that although it is, as a practice, deplored generally today, the initiate into the secret society—”

“What exactly *was* wrong with her?” Mrs. Arrow, coming up to Morgen with a tray, spoke too loudly, and there was silence in the room. Mrs. Arrow looked around, discomfited, and then said boldly, “Well, we’ve known her ever since she was *so* high, and I think we’ve shown enough interest to be told.”

“*Very* old family friends,” Mr. Arrow confirmed.

“A nervous fever,” Morgen said.

The doctor spoke slowly, in a measured voice, seeming to estimate the suitability of each of his phrases for the ears of Mr. and Mrs. Arrow: “The human creature at odds with its environment,” he said, “must change either its own protective coloration, or the shape of the world in which it lives. Equipped with no magic device beyond a not overly sharp intelligence,” and the doctor hesitated, perhaps lost in wonder at his own precarious eminence, “intelligence,” he went on firmly, “the human creature finds it tempting to endeavor to control its surroundings through manipulated symbols of sorcery, arbitrarily chosen, and frequently ineffectual. Suppose a gazelle, discovering itself to be colored blue when all other gazelles—”

“A nervous fever, you said?” Mrs. Arrow whispered to Morgen, and Morgen nodded.

“My cousin—” Mr. Arrow began in a low voice, but Doctor Wright frowned him down.

“ — will take refuge, first, in disbelief, in a convincing refusal to perceive colors, a state of confused bewilderment—”

“Like that fellow you mentioned, the one on the maypole,” said Mr. Arrow, hoping to atone for his previous interruption by a show of intelligent comprehension.

“In any case,” said Morgen, overwhelmingly, “I think our pet gazelle had better come indoors.” She rose. “I’ll get her.”

Doctor Wright turned alertly to Mr. Arrow, but this time Mr. Arrow was ready. “Since you were kind enough to ask me,” Mr. Arrow said, “I’ll just get out my music.”

* * *

Later, walking home companionably through the warm summer night, she put one hand through Morgen’s arm and one hand through the doctor’s arm and walked in step between them. “And all that faradiddle,” Morgen was saying.

“Not faradiddle at all.” The doctor was hurt. “I thought I did it very nicely.”

“Hah,” said Morgen. “And the way you play bridge.”

“Bridge is a game for the undivided intellect,” said the doctor. “Like your own.” He bowed to Morgen, as well as he could, walking through the night with her niece between them.

“You know what I was thinking, out in the garden?”

“What?” said Aunt Morgen, and “Yes?” said the doctor.

“I was looking at the flowers, thinking of their names, as though I were naming them, and had to see that each one had a name, and it was the right name. It’s harder than it sounds.”

“Like what?” said Morgen.

“And the stars — I named some of the stars, too.”

“And yourself?” said the doctor.

She nodded, smiling.

“This child is without a name,” the doctor said across her to Morgen. “Did you know?”

Morgen thought, and then laughed. “I guess she is,” she said, “but I hadn’t noticed.” She laughed again, and pressed her niece’s arm. “If you’re taking on a new name, how about Morgen this time?”

“Victoria?” suggested the doctor.

“Morgen Victoria,” Morgen amended generously.

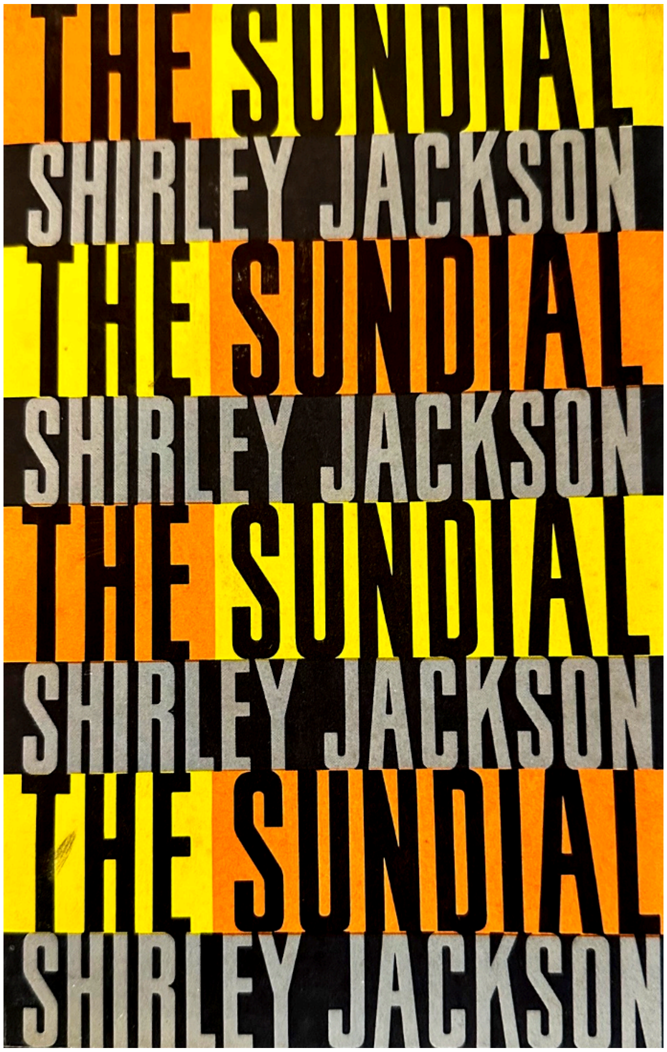
“Victoria Morgen,” said the doctor.

She laughed, too, holding both their arms. “I’m happy,” she said, just as she had that afternoon. “I know who I am,” she said, and walked on with them, arm in arm, and laughing.

The Sundial (1958)

By the time of writing *The Sundial* in 1957, Jackson was taking care of four children and performing all the other domestic duties, while also earning more than her husband. She felt isolated and ostracised by fellow residents in her North Bennington village and considered herself an outsider. The situation was exacerbated by an incident in late 1956, when she discovered her daughter, Sarah, alongside some other students, had been physically abused by a teacher at their school. Jackson demanded that the accused was dismissed, but was met with furious resistance from many in the community. The author and her family received hate mail and the teacher remained in her job.

The Sundial is a psychological horror novel with elements of dark humour and apocalyptic terror. It centres on the peculiar and dysfunctional Halloran family, who at the start of the novel have just buried Lionel Halloran, the master of the mansion in which they all reside. Lionel's wife is convinced that his spiteful mother, Orianna, killed him so she could assume control of the property and its wealth. After Orianna's sister-in-law, Fanny, has a vision of the world ending and only those in the house being spared, the occupants begin to prepare for the apocalypse and their salvation. Jackson crafts a bleakly comic and unsettling tale about a group of deeply unpleasant, entitled and manipulative people trying to navigate an absurd situation.


THE SUNDIAL
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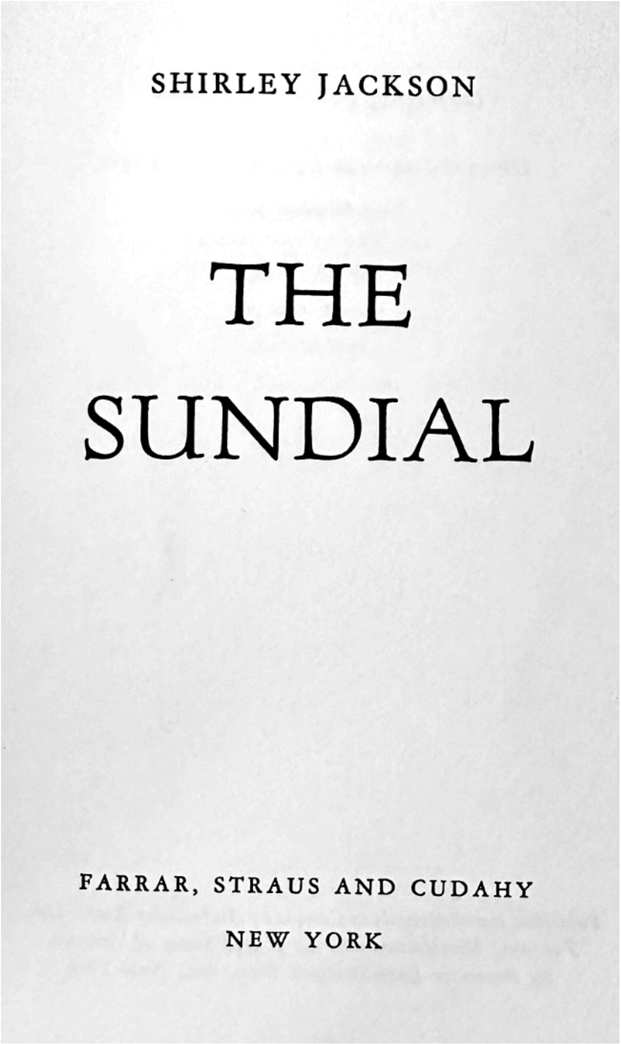

SHIRLEY JACKSON

THE
SUNDIAL

FARRAR, STRAUS AND CUDAHY
NEW YORK

The first edition's title page

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AFTER THE FUNERAL they came back to the house, now indisputably Mrs. Halloran's. They stood uneasily, without any certainty, in the large lovely entrance hall, and watched Mrs. Halloran go into the right wing of the house to let Mr. Halloran know that Lionel's last rites had gone off without melodrama. Young Mrs. Halloran, looking after her mother-in-law, said without hope, "Maybe she will drop dead on the doorstep. Fancy, dear, would you like to see Granny drop dead on the doorstep?"

"Yes, mother." Fancy pulled at the long skirt of the black dress her grandmother had put on her. Young Mrs. Halloran felt that black was not suitable for a ten-year-old girl, and that the dress was too long in any case, and certainly too plain and coarse for a family of the Halloran prestige; she had had an asthma attack on the very morning of the funeral to prove her point, but Fancy had been put into the black dress nevertheless. The long black skirt had entertained her during the funeral, and in the car, and if it had not been for her grandmother's presence she might very well have enjoyed the day absolutely.

"I am going to pray for it as long as I live," said young Mrs. Halloran, folding her hands together devoutly.

"Shall I push her?" Fancy asked. "Like she pushed my daddy?"

"Fancy!" said Miss Ogilvie.

"Let her say it if she wants," young Mrs. Halloran said. "I want her to remember it, anyway. Say it again, Fancy baby."

"Granny killed my daddy," said Fancy obediently. "She pushed him down the stairs and killed him. Granny did it. Didn't she?"

Miss Ogilvie raised her eyes to heaven, but lowered her voice in respect for the sad occasion of the day, "Maryjane," she said, "you are perverting that child's mind and very possibly ruining her chances of inheriting—"

"On this day," young Mrs. Halloran said, putting her mouse face into an expression of reproachful dignity, "I want it clearly understood by all of you, everyone here, and remembered always, *if* you don't mind. Fancy is a fatherless orphan today because that nasty old woman couldn't *stand* it if the house belonged to anyone else and I was still a wife, a beloved helpmeet." She breathed shallowly, and pressed her hands to her chest. "Pushed him down the stairs," she said sullenly.

"The king, thy murdered father's ghost," Essex said to Fancy. He yawned, and moved on the velvet bench, and stretched. "Where are the funeral baked meats? The old woman can't be planning to starve us, now she's got it all?"

"This is unspeakable," said young Mrs. Halloran, "to think of food, with Lionel barely cold. Fancy," and she held out her hand. Fancy moved unwillingly, her long black skirt swinging, and young Mrs. Halloran turned to the great stairway. "My place now is with my fatherless orphaned child," she said over her shoulder. "They must send my dinner up with Fancy's. Anyway I believe I am going to have more asthma."

WHEN SHALL WE LIVE IF NOT NOW? was painted in black gothic letters touched with gold over the arched window at the landing on the great stairway; young Mrs. Halloran paused before the window and turned, Fancy toiling upward still, entangled in her skirt. "My grief," young Mrs. Halloran said, one hand on her breast and the other barely touching the wide polished handrail, "my lasting grief. Hurry *up*, Fancy." Together, young Mrs. Halloran leaning lightly upon the shoulder of her daughter, they moved out of sight down the hall, into the vastness of the upper left wing which, until so recently, they had shared with Lionel.

Essex looked after them with distaste. “I should think Lionel would have welcomed the thought of dying,” he said.

“Don’t be vulgar,” said Miss Ogilvie. “Even with me, please remember that we are employees, not members of the family.”

“*I* am here, however, if you please,” Aunt Fanny said suddenly from the darkest corner of the hall. “You will of course have overlooked the fact that Aunt Fanny is here, but I beg of you, do not inhibit your conversation on *my* account. I am a member of the family, surely, but that need not—”

Essex yawned again. “I’m hungry,” he said.

“I wonder if it will be a proper dinner? This is the first funeral since I’ve been here,” Miss Ogilvie said, “and I’m not sure how she manages. I suppose we’ll sit down, though.”

“No one will waste a minute’s thought if Aunt Fanny stays safely in her room,” Aunt Fanny said. “Tell my brother’s wife,” she said to Essex, “that I will join her in grief after dinner.”

“My first funeral, too,” Essex said. Lazily, he stood up and stretched again. “Makes you sleepy. You think the old lady’s locked up the gin in honor of the day?”

“They’ll have plenty in the kitchen,” Miss Ogilvie said. “But just a teensy one for me, thanks.”

“It’s over,” Mrs. Halloran said. She stood behind her husband’s wheel chair, looking down onto the back of his head with no need, now, to control her boredom. Before Mr. Halloran had become permanently established in his wheel chair Mrs. Halloran had frequently found it difficult to restrain her face, or the small withdrawing gestures of her hands, but now that Mr. Halloran was in the wheel chair, and could not turn quickly, Mrs. Halloran was always graceful with him, standing protectively behind him and keeping her voice gentle.

"He's gone, Richard," she said. "Everything went off beautifully."

Mr. Halloran had been crying, but this was not unusual; since he had been made to realize that he would not, now, be vouchsafed a second run at youth he cried easily and often. "My only son," Mr. Halloran said, whispering.

"Yes." Mrs. Halloran forebade her fingers to drum restlessly upon the back of the wheel chair; one should not fidget in the presence of an invalid; in the presence of an old man imprisoned in a wheel chair one ought not to be impatient. Mrs. Halloran sighed, soundlessly. "Try to be brave," she said.

"Do you remember," Mr. Halloran asked, quavering, "when he was born, we rang the bells over the carriage house?"

"Indeed we did," Mrs. Halloran said heartily. "I can have the bells rung again, if you like."

"I think not," Mr. Halloran said. "I think not. They might not understand, down in the village, and we must not indulge our own sentimental memories at the expense of public opinion. I think not. In any case," he added, "the bells are not loud enough to reach Lionel now."

"Now that Lionel is gone," Mrs. Halloran said, "I am going to have to get someone to manage the estate."

"Lionel did it very poorly. At one time the rose garden was perfectly visible from my terrace, and now I can only see hedges. I want the hedges all cut down. At once."

"You are not to excite yourself, Richard. You were always a good father, and I will have the hedges trimmed."

Mr. Halloran stirred, and his eyes filled again with tears. "Do you remember," he said, "I wanted to keep his curls?"

Mrs. Halloran put a little wistful smile on her face and came around the wheel chair to look at her husband. “Dear Richard,” she said. “This is not healthy for you. I know that Lionel loved you better than anyone in the world.”

“That’s not proper,” Mr. Halloran said. “Lionel has a wife and child, now, and his father must no longer come first. Orianna, you must speak to Lionel. Tell him that I will not have it. His first, his only duty is to the good woman he married, and his sweet child. Tell Lionel …” He stopped uncertainly. “*Is* it Lionel who died?” he asked after a minute.

Mrs. Halloran moved around to the back of the wheel chair and permitted herself to close her eyes tiredly. Lifting her hand with deliberation, she put it down softly onto her husband’s shoulder, and said, “His funeral went off very well.”

“Do you remember,” the old man said, “we rang the bells over the carriage house when he was born?”

Mrs. Halloran set her wine glass down very quietly, looked from Essex to Miss Ogilvie and said, “Aunt Fanny will be down for dessert?”

“Adding the final touch of jubilation to a day of perfect happiness,” Essex said.

Mrs. Halloran looked at him for a minute. “At such a remark,” she said finally, “Lionel would have found it necessary to remind you that you were not here to be ironic, but to paint murals in the breakfast room.”

“Orianna *dear*,” said Essex with a little false laugh, “I had not suspected you of fallibility; the one painting murals in the breakfast room was the *last* young man; *I* am the young man who is supposed to be cataloguing the library.”

“Lionel wouldn’t have known,” Miss Ogilvie said, and turned pink.

"But he would have suspected," Mrs. Halloran said agreeably, and then, "Aunt Fanny is at the door; I hear her little cough. Essex, go and let her in, or she will never bring herself to turn the doorknob."

Essex opened the door with a flourish; "Good evening, Aunt Fanny," he said. "I hope this sad day has agreed with you?"

"No one needs to worry over me, thank you. Good evening, Orianna, Miss Ogilvie. Please don't bother, really; you know perfectly well Aunt Fanny is not one to worry over. Orianna, I shall be glad to stand."

"Essex," said Mrs. Halloran, "set a chair for Aunt Fanny."

"I'm sure the young man would rather not, Orianna. I am accustomed to taking care of myself, as *you* have surely discovered."

"A glass of wine for Aunt Fanny, Essex."

"I take wine only with my equals, Orianna. My brother Richard—"

"Is resting. He has had his dinner, Aunt Fanny, and his medicine, and I promise you that nothing will prevent your seeing him later in the evening. Aunt Fanny, sit down at once."

"I was not brought up to take orders, Orianna, but I suppose you are mistress here now."

"Indeed I am. Essex." Mrs. Halloran turned easily in her chair and leaned her head back comfortably. "I want to hear how you wasted your youth. Only the scandalous parts."

"The path gets straighter and narrower all the time," Essex said. "The years press in. The path becomes a knife edge and I creep along, holding on even to that, the years closing in on either side and overhead."

"That's not very scandalous," Mrs. Halloran said.

"I am afraid," Aunt Fanny said, "that this young man did not have what we used to call 'advantages'. Not everyone, Orianna, was fortunate enough to grow up in luxury and plenty. As of course *you* know perfectly well."

“The statistics scratch at your eyes,” Essex said. “When I was twenty, and could not see time at all, the chances of my dying of heart disease were one in a hundred and twelve. When I was twenty-five and deluded for the first time by a misguided passion, the chances of my dying of cancer were one in seventy-eight. When I was thirty, and the days and hours began to close in, the chances of my dying in an accident were one in fifty-three. Now I am thirty-two years old, and the path getting narrower all the time, and the chances of my dying of anything at all are one in one.”

“Very profound,” said Mrs. Halloran, “but still not altogether scandalous.”

“Miss Ogilvie,” said Essex, “treasures in an ebony box stolen from the music room and hidden under the handkerchiefs in the top right hand drawer of her dresser the small notes Richard Halloran wrote her four years ago, before, although it is perhaps rude to mention it, he took to his wheel chair. He left one every evening for her, under the big blue cloisonné vase in the main hall.”

“Good heavens,” said Miss Ogilvie, pale. “*That* could not be what she means by scandal.”

“Do not trouble yourself, Miss Ogilvie,” Mrs. Halloran said, amused. “In his capacity as librarian Essex has become accustomed to spying on all of you. He brings me very entertaining stories, and his information is always accurate.”

“A moment of truth,” said Aunt Fanny tightly. “Coarse and vulgar I said *then*, and coarse and vulgar I say *now*.”

“I would not have stayed on—” Miss Ogilvie began with difficulty.

“Of course you would have stayed on. Nothing could have dislodged you; your mistake,” Mrs. Halloran said kindly, “was in supposing you could dislodge *me*. Aunt Fanny’s mistake, in a word.”

"This is needless and disgusting," Aunt Fanny said. "Orianna, if I might have your gracious permission to retire?"

"Stay and finish your wine, Aunt Fanny, and Essex will think of more scandalous stories for you."

"The path gets narrower all the time," Essex said, grinning. "Does Aunt Fanny remember the evening when she drank Lionel's birthday champagne and asked me—"

"I believe I am going to be ill," Aunt Fanny said.

"You have my gracious permission," Mrs. Halloran said. "Essex, I am not pleased. *You* must be above suspicion, even if Aunt Fanny is not. Fanny, if you *are* going to make some demonstration, please get it over with; I want to have my walk before we play backgammon, and my schedule has already been much disturbed today. Miss Ogilvie, have you finished your wine?"

"You are going to play backgammon?" demanded Aunt Fanny, distracted. "Tonight?"

"It is *my* house now, Aunt Fanny, as you have reminded me. I see no reason why I should not play backgammon in it."

"Coarse is coarse," Aunt Fanny said. "This is a house of mourning."

"I am sure that Lionel would have foregone dying, Aunt Fanny, if he thought his funeral would interfere with my backgammon. Miss Ogilvie, *have* you finished your wine now?" Mrs. Halloran rose. "Essex?" she said.

The character of the house is perhaps of interest. It stood upon a small rise in ground, and all the land it surveyed belonged to the Halloran family. The Halloran land was distinguished from the rest of the world by a stone wall, which went completely around the estate, so that all inside the wall was Halloran, all outside was not. The first Mr. Halloran, father to Richard and Aunt Fanny — Frances Halloran she was then — was a man who, in the astonishment of finding himself suddenly extremely wealthy, could think of nothing better to do with his money than set up his own world. His belief about the house, only very dimly conveyed to the architect, the decorators, the carpenters and landscapers and masons and hodcarriers who put it together, was that it should contain everything. The other world, the one the Hallorans were leaving behind, was to be plundered ruthlessly for objects of beauty to go in and around Mr. Halloran's house; infinite were the delights to be prepared for its inhabitants. The house must be endlessly decorated and adorned, the grounds constructed and tended with exquisite care. There were to be swans on the ornamental lake before the house, and a pagoda somewhere, and a maze and a rose garden. The walls of the house were to be painted in soft colors with scenes of nymphs and satyrs sporting among flowers and trees. There was to be a great deal of silver, a great deal of gold, much in the way of enamel and mother-of-pearl. Mr. Halloran did not care much for pictures, but conceded a certain few to the decorator; he did, however, insist upon one picture of himself — he was a practical and a vain man — to be hung over the mantel of the room the architect, inventing madly, was calling "your drawing room." Mr. Halloran did not care for books, but he bowed to the incredulous smiles of the architect and decorator, and included a library, which was properly stocked with marble busts and ten thousand volumes, all leather-bound, which arrived by railroad and were carried carton by carton into the library and unpacked with care and set in order on the shelves by people hired to do the work. Mr. Halloran set his heart upon a sundial, and it was ordered from a particular firm in Philadelphia which was very good for that kind of thing, and Mr. Halloran himself selected the spot where it would go. He had half hoped that the inscription on the sundial — left to the discretion of the people in Philadelphia who knew so much about that kind of thing — would be "It is later than you think,” or perhaps even “The moving finger writes, and having writ,” but through the fancy of someone in Philadelphia — and no one ever knew who — the sundial arrived inscribed WHAT IS THIS WORLD? After a while Mr. Halloran quite fancied it, having persuaded himself that it was a remark about time.

The sundial was set into place with as much care as the books had been put into the library, and properly engineered and timed, and anyone who cared to ignore the little jade clock in the drawing room or the grandfather clock in the library or the marble clock in the dining room could go out onto the lawn and see the time by the sun. From any of the windows on that side of the house, which was the garden front looking out over the ornamental lake, the people in the house could see the sundial in the middle distance, set to one side of the long sweep of the lawn. Mr. Halloran had been a methodical man. There were twenty windows to the left wing of the house, and twenty windows to the right; because the great door in the center was double, on the second floor there were forty-two windows across and forty-two on the third floor, lodged directly under the elaborate carvings on the roof edge; Mr. Halloran had directed that the carvings on the roof be flowers and horns of plenty, and there is no doubt that they were done as he said.

On either side of the door the terrace went to the right for eighty-six black tiles and eighty-six white tiles, and equally to the left. There were a hundred and six thin pillars holding up the marble balustrade on the left, and a hundred and six on the right; on the left eight wide shallow marble steps led down to the lawn, and eight on the right. The lawn swept precisely around the blue pool — which was square — and up in a vastly long lovely movement to a summer house built like a temple to some minor mathematical god; the temple was open, with six slim pillars on either side.

Although no attempt had actually been made to match leaf for leaf and branch for branch the tended trees which bordered the lawn on either side, there were four poplars, neatly spaced, around the summer house; inside, the summer house was painted in green and gold, and vines had been trained over its roof and along the pillars supporting it.

Intruding purposefully upon the entire scene, an inevitable focus, was the sundial, set badly off center and reading WHAT IS THIS WORLD?

After the first Mr. Halloran had his house, painted and paneled and brocaded and jeweled and carpeted, with sheets of silk on the beds and water colored blue in the pool, he brought his wife, the first Mrs. Halloran, and his two small children to live there. Mrs. Halloran died there within three months, without ever having seen more of the sundial than the view from her bedroom window; she did not go to the center of the maze nor visit the secret garden, she never walked into the orchard to pick herself an apricot, although fresh fruit was brought her every morning in a translucent blue bowl; roses were brought her from the rose garden and orchids and gardenias from the hothouses, and in the evenings she was carried downstairs to sit in a chair before the great fire in what Mr. Halloran was by now frankly calling the drawing room. Mrs. Halloran had been born in a two-family house on the outskirts of a far-off city where most of the year seemed wintry, and she felt that she had never been warm in her life until she sat before the great fire in her drawing room. She could not bring herself to believe that in this house she would never see winter again, and even the eternal summer in her room, of roses and gardenias and apricots, did not reassure her; she died believing that snow was falling outside the window.

The second Mrs. Halloran was Orianna, Richard’s wife, who had made a particular point of behaving with appreciation and docility while her father-in-law was alive. “I believe,” she told Richard once, after they had returned from their honeymoon in the Orient and settled down in the big house, “I believe that it is our duty to make your father’s last years happy ones. After all, he is your one living relative.”

“He is not at all my one living relative,” Richard pointed out, puzzled. “There is my sister Frances, and my Uncle Harvey and his wife in New York and their children. And I am sure I have other second and third cousins.”

“But none of them has any control over your father’s money.”

“Did you marry me for my father’s money?”

“Well, that, and the house.”

“Tell me again,” Mrs. Halloran said, looking down at the sundial in the warm evening darkness.

“‘What is this world?’” Essex said quietly, “‘What asketh man to have? Now with his love, now in his colde grave, Allone, with-outen any companye.’”

“I dislike it.” Standing in silence, Mrs. Halloran reached out and touched a finger to the sundial; there were faint noises of leaves stirring and a movement in the water of the pool. In the darkness the house seemed very far away, its lights small, and Mrs. Halloran, touching the sundial, moved her finger along a W, and thought: without it the lawn would be empty. It is a point of human wickedness; it is a statement that the human eye is unable to look unblinded upon mathematical perfection. I am earthly, Mrs. Halloran reminded herself conscientiously, I must look at the sundial like anyone else. I am not inhuman; if the sundial were taken away I, too, would have to avert my eyes until I saw imperfection, a substitute sundial — perhaps a star.

“Are you warm enough?” Essex asked. “You shivered.”

“No,” said Mrs. Halloran. “I think it has turned quite chilly. We had better go back to the house.”

Walking, Mrs. Halloran caressed with her soft steps the fine unyielding property she walked upon; she was not unable to perceive the similar firmness of Essex’ arm under his sleeve, and she felt the very small tensing of his muscles as equally a response to her perfection and a little gesture of protection; this is all mine, she thought, savoring the sweet quiet stone and earth and leaf and blade of her holding. She remembered then that she had decided to send Essex away and thought, smiling a little, poor Essex, unable to comprehend that the essence of the good courtier must be insecurity. Now I own the house, she thought, and could not speak, for love of it.

In the big drawing room Richard Halloran sat by the fire in his wheel chair, and Miss Ogilvie sat, pointedly remote, at a table far away with Aunt Fanny. Miss Ogilvie was holding a book and Aunt Fanny was playing solitaire; she had clearly not felt herself entitled to turn on an adequate light, and both she and Miss Ogilvie bent, squinting.

“Orianna,” said her husband, when Mrs. Halloran and Essex came in through the tall doors from the terrace, “I was thinking about Lionel.”

“Of course you were, Richard.” Mrs. Halloran gave her scarf to Essex, and went to stand behind her husband’s wheel chair. “Try not to think about it,” she said. “You’ll have trouble sleeping.”

“He was my son,” Richard Halloran said, patiently explaining.

Mrs. Halloran leaned forward. “Shall I move you away from the fire, Richard? Are you too warm?”

“Don’t badger him,” Aunt Fanny said. She lifted a card to hold it pointedly toward the light and look at it. “Richard was always perfectly capable of making his own decisions, Orianna, even about his own comfort.”

"Mr. Halloran has always been such a forceful man," Miss Ogilvie added fondly.

"We rang the bells over the carriage house for his first birthday," Mr. Halloran explained across the room to Aunt Fanny and Miss Ogilvie. "My wife thought we might ring the bells again today — as a sort of farewell, you know — but I thought not. What do you think, Fanny?"

"By no means," Aunt Fanny said firmly. "In deplorable taste. Naturally." She looked at Mrs. Halloran, and said "Naturally," again.

"Essex," said Mrs. Halloran, not moving. "I wonder if we should have them ring the bells, after all." Essex, crossing the room with the soundless step of a cat, stood beside her attentively, and Mr. Halloran nodded and said, "Thoughtful. He would have liked it. We rang the bells over the carriage house," he told Miss Ogilvie, "for his first birthday, and then every birthday after that, until he asked us not to do it any more."

"I am afraid, however, that it is too late to ring the bells tonight," Mrs. Halloran told her husband gravely.

"You are right, my dear, as always, Poor Lionel would not hear them, in any case. Perhaps tomorrow will not be too late."

"Lionel was a fine man," Miss Ogilvie said, drooping mournfully. "We will miss him."

"Yes, you must get someone to cut down the hedges," Mr. Halloran said to his wife.

"His father was always everything a boy could desire," said Aunt Fanny. "Richard, are you too warm by the fire? You always disliked being overheated. Although," she added, "the fire is not very high, apparently. At least, it gives almost no light."

"Essex," said Mrs. Halloran, "go and turn on the lamp for Aunt Fanny."

“Thank you, no,” Aunt Fanny said. “It is never necessary to consult *my* comfort, Orianna. You are perfectly aware that I ask for nothing at your hands. Or,” she added, glancing at Essex, who stood by her, “at the hands of a hired—”

“Young man to catalogue the library,” Essex supplied.

“Mr. Halloran,” Miss Ogilvie asked, “may I get you a shawl to throw over your shoulders? Perhaps your back is cold? I know one’s back so often is, even when the fire is warming one’s …” she hesitated, “extremities,” she said.

“Do you mean feet, Miss Ogilvie?” Mrs. Halloran asked. “Because I assure you that Richard still has his, although they are not often visible. Miss Ogilvie is concerned about your feet,” she said down to her husband.

“My feet?” He smiled. “Don’t do much walking any more,” he explained gallantly to Miss Ogilvie, who blushed.

“Aunt Fanny,” Mrs. Halloran said, and they all turned to her, wondering at her voice, “I am happy to hear that you ask for nothing at my hands, because there is something I am going to tell all of you, and Aunt Fanny reassures me.”

“I?” said Aunt Fanny, astonished.

“The essence of life,” said Mrs. Halloran gently, “is change, you will all, being intelligent people, agree. Our one recent change — I refer, of course, to the departure of Lionel—”

“It *was* Lionel, then,” Mr. Halloran said, nodding to himself before the fire.

“ — has been both refreshing and agreeable. We could very well do without Lionel. I am now convinced that a thorough housecleaning is necessary. Richard will stay, of course.” She put her hand on her husband’s shoulder and he nodded again, gratified. “Essex,” said Mrs. Halloran. “I wonder if we have not detained you past your time?”

“The library—” said Essex, putting his fingers against his mouth and staring.

“I think I shall let the library go for a while,” Mrs. Halloran said, “and get someone to paint murals in my dressing-room. You will, of course, receive a small settlement to start you on some small scholarly pursuit.”

“The path,” Essex said tightly, “gets narrower all the time.”

“So wise of you,” Mrs. Halloran said.

“I would have hoped—” Essex tried. “I would hope that after—”

“Essex, you are thirty-two years old. It is not too late for you to find a career in life. You might work with your hands. You may of course take a day or so to plan. Miss Ogilvie,” and Miss Ogilvie put out her hand blindly and took hold of her chair arm. “I am pleased with you,” Mrs. Halloran said. “This is not criticism, Miss Ogilvie. You are a gentlewoman, of a sort too rarely found in the world today; you have been sheltered — you came, I think, just shortly before Fancy was born? — you have been sheltered from the world all your life, and I would not thoughtlessly put you out to live exposed. I think we shall put you into a little boarding house, genteel, of course — you may be positive that it will be genteel, and altogether suitable for your condition of life and your breeding; some watering place? A spot by the sea? In the off season you will play cribbage with other ladies of similar station in life. Perhaps during some warm autumn month you will fall into the hands of an adventurer, carried away by the sound of the sea and the fading merriment on the pier; perhaps even Essex, in his trackless scholarly wanderings, will find you and take your money away from you. You would of course be perfectly safe in the hands of an ordinary adventurer, since the little nest egg I will give you will be absolutely out of your control; I feel that it is only wise."

"This is heartless." Miss Ogilvie sank back in her chair. "I have not deserved this."

"Perhaps not. But you must allow me my impulse of generosity. I insist upon the nest egg."

"And I? Am I to be turned out, too?"

"Dear Aunt Fanny, this is your home. Do you suppose me ungrateful enough to turn you away from the home of your childhood? You have lived here with your mother, with your father — a fine man; I remember your father."

"My mother and father have nothing to do with *you*. My brother—"

"Yes," said Mrs. Halloran. "You went to your first, and only, dance, in the ballroom here; Miss Halloran, you were then; we must not lose sight of Miss Halloran in Aunt Fanny. Equally, however, your brother and I are alone now; we have not been alone in this house since our marriage. There is room enough for you and me in the house, Fanny," Mrs. Halloran said indulgently.

"I have never thought so," Aunt Fanny said.

"Do you recall the tower, Fanny? Your father built it; it was to have been an observatory, was it not? I remember workmen there during my early days in the house. The tower could be made extremely comfortable. You may even take some of my furniture up there; I have no objection to your choosing anything in the house, except, of course, those objects of particular sentimental value; the blue cloisonné vase in the hall will go with Miss Ogilvie."

"I will take my mother's jewelry."

"I daresay that people in this house years from now will begin to talk of the haunted tower." Mrs. Halloran laughed. "Well," she said, "who is left now? It will be lonely here for Maryjane, I know; I am positive that she had a genuine feeling for Lionel, although I would not care to define it any further than that. I think I shall send Maryjane home again. Lionel found her in a public library in the city, so that is where she is going. She had a little apartment at the time, and I shall arrange for her to have her little apartment back again. She will not absolutely have to go back to work in the library, because of course I will be generous. She may even take up again with her old friends as though no time had passed; I am afraid, however, that she must not hope to find a second Lionel. One Lionel in a lifetime is, I believe, quite enough for anyone."

"And Fancy?" said Miss Ogilvie, barely speaking. "I am her governess, I should—"

"Fancy is mine, too, now," Mrs. Halloran said, smiling. "Some day everything I have will belong to Fancy, and I think to keep Fancy with me."

"*I* think you've been joking with us," Essex said, his voice flat, and without life. "It's one of your jokes, Orianna. You want us all to be frightened, and beg, and then you will laugh and say you were joking—"

"Do you really think so, Essex? Then I will be interested to see how far my joke will go before you beg. Richard?" Mr. Halloran opened his eyes and smiled. "Bedtime," he said cheerfully. Mrs. Halloran turned the wheel chair. "Goodnight," she said; "Goodnight," Mr. Halloran said, and Mrs. Halloran had pushed the wheel chair almost to the door before Essex ran to open it for her.

Miss Ogilvie was crying, not noisily, but obtrusively; she had cried slightly when Lionel died, but her tears then had been more formal, and she had kept her nose from turning red. Aunt Fanny sat in patient grimness, staring into the fire. Her hands were folded in her lap; when her brother and sister-in-law left the room Aunt Fanny had said “Goodnight, Richard,” and had not spoken since. Essex walked, because when he was still he saw himself; “Cringing,” he said, “fetching and lying and spying and outraging, and turned away as I deserve. Aunt Fanny,” he said, “Miss Ogilvie — we are contemptible.”

“I always tried to do what was best,” Miss Ogilvie said miserably. “She had no right to speak to me so.”

“It was true,” Essex said. “I was shallowly protected; I thought I was clever and quick and invulnerable, and that is not a very good protection; I thought she was fond of me, and I made myself into a pet monkey.”

“She could have broken it more gently,” Miss Ogilvie said.

“An ape, a grotesque little monster.”

“Be quiet,” said Aunt Fanny, and they turned to her, surprised. She was looking toward the door; it opened, and Fancy slipped in.

“Fancy,” said Aunt Fanny, “your grandfather would not like you to be downstairs so late. Go at once to your room.”

Disregarding Aunt Fanny utterly, Fancy moved to the fireplace and sat crosslegged on the hearth rug. “I spend a lot of time in here,” she said. “When you’re all in bed, mostly.” She looked directly at Miss Ogilvie. “You snore,” she said.

Miss Ogilvie, goaded, almost snarled. “You ought to be spanked,” she said.

Fancy ran her hand richly along the soft hearth rug. “It’s going to belong to me when my grandmother dies,” she said. “When my grandmother dies, no one can stop the house and everything from being mine.”

“Your grandfather—” Aunt Fanny said. “My brother—”

"Well," said Fancy, as one explaining to an unreasonable child, "of course I know that it really belongs to Grandfather. Because it belongs to the Hallorans. But it doesn't really *seem* to, does it? Sometimes I wish my grandmother would die."

"Little beast," said Essex.

"This is not properly spoken, Fancy," Miss Ogilvie said gravely. "It is very rude of you to think about your grandmother's dying, when she has been so kind to you. And it is very rude to steal about the house at night spying on people and then making comments on—" She hesitated. "You ought to behave better," she said.

"Furthermore," said Aunt Fanny, "you had better not count your riches before you get them. You have plenty of toys."

"I have my doll house," Fancy said suddenly, looking for the first time squarely at Aunt Fanny. "I have my beautiful little doll house with real doorknobs and electric lights and the little stove that really works and the running water in the bathtubs."

"You are a fortunate child," Miss Ogilvie said.

"And all the little dolls. One of them," Fancy giggled, "is lying in the little bathtub with the water really running. They're little doll house dolls. They fit exactly into the chairs and the beds. They have little dishes. When I put them to bed they have to go to bed. When my grandmother dies all *this* is going to belong to me."

"And where would we be then?" Essex asked softly. "Fancy?"

Fancy smiled at him. "When my grandmother dies," she said, "I am going to smash my doll house. I won't need it any more."

Essex lay absolutely still in the dark, thinking that if no sound or movement could be heard outside the door he would be safe; always, when he held himself this still he hoped that he might be really dead.

"Essex," Aunt Fanny whispered, tapping softly, "Essex, please let me in?"

At first, sometimes, Essex had tried to answer her. "Go away, Aunt Fanny," he would say; "Aunt Fanny, go away from here." Now, however, he knew that he was safer if he did not speak or move; he might even be dead.

"Essex — I'm only forty-eight years old. Essex?"

I am enclosed in the tight impersonal weight of a coffin, Essex thought; there is thick earth above me.

"Orianna is older than I am. Essex?"

I cannot turn, cannot move my head; if my eyes are open I do not know it; I dare not move my hand to feel the holding wood around me.

"Essex? Essex?"

I will try to speak into the deafening silence; I will try to move and turn my head and raise my hands and I will be held tight, tight.

"Let me in, Essex — you can stay on in the house with me."

It was very early in the morning, so early that there was no clear light. On the terrace and on the long lawn it was dark, and only a certain knowledge that the sun rose every morning could give any hint of brightness. Aunt Fanny, who had sat all night inside her dead mother's bedroom, and Fancy, who had awakened and stolen softly away from her sleeping mother, met and startled one another on the terrace. At first each of them saw only a dark figure, and then Aunt Fanny said "Fancy?" whispering, "what are you doing out here?"

"I was playing," Fancy said evasively.

"Playing? At this hour?" Aunt Fanny took Fancy's hand and led her down the terrace steps. "Come away from the house, Fancy; we'll go into the gardens. What were you playing?"

Fancy smiled provokingly. "Just playing," she said.

“Who told you all of this would belong to you someday?” Aunt Fanny asked suddenly, stopping her walk to stand and look down at Fancy. “Your mother? It must have been. I suppose your mother thinks she has a claim. Let’s walk down the side path, dear; Aunt Fanny likes the secret garden early in the morning. Now, a little girl ten years old with a mother and a grandfather and an Aunt Fanny to look after her shouldn’t be always thinking about what she is going to get someday. We all love you, you know that? Aunt Fanny loves you.”

It was almost too dark to see the path, but Aunt Fanny could see Fancy’s face turned to her, curiously. She does not have the family charm, Aunt Fanny thought, and sighed. Then Aunt Fanny stumbled, and thought, perhaps it is still too dark to go down these side paths, but now it was as far to go back as to go on. Looking upward, to see if it was getting any lighter, Aunt Fanny made small sounds of irritation. The gardeners were growing careless with these walks far from the house; perhaps they knew that only Aunt Fanny habitually came along these ways, because the hedges beside the path had not been clipped smooth, making a straight green wall on either side; indeed, when Aunt Fanny looked up she could see that the hedges had been allowed to grow almost wild; were, in fact, in some places meeting overhead, darkening the path and giving an air of gloom to a walk which should have been agreeable and refreshing. “My father,” Aunt Fanny said aloud, “would not have tolerated this; Fancy, look there: the turnings of this walk should be perfect, lending themselves to a gentle easy saunter, and here we are slapped and confused. I wish,” Aunt Fanny said, “that my father could see what has been done to the gardens.”

“There’s a gardener,” Fancy said.

It was not until that moment, Aunt Fanny thought, that the faint depression she had been feeling deepened and centered and became conscious; walking in the gardens had always made Aunt Fanny feel happy, but when Fancy pointed out the gardener Aunt Fanny at the same time recognized that they had somehow strayed off the side path and were lost, perhaps even wandering onto someone else's property, although, as she told herself at once, they had not gone through the wall so it was really all right; certainly they had not been gone ten minutes from the house, and the Halloran property did not end ten minutes from the house in any direction.

"Fancy," she said uneasily, "I really think we had better go back," but Fancy had run on ahead. There was light now, of a sort, but it was growing misty, and, with the green branches now reaching most frighteningly over her head and the faint touches of mist curling around the tips of leaves and through the branches and even almost hiding Fancy's feet as she ran, Aunt Fanny became, quickly and most pressingly, nervous, and, worse, bewildered. "Fancy," she called, "come back at once," but Fancy, as in a dream, ran on, always too far ahead to catch, running ankle deep through the mist, turning and even laughing as she ran ahead between the hedges; "Fancy," Aunt Fanny called, hurrying, "come back."

Then she too saw the gardener; he was standing on a ladder some distance down the path, and he was clipping the hedge. Aunt Fanny was perplexed, wondering how Fancy could have seen him before, so far back among the twisting curves of the path, but Fancy was running to him now, laughing, and Aunt Fanny, gasping, hurried on. Fancy caught the bottom of the gardener's ladder and spoke to him, laughing, and the gardener turned and looked down at her and nodded and pointed. When Aunt Fanny came up he turned back to the hedge and raised his clipper again. "Fancy," Aunt Fanny said, pulling at her, "come away at once. We do not run and laugh before the gardeners," she said severely but softly, "Fancy, we always observe decorum; I am displeased that you should have run away from me."

“I wanted to ask him the way,” Fancy said. She was walking quietly now, her cheeks faintly flushed from running. “Didn’t you think he was funny?”

“I hardly noticed, Fancy. One does not—”

“Dressed funny, I mean? And his hat?”

“I said, Fancy, I do not—”

“Look at him, then.” Fancy stopped, and shook at Aunt Fanny. “Look and see how funny he is.”

“Look back on a gardener? I?” Aunt Fanny gave Fancy an irritable little pull. “Fancy, behave yourself.”

“He’s gone now, anyway.” Fancy moved slightly ahead and then said, “Why, here’s the garden; I didn’t know we were so near it.” She moved between the arching branches overhead, the mist moving around her ankles, and Aunt Fanny, annoyed and frightened and tired, hurried to keep up with her; it would not do to let Fancy stray too far. A little girl and a defenseless woman, Aunt Fanny thought with sudden acute fear; strange gardeners around (and there *had* been something funny, Fancy was right — was it the turn of his head?), and neither of them sure of the way back.

“Please wait, Fancy,” she called, and followed, into the garden, and stopped. This was not her secret garden, this was not the garden which ought to have been at the end of the path they had taken, this was a garden so secret that Aunt Fanny wondered, shocked, if anyone had ever seen it before. Fancy, half-hidden in the mist, was dancing on the grass, and there were flowers, dull in the mist, but showing sullenly red and yellow and orange. Distantly, clouded, Aunt Fanny saw the hard whiteness of marble, and then through a break in the mist a narrow marble pillar. “Fancy,” she cried out, moving forward and holding her hands guardingly before her, “where are you?”

“Here,” Fancy called back.

"Where?"

"In the house."

The voice died away and Aunt Fanny, tangled in mist now, began to cry helplessly. "Fancy," she said.

"Aunt Fanny," but it came from far away.

Stumbling, Aunt Fanny went forward, hands out, and touched marble, but it was warm and she took her hand away quickly; hideous, she thought, it's been in the sun. Then she thought, why, this could be the summer house and I am only turned around; we could have strayed from the path and come into the garden by another way and *that* would be why it looked strange; this is certainly the summer house and it is silly of me to cry and stumble and be frightened. I shall go into the summer house, she thought, and sit down quietly on the bench, and when I have recovered myself I shall either call until Fancy finds her way to me — the wicked girl, to run away so — or I shall wait until this mist clears a little — and it *must*, of course; it is an early morning mist, a trifle; the sun will sweep it away; I have been in fogs many times worse than this and never been frightened; it was only because it was unexpected; I shall sit in the summer house until I am able to go on.

For a minute she stood very still with her eyes closed, trying to remember precisely the secret garden so that she might go into the summer house correctly in the mist. I must not fall down, she thought, because I shall not be able to get up again; if I fall down it will really be quite serious; I would have to call for help.

"Fancy," she called, "Fancy!"

Moving blindly, trying, although she could not, to watch her feet, trying not to stumble, she moved carefully and with extreme slowness around the summer house, remembering distinctly the pillars, the dark bushes on all sides, the four poplars around, the two low marble steps. If I sit in the summer house in the secret garden, she was telling herself reassuringly, if I go into the summer house from the secret garden, if I go into the summer house through the secret garden, I need only take four steps across the marble floor, four small steps across the marble floor and from the other side of the summer house I can look out over the long lawn and up the far lawn and past the pool and I will see the sundial and then the house. If I get into the summer house even the mist cannot stop me from seeing the house, and I can go down the two low marble steps on the other side and out onto the lovely long lawn and go straight, right down the middle of the lawn, even through mist, past the sundial, and go to the house.

Fancy, she realized, had probably gone that way already. Fancy was almost surely halfway home.

She stumbled, and put out her hand to catch herself against the marble pillar, but the mist cleared briefly and she saw that she had caught hold of the long marble thigh of a statue; standing soberly on his pedestal, the tall still creature looked down on her tenderly. The marble was warm, and Aunt Fanny drew her hand back and screamed "Fancy, Fancy!" There was no answer, and she turned and ran madly, putting her feet down on flowers and catching herself against ornamental bushes; "Fancy!" she screamed, taking hold of an outstretched marble hand beside her, "Fancy!" stopping just short of a yearning marble embrace, "Fancy!" and turned away crazily from a marble mouth reaching for her throat.

"Aunt Fanny?"

"Fancy! Where are you?"

"In the house."

"Please come back, Fancy; please come back." She was by a marble bench. Its back and sides were stained and uncared-for; there was a crack running clearly down one leg, there were dead leaves lying along the seat and heaped in the corners. Thankfully Aunt Fanny sat down; the bench was warm, and she moved, huddling herself together, sitting only on the edge of the bench. This is unspeakable, she thought; am I in the family graveyard? Why is this happening?

Unexpectedly, she thought of Essex — the path gets narrower all the time, she told herself — and was reassured. He will laugh at me, she thought; I must control myself. She forced herself to sit up primly on the edge of the marble bench, repressing firmly the nausea she felt at its warm pressure, and she smoothed the black linen of her dress across her lap, and tucked in her hair, which had somehow come loose, and crossed her ankles decently, and took her black-edged handkerchief from her bosom and dried her eyes and wiped away the dampness and grime from her face. Now, she thought; I may go mad, but at least I look like a lady.

A certain unfamiliar humor had come upon her with the thought of Essex; if he were here, she reflected, we would be sitting together on this marble bench and no one could see us in the mist. We would be in a deeply hidden garden — she could catch, now, the heavy sweetness of roses — and on a fair low seat, the marble warm beneath our hands. Distantly, she heard the music of a fountain, the touch of water upon itself, the low murmur of the fall. It came, perhaps, through the lifted curved hands of a marble nymph, running down her arms and over her shoulders and breast and clothing her in water falling softly, falling on and on. Then it might overflow one wide pool and fall on, down, into the reaching stone arms of a satyr who pushed upward to catch both hands full of water and let it fall gently against the arched backs and lifted heads of the dolphins who held him. Then, past the frozen dolphins, across the wide pool and on, down and down, into a great cup held by two maidens, overflowing the cup, going always past their stone smiling faces, their hard curls, on down and down over rocks and marble lilies, under and around marble fish and between the long legs of stone birds, necks always bent, heads always turned curiously. Far, far beyond, in a long sweet movement from the high curved hands of the nymph past the satyr, over the dolphins, between the maidens, leaving behind the lilies and the rocks and the fish and the birds, the moving water must be caught and imprisoned at last in a final narrowing agonizing eddy, twisted and trapped and forced down, pushed underground to run secretly and flow, perhaps, into the ornamental pool before the house, colored blue, and moving only faintly under the wind.

Roses, she thought: I would like to give Essex a rose. She put her head gently back against the marble bench, tears on her cheeks, and listened to the drops of water singing as they went down the fountain ("Frances, I have waited for you so long …" "Impatient, Essex?" "Impatient? Say rather mad … burning …"). She stirred, and smiled, and lifted her hand in tender protest, and looked upon the marble jeering face of a fiend, set into a shrine beside the bench, roses growing low against his head, dead petals caught between his thrusting teeth.

"Fancy," she called, screaming, "Fancy, Fancy!"

The moving water in the fountain called "Fancy, Fancy" faintly, and the tortured marble face was warm.

"Aunt Fanny?"

"Please help me. Please come; please hurry!"

"I'm in the house."

"Hurry!"

"I'm coming. I'm holding out my hand. It's all right, Aunt Fanny, I'm right here."

And Aunt Fanny, turning, took hold of Fancy's hand, and it was warm marble; far away, she heard Fancy's mocking laughter and her voice singing.

Somehow, sobbing, Aunt Fanny came through the mist and into the summer house and in four wide steps was running down the lawn toward the sundial in the darkness, and then she heard a voice. It was huge, not Fancy at all, echoing and sounding around and in and out of her head: FRANCES HALLORAN, it came to her, FRANCES, FRANCES HALLORAN. Twisting as she ran, moving wildly, she put out her hands; FRANCES HALLORAN, the voice went on, FRANCES.

FRANCES HALLORAN: she was gasping dreadfully for breath, one shoe lost and the grass unexpectedly wet under her stocking: FRANCES HALLORAN, and then she stopped absolutely. There was something there in the darkness hard by the sundial, not a statue, not Essex: “Who?” Aunt Fanny said, cold.

“Frances Halloran—” Remotely.

This was fear so complete that Aunt Fanny, once Frances Halloran, stood with nothing but ice to clothe her; *was* there something there? Something? Then she thought with what seemed shocking clarity: it is worse if it is not there; somehow it must be real because if it is not real it is in my own head; unable to move, Aunt Fanny thought: It is real.

“Frances?”

Aunt Fanny moved one hand, blindly. “Father?” she said, without sound. “Father?”

“Frances, there is danger. Go back to the house. Tell them, in the house, tell them, in the house, tell them that there is danger. Tell them in the house that in the house it is safe. The father will watch the house, but there is danger. Tell them.”

Am I hearing this? Aunt Fanny thought lucidly, and then, fumbling, “Father?”

"The father comes to his child and says gently that within himself there is no fear; the father comes to his child. Tell them in the house that there is danger."

"Danger? Father?"

"From the sky and from the ground and from the sea there is danger; tell them in the house. There will be black fire and red water and the earth turning and screaming; this will come."

"Father — Father — when?"

"The father comes to his children and tells them there is danger. There is danger. Within the father there is no fear; the father comes to his children. Tell them in the house."

"Please—"

"When the sky is fair again the children will be safe; the father comes to his children who will be saved. Tell them in the house that they will be saved. Do not let them leave the house; say to them: Do not fear, the father will guard the children. Go into your father's house and say these things. Tell them there is danger."

Aunt Fanny, formerly Frances Halloran, put her hand down onto the sundial and found it warm. "Father?" she said into the sudden bright sunlight, but there was nothing there. "You were never so kind to me before," said Aunt Fanny brokenly.

Then, screaming for Essex, she fled, and crashed against the terrace door and wildly pounded it open, to stop in complete silence, staring madly at the astonished faces around the breakfast table, eyes wide, mouths open, regarding her.

"I want to tell you," Aunt Fanny said and then — to the embarrassed surprise of everyone in the room, none of whom had ever had any occasion to believe that Aunt Fanny was capable of a single, definite, clear-cut, unembellished act — Aunt Fanny fainted.

2

ESSEX CARRIED AUNT Fanny into the drawing room, since it was the nearest place with a couch to put her on; Miss Ogilvie followed, panting, with a glass of water, Fancy tagged curiously, Maryjane brought two aspirin from the bottle she always carried in her pocket, and Mrs. Halloran, finishing her coffee without haste, came into the drawing room at last to find Aunt Fanny, surrounded, on the couch, turning and twisting her head and murmuring incoherently.

"Chafe her wrists and loosen her stays," Mrs. Halloran suggested, seating herself in an armchair from which she could observe Aunt Fanny, "burn a feather under her nose. Raise her feet. Please do not neglect any possible attention; I would not have Aunt Fanny think that we took her malaise lightly."

"Something has clearly frightened her out of her senses," Miss Ogilvie said, more sharply than she customarily spoke to Mrs. Halloran.

"A feat," said Mrs. Halloran. "Incredible."

"It was my father," Aunt Fanny said clearly. She sat up, resisting Miss Ogilvie and Maryjane, and looked directly at Mrs. Halloran. "My father was there," she said.

"I hope you gave him my dutiful regards," Mrs. Halloran said.

"By the sundial, waiting for me; he called me and called me." Aunt Fanny began to cry. "You wicked wicked *wicked* girl," she said to Fancy.

"What did *I* do?" Fancy said, staring, and Maryjane put an arm around her daughter and said, "Now you just wait one little damn minute here."

"She ran away," Aunt Fanny said, "and left me all alone and I was lost."

"Lost?" Mrs. Halloran said. "You have lived here for forty years, Aunt Fanny; what part of the place could lose you now?"

"I never ran away," Fancy said. "I did not."

"She did not," Maryjane said.

"She did so," Aunt Fanny said. "There was a gardener on a ladder clipping the hedge and Fancy ran away."

Mrs. Halloran frowned. "When, Fanny?" she asked. "When did all this happen?"

"Just now — this morning. It was just getting light."

"No," Mrs. Halloran said. "There are no gardeners working on the hedges yet. Your brother wants me to speak to them today."

"On a ladder," Aunt Fanny said.

"Quite impossible," Mrs. Halloran said. "You may very well have seen your father; I would not dream of disputing a private apparition. But you could not have seen a gardener trimming a hedge. Not here, not today."

"Fancy saw him," Aunt Fanny said wildly.

"I did not," Fancy said. "I never saw anyone this morning except my mother and my grandmother and Miss Ogilvie and Essex—"

"We went for a walk," Aunt Fanny said.

"I did *not* go for any walk," Fancy said.

"She has been with me since I woke up," Maryjane said with finality.

"The secret garden was changed, and it was dark and the mist—"

"Aunt Fanny," Essex said, bending over her sympathetically, "suppose you tell us just what happened. Slowly, and try not to cry."

"Essex," said Aunt Fanny, crying.

"She is hysterical," said Mrs. Halloran. "Slap her quite firmly in the face."

"Please, Aunt Fanny. Tell us exactly."

Aunt Fanny caught her breath and accepted a handkerchief from Miss Ogilvie to wipe her eyes. Then, although her voice was trembling, she said, "I could not sleep. I thought I would go for a walk. It was very dark, and misty, but I knew the sun was going to rise soon. I met Fancy on the terrace —"

"You did not."

"Fancy, why don't you tell the truth? I'm not blaming you; Aunt Fanny *loves* you."

"But I *did*n't."

"Go on, Aunt Fanny," Essex said. "We'll sort it all out later."

"We walked down the side path, toward the secret garden. Then we saw the gardener and Fancy said he looked funny."

"I *did*n't."

"You *did*, you bad wicked girl. And we came to the garden, but it was changed. Dirty. Horrible. I was lost, and I couldn't find the way out, and Fancy ran away and I called her and called her and there were hundreds and hundreds of statues and they were warm." Aunt Fanny shivered. "And I couldn't find the summer house and I sat on a bench and thought about Essex and how he might help me—"

"I am not sure how much of this nonsense I can hear," Mrs. Halloran said.

" — and then I found the summer house and started to run to the house but it was so dark and the mist was so thick and when I came to the sundial my father was there."

"I saw her running," Miss Ogilvie said. "At the breakfast table, I glanced out and thought, 'There comes Aunt Fanny, running down the lawn.' I confess I was startled. But it was quite light."

"The sun has been shining brightly for two hours," Essex said. "There is not a cloud in the sky."

"It was dark," Aunt Fanny said.

"I saw you quite clearly running down the lawn," Miss Ogilvie said. "The sun was shining and I thought, 'There comes Aunt Fanny, running down the lawn.'"

"What did your father have to say?" Mrs. Halloran inquired curiously. "I hope he sent his best to the rest of us?"

Aunt Fanny sat up suddenly, staring. "I forgot," she said. "I forgot to tell you, all of you, and I was supposed to bring the message right back here." She began to cry again. "He will be angry," she said.

"Well, tell us now," Essex said. He glanced at Mrs. Halloran and said quietly, "I wonder if we should have a doctor?"

"An alienist," Mrs. Halloran said, and snorted. "Gardeners working before breakfast," she said.

"He said to tell you there was danger. He said—" Aunt Fanny, wringing her hands, tried to be exact, " — he said there was danger, but this house was safe. That he would protect us. He said it over and over again, that there was danger but this house was safe. He said we must stay in the house."

"Did he *indeed?*" Mrs. Halloran said, and Essex, looking over his shoulder, laughed at her.

"He said fire would come, and he said it would be black fire. He said there was danger, and he would protect the house, and we are not to leave the house."

"Can you get a message back to him?" Mrs. Halloran inquired. "Because *I* would like you to tell him that, danger or no danger—"

Miss Ogilvie screamed and scrambled up onto a chair. Maryjane clutched at Essex, and even Mrs. Halloran rose. A small brightly-banded snake was watching them from the fireplace, seemingly frozen with attention, and then, turning at once into liquid movement, slipped from the fireplace across the heavy carpet, within a foot of Mrs. Halloran's shoe, and, without hesitation, angled behind a bookcase and disappeared.

"Good God," Mrs. Halloran said. "Merciful God. Essex!"

Essex disengaged himself from Maryjane with some difficulty and said, "Mrs. Halloran?"

"What was that?"

"A snake. It came out of the fireplace and went across the room and behind the bookcase."

"I *know* it was a snake, but — in *my* house?"

"A snake, a snake," cried Miss Ogilvie, clinging precariously to the back of the chair and seemingly determined to climb right on up the wall, "it will bite us; it was a snake, a snake!"

"Blasphemy," Essex said politely to Mrs. Halloran. "Sent, no doubt, by the noble ghost you were mocking. You should pay more attention to what you are saying."

"*You* did it," Maryjane said violently to Mrs. Halloran, "*you* were making fun of Aunt Fanny's father, but *I* think we've had a warning and believe you me I'm not going to need a second one, believe you *me*. I say I am going to stay right here in this house where it's safe and no one, not even you, is going to kick me out of it to face the danger he said was coming, not out into any fire." She clasped Fancy to her and her hands were shaking. "Fancy stays and I stay," she said.

"I will have this room fumigated," Mrs. Halloran said.

“You won’t find that snake,” Aunt Fanny said dreamily. “It was shining, full of light. You won’t ever find it.”

“Essex,” Mrs. Halloran said.

“Mrs. Halloran?”

“I am bewildered. Come into the library and explain all this to me.”

The question of belief is a curious one, partaking of the wonders of childhood and the blind hopefulness of the very old; in all the world there is not someone who does not believe something. It might be suggested, and not easily disproven that anything, no matter how exotic, can be believed by someone. On the other hand, abstract belief is largely impossible; it is the concrete, the actuality of the cup, the candle, the sacrificial stone, which hardens belief; the statue is nothing until it cries, the philosophy is nothing until the philosopher is martyred.

Not one of the people in Mrs. Halloran’s house could have answered honestly and without embarrassment the question: “In what is it you believe?” Faith they had in plenty; just as they had food and beds and shelter, they had faith, but it was faith in agreeably concrete things like good food and the best beds and the most weathertight shelter and in themselves as suitable recipients of the world’s best. Old Mr. Halloran, for one, would have been considerably more lighthearted in a faith which promised him everlasting life, but in the concept of everlasting life Mr. Halloran could not believe, since he was dying. His own life showed no signs of continuing beyond a hideously limited interval, and the only evidence he ever saw of everlasting life was in those luckier ones around him who continued young and would stay so after he was dead. Not-dying from day to day was as much as Mr. Halloran could be fairly expected to believe in; the rest of them believed in what they could — power, perhaps, or the comforting effects of gin, or money.

Fancy was a liar. She had been with Aunt Fanny and dared not admit to running away. She had not been frightened, but she enjoyed teasing people weaker than herself. Not a servant, or an animal, or any child in the village near the house, would willingly go near her.

Being impossible, an abstract belief can only be trusted through its manifestations, the actual shape of the god perceived, however dimly, against the solidity he displaces. Not one of the people around Aunt Fanny believed her father's warning, but they were all afraid of the snake. Miss Ogilvie, indeed, never again sat in that corner of the drawing room near the snake's bookcase, although it had formerly been one of her favorite spots.

"It could have been in the firewood," Essex said, pacing the library floor.

"But the gardener could not have been clipping the hedge," Mrs. Halloran said.

"I have no idea what to think. Aunt Fanny has behaved very strangely."

"I will not dispute *that*. Essex, you may stay."

Essex was silent. Then he said, "People can be persuaded to accept almost anything. Last night I thought myself degraded, fouled, rendered contemptible, cringing. Today Aunt Fanny and her snake have enlightened me; two catastrophes cannot make a right, but I think I had never any expectation of leaving. Aunt Fanny has been very kind."

"I genuinely hope she will feel better," Mrs. Halloran said. "Now I will have to let Miss Ogilvie stay, and Maryjane."

But Aunt Fanny continued very odd. Physically, she was well enough to make it unnecessary to call a doctor, but she went about smiling and happy, almost gay. She laughed like a young girl who has found a first lover, she ate hugely of pancakes for her late breakfast, she sang. Mrs. Halloran believed she had gone mad, but Aunt Fanny mad was so much more palatable than Aunt Fanny sane that Mrs. Halloran bit her tongue, averted her eyes, and winced only occasionally.

Immediately after her breakfast, which everyone had stayed to watch her eat, Aunt Fanny fell asleep, her head on the table, a smile on her face. Asleep, she spoke at length, and, although afterward none of them could remember with exactness the words Aunt Fanny used, they sat appalled and frightened, and certainly heard Aunt Fanny speak as she never had before.

Aunt Fanny was listening to her father, repeating to them what he told her. With a happy smile on her face and her eyes shut, she listened with a child's care, and spoke slowly, word for word. Aunt Fanny's father had come to tell these people that the world outside was ending. Neither Aunt Fanny nor her father expressed any apprehension, but the world which had seemed so unassailable to the rest of them, the usual, daily world of houses and cities and people and all the small fragments of living, was to be destroyed in one night of utter disaster. Aunt Fanny smiled, and nodded, and listened, and told them about the end of the world.

At one point she said sadly, "All those poor people, dying at once," and, again, "We must consider ourselves extremely fortunate."

Those few people gathered in Mrs. Halloran's house, which Aunt Fanny now seemed to believe was her father's house, would be safe. The house would be guarded during the night of destruction and at its end they would emerge safe and pure. They were charged with the future of humanity; when they came forth from the house it would be into a world clean and silent, their inheritance. "And breed a new race of mankind," Aunt Fanny said with sweetness.

Immediately following this revelation, Aunt Fanny, waking, asked for and drank a small glass of brandy, after which she retired to her room and fell into a deep sleep which lasted until late afternoon. While Aunt Fanny slept, Fancy played with her doll house and then went down into the kitchen, where she was not welcome. Miss Ogilvie washed out the underwear she had worn the day before, and used a small hand iron to finish up the underwear already dry. Maryjane lay on the chaise in her bedroom, reading a true confession magazine brought her secretly by one of the maids, and eating peanut brittle. Essex sat in the library under a bust of Seneca and did a crossword puzzle. Mr. Halloran dozed before the fire in his room, and wondered that the years had been so short. Mrs. Halloran sat long alone, her open hand resting on the pages of a Bible she had not opened, or even remembered, for many years.

When Aunt Fanny awakened she was perfectly aware of all that had happened, including her own revelations, and — probably resembling in this all souls who have been the vehicle of a major supernatural pronouncement — her first reaction of shivering terror was almost at once replaced by a feeling of righteous complacence. She did not know why these extraordinary messages had been sent through her own frail self, but she believed without question that the choice had been good. She was completely subject to some greater power and, her own will somewhere buried in that which controlled her, she could only become autocratic and demanding.

For a few minutes she lay quietly on her bed, wondering, and then she rose and went to look at herself in the mirror. There seemed as yet no outward change to her, so she thought to put on her dead mother’s jewels, and, at last, decked in diamonds never cleaned since they were put away on her mother’s death, Aunt Fanny made her way upstairs to the wing which was occupied by Maryjane and Fancy. She knocked on the door of their sitting room, and heard Maryjane ask who it was, then tell Fancy to get up and unlock the door.

“It is Aunt Fanny, my dears,” Aunt Fanny said, and the door was opened. Fancy had been putting away her doll house, and Maryjane was lying back, her confession magazine underneath her. “Aunt Fanny,” said Maryjane. “It was kind of you to come. My asthma is worse, much worse. Will you tell them downstairs?”

“But now you may give up having asthma, Maryjane,” Aunt Fanny said.

“Why?” Maryjane sat up. “Is she dead?”

“You know perfectly well,” Aunt Fanny said irritably, “that she is well on her way to being reborn into a new life and joy.”

“Reborn?” Maryjane fell back. “That’s *all* I need,” she said.

“Shall I push her down the stairs?” Fancy asked, as one repeating an incantation rather than as one asking a question; perhaps she had to recite this regularly to her mother.

“Is Fancy subnormal, do you think?” Aunt Fanny asked.

“She’s Lionel’s own child,” Maryjane said.

“Well, tell her to stop saying that. Evil, and jealousy, and fear, are all going to be removed from us. I told you clearly this morning. Humanity, as an experiment, has failed.”

“Well, I’m sure I did the best *I* could,” Maryjane said.

“Do you understand that this world will be destroyed? Soon?”

“I just couldn’t care less,” Maryjane said. “Unless they save a special thunderbolt for *her*.”

“Everything, Aunt Fanny?” Fancy was pulling at her sleeve. “The whole thing? All the parts I’ve never seen?”

“All of it, dear. It has been a bad and wicked and selfish place, and the beings who created it have decided that it will never get any better. So they are going to burn it, the way you might burn a toy full of disease germs. Do you remember when you had the measles? Your grandmother took your teddy bear and had it put in the incinerator, because it was full of germs?"

"I remember," Fancy said grimly.

"Well, that is just what they are going to do with this diseased, filthy old world. Right in the incinerator."

"Did your father really tell you all this?" Maryjane asked.

"It is as though something I had known all my life, and believed without ever really knowing what it was — some lovely, precious secret — had suddenly come into the open. When my father spoke to me he only reminded me of what I had always known, and forgotten. I am very happy about it."

"Who is 'they'?" Fancy asked insistently.

Aunt Fanny shook her head. "I am sure we will hear more about it," she said.

"What *I* don't see," Maryjane said petulantly, "is how it is going to help my asthma. Lionel used to rub my ankles."

Aunt Fanny put her hand gently on Maryjane's arm. "Those who survive this catastrophe," she said, "will be free of pain and hurt. They will be … a kind of chosen people, as it were."

"The Jews?" Maryjane said indifferently. "Weren't they chosen the last time?"

"I *wish* you would take me seriously," Aunt Fanny said, her voice sharpening. "It's not as though *I* had any choice in all this, I *only* say what I'm told, after *all*. Naturally you are included in any plan for the inhabitants of this house, but I can hardly see what earthly use you will be to us if you persist in saying every silly thing that comes into your head. After all, Maryjane, I am *sure* that there must be a great many people who would be *glad* to be saved when the world is destroyed. After *all*," and she rose and turned to the door.

"You're wearing your mother's diamonds," Maryjane said. "You know by rights they should have come to me. Lionel always said so."

"I'm interested," Fancy said. "Aunt Fanny, I'm *terribly* interested. It ought to be a pretty big fire."

"Dreadful," said Aunt Fanny.

"I'd like to see it," Fancy said.

"Well, I'm sure your Aunt Fanny will let you watch," Maryjane said. "Fanny, if you're going downstairs remind them about my tray, will you?"

Aunt Fanny swept downstairs and into the drawing room where Essex and Miss Ogilvie were drinking martinis with Mrs. Halloran. Essex, moving belatedly to hold the door for Aunt Fanny, was caught helpless, holding his glass aimlessly while Aunt Fanny passed him regally to take her chair unassisted.

"A truly unusual day, Orianna," she said. "Essex."

Essex sat down.

Aunt Fanny gestured to Essex, said "A glass of sherry, if you please," and then, to Mrs. Halloran, "Now that we know what is going to happen, Orianna, I think we had better decide where we stand."

"If I did not detect somewhere in that the air of a prepared speech," Mrs. Halloran said, "I would be afraid of you, Fanny."

"Thank you, Essex." Aunt Fanny noticed Miss Ogilvie nodded, and went on, "There will be no more of *that*, Orianna. You will be civil."

Mrs. Halloran opened her mouth and closed it again.

"Let us not forget that your origins are low," Aunt Fanny said. "There are areas of refinement not possible to one of your background. One area of refinement," she explained with sweet patience, "is — if you will permit me to put a name to it — the supernormal. *There* you must allow *me* superiority, and it is the supernormal which has laid siege to this house, and captured it undefended. A little more, please, Essex?"

"I have never seen this before," Essex observed to the sherry decanter. "Aunt Fanny is possessed."

"Drinking spirits," Miss Ogilvie said, nodding wisely.

"Spirits indeed," Aunt Fanny said. She smiled approvingly at Miss Ogilvie. "We are in a pocket of time, Orianna, a tiny segment of time suddenly pinpointed by a celestial eye."

"Now, you cannot suspect *that* of being a prepared speech," Essex said to Mrs. Halloran.

"I wish Aunt Fanny would stop babbling sacrilegious nonsense," Mrs. Halloran said, and there was an ominous note in her voice.

"Call it nonsense, Orianna, say — as you have before — that Aunt Fanny is running in crazed spirits, but — although I am of course not permitted to threaten — all the regret will be yours."

"I feel it already," Mrs. Halloran said.

"The experiment with humanity is at an end," Aunt Fanny said.

"Splendid," Mrs. Halloran said. "I was getting very tired of all of them."

"The imbalance of the universe is being corrected. Dislocations have been adjusted. Harmony is to be restored, inperfections erased."

"*I* wonder if anything has been done about the hedges," Mrs. Halloran said. "Essex, did you speak to the gardeners?"

"The ways of the gods are inscrutable," Aunt Fanny said, her voice high.

"Inscrutable, indeed," Mrs. Halloran said. "I personally would never have made such a choice. Put it, Aunt Fanny, since you will not be silent, that the first harmony to be established is that between you and myself."

“I cannot be silenced,” Aunt Fanny said, shouting, “I cannot be silenced; this is my father’s house and I am safe here. No one can drive me away.”

“Distasteful,” said Mrs. Halloran, shrugging. “Essex, will you fill my glass? And I believe Aunt Fanny will have more sherry. We have time before dinner. Miss Ogilvie?”

“She is doing it again,” Essex said later, coming to stand by Mrs. Halloran on the terrace. “Listening. Nodding.”

“If anything had been needed to perfect Aunt Fanny’s exquisite charm,” Mrs. Halloran said, “it would be this prophetic lunacy.”

“*I* believe she has lost her mind,” Essex said.

Mrs. Halloran turned to move slowly down the wide marble steps, and Essex came soundlessly beside her. “It is a lovely night,” Mrs. Halloran said. “Aunt Fanny may be certifiable, certainly. It is not impossible in my husband’s family. But it is irrelevant.”

“If Aunt Fanny is *not* mad,” Essex said. “Had it occurred to you? We may expect a world cataclysm in the very near future. Unless of course it is not impossible that in your husband’s family they may be mistaken.”

“What concerns me most is her defiance,” Mrs. Halloran said. “It is not usual in Aunt Fanny.”

“I suppose the destruction of the world will not turn on Aunt Fanny’s manners. I would not let her mingle freely with your friends, however, or at least not with strangers.”

“Essex,” Mrs. Halloran said. She stopped by the sundial and put her hand down gently; under her fingers the letters said WHAT IS THIS WORLD? “Essex, I am not a fool. I have gone for many years disbelieving most of what people told me. But I have never before been requested to take an immediate opinion on the question of the annihilation of civilization. I have never known my sister-in-law to get any message accurately, but I cannot afford to ignore her."

"Does that mean that you find yourself believing Aunt Fanny's claptrap?"

"I have no choice," Mrs. Halloran said. She moved her finger caressingly along WORLD. "Authority is of some importance to me. I will not be left behind when creatures like Aunt Fanny and her brother are introduced into a new world. I must plan to be there. Oh, what madness," she said, her voice agonized, "why could he not have come to *me?*"

After a minute Essex said, "I see. Then I suppose I must withdraw my word claptrap, and substitute something more politic."

"Claptrap will do." Mrs. Halloran laughed. "I am positive of it, but I insist upon being saved along with Aunt Fanny. I have never had any doubt of my own immortality, but put it that never before have I had any open, clear-cut invitation to the Garden of Eden; Aunt Fanny has shown me a gate."

"Then I will have to book a ticket, too. I cannot believe Aunt Fanny, but I will not doubt *you*."

Mrs. Halloran turned and started back toward the house. "I do wish Aunt Fanny had never thought of it," she said, and sighed.

"At least we are not enjoined to live in celibate poverty," Essex said.

"I agree that I would not be so willing to believe in Aunt Fanny if her messages dictated that I give away all my earthly possessions. But then, of course, Aunt Fanny would never accept such a message; it could not have been meant for *her*."

"I wonder if there are others. Other places, on the earth. Learning these same unbelievable things, right now."

“That presupposes the existence of other Aunt Fannys. I cannot bear to think of it.”

“When we believe,” Essex said seriously, “we must do so wholly. I am prepared to follow Aunt Fanny because I agree with you: it is the only positive statement about our futures we have ever heard, but once I have taken her side I will not be shaken. If I can bring myself to believe in Aunt Fanny’s golden world, nothing else will ever do for me; I want it too badly.”

“I wish I had your faith,” Mrs. Halloran said.

3

THE WEATHER, OF course, continued fair. No one could find the snake behind the bookcase, and the hedges, in particular the hedges along the walk to the secret garden, were clipped to bare bone. Aunt Fanny wore her mother's diamonds every day, even at breakfast, and wore, besides, a look of quiet satisfaction peculiarly irritating to Mrs. Halloran. Maryjane's asthma improved somewhat. Essex, who was skillful in slight arts, carved a tiny totem pole for Fancy's doll house, with a recognizable likeness of Aunt Fanny at the bottom. Mr. Halloran asked that his nurse stop reading him weekly magazines and begin on *Robinson Crusoe*, and during the long afternoons anyone passing the doorway to Mr. Halloran's sunfilled room might hear the flat level voice continuing, "A little after noon I found the sea very calm, and the tide ebbed so far out that I could come within a quarter of a mile of the ship, and here I found a fresh renewing of my grief; for I saw evidently, that if we had kept on board, we had been all safe …" Mrs. Halloran sketched out a rough plan for a tiny amphitheatre to be constructed on a little hill beyond the orchard, without announcing any particular design for its possible use, and one morning received word of the imminent arrival of guests.

"I am expecting guests," she said at breakfast, folding the letter carefully and putting it back into its envelope.

"Here?" said Aunt Fanny blankly.

"Where else?" said Mrs. Halloran.

"This is still a house of mourning, Orianna. Had you forgotten?"

"You never remember Lionel, Fanny, except when he might be an inconvenience to me. I am expecting guests. A Mrs. Willow and her two daughters. Very old friends of mine."

"From another walk of life, I suppose," Aunt Fanny said with a little smile. "If they are such *very* old friends of yours."

"No, Aunt Fanny, they will not please you. How delightful that I should be in a position to entertain them even if they do not please Aunt Fanny."

"Two daughters?" said Miss Ogilvie. "Will they attend my little school for Fancy?"

"I hardly think so. The older of them must be nearly thirty, and I expect there is very little she can learn from you now, Miss Ogilvie."

"At least," said Aunt Fanny, with the same little smile, "we need not expect them to stay for long."

"I have not seen Augusta Willow for nearly fifteen years," Mrs. Halloran said with seeming irrelevancy, "but I cannot believe that she has changed *that* much."

"When are they coming?" Miss Ogilvie asked.

"The sixteenth. That would be Friday, Essex, would it not?"

A car was sent late Friday afternoon to meet Mrs. Willow and her daughters, and Maryjane finding herself unequal to meeting company so late in the day, Mrs. Halloran waited in the drawing room with Mr. Halloran by the fire, and Essex and Miss Ogilvie and Aunt Fanny to receive her very old friend, whose voice was heard from the driveway as she got out of the car, directing the disposition of numerous pieces of luggage. Mrs. Halloran smiled at Aunt Fanny, who seemed to be counting under her breath the severally designated little blue bags and large tan dress cases and hatboxes and jewelcases and overnight bags and dark red heavy cases, and said softly, “Aunt Fanny, how lucky that your father has set an arbitrary end to this visit,” and then, still smiling, rose to greet her friend.

Mrs. Willow was a large and overwhelmingly vocal woman, with a great bosom and an indefinable air of having lost some vital possession down the front of it, for she shook and trembled and regarded herself with such enthusiasm, that it was all the casual observer could do at first to keep from offering to help. Whatever she had lost and was hoping to recover, it was not her good humor, for that was unlosable, and seemed, in fact, as much a matter of complete insensitivity as of good spirits; Mrs. Willow was absolutely determined to be affable, and would not be denied.

“And you *have* gotten older, Orianna,” she said, entering, “how glad I am! The older we get ourselves the more we like to see it in our friends,” and she smiled amply around the room, as though prepared with only the faintest encouragement to gather them all to her bosom, that repository of lost treasures, and cherish them for having grown older every minute since they were born, “and I can’t say,” she continued happily, “that you’ve done anything to improve the looks of this old place. *And* I won’t say,” she went on, “that Richard Halloran looks well.” She nodded toward Mr. Halloran, in his wheel chair by the fire.

“This is a house of mourning, ma’am,” Aunt Fanny said.

“And *this* is Aunt Fanny. My sister-in-law,” Mrs. Halloran said. “I had forgotten what a disturbance you make, Augusta.”

“Don’t I?” said Mrs. Willow. She turned slowly, to regard with individual speculation each person in the room. “Who’s that young man?” she asked, as one going directly to the heart of a problem.

“Essex,” Mrs. Halloran said, and Essex bowed, speechless.

“Miss Ogilvie,” Mrs. Halloran said; Miss Ogilvie fluttered, looked for help to Richard Halloran, and made a weak smile.

“You remember my gels?” Mrs. Willow asked, gesturing. “That one’s Arabella, the pretty one, and the dark one’s Julia. Curtsey to your Aunt Orianna, pets.”

“Do try to call me Mrs. Halloran,” Mrs. Halloran said to the two girls. These, accustomed to the manners of their mother, tended clearly to underestimate the rest of the world; the dark one, who was Julia, nodded gracelessly, said, “Hello,” and turned away. Arabella, who was the pretty one, smiled prettily, her eye falling — as perhaps it had not before — upon Essex, behind Mrs. Halloran’s chair. “How do you do?” she said.

“Well.” Mrs. Willow, having surveyed the room and the people in it, turned back to Mrs. Halloran. “Pretty dull here, are you? You like my gels, Orianna?”

“Not so far,” said Mrs. Halloran. “Of course, it is not impossible that they may improve upon further acquaintance.”

“Richard,” said Mrs. Willow, going to him by the fire, “you remember me? Do you keep well? I can’t say you *look* fit.”

“My brother is grieving, ma’am,” said Aunt Fanny.

“It’s Augusta, is it not?” Richard Halloran said, looking up. “They think I am unable to remember, Augusta, but I remember *you* clearly; you wore a red dress and the sun was shining.”

Mrs. Willow laughed hugely. “I’ve come back to cheer you a little, Richard.”

“Do *you* remember,” Richard Halloran asked, raising his eyes to Mrs. Willow, “when we rang the bells over the carriage house?”

“Do I not,” said Mrs. Willow comfortably. “Ah, you used to be a gay one, Richard. Plenty of pranks in *your* time, I’ll be bound. But you’re too warm here by the fire; you,” she gestured to Essex, “come and help me move his chair.”

“If you please,” Aunt Fanny said, coming forward with dignity, “my brother is perfectly comfortable here. This is my father’s house, ma’am, and my brother may sit where he pleases within it.”

“Of course he may, dear,” Mrs. Willow patted Aunt Fanny on the shoulder. “Just as soon as I have him a little bit away from the fire.”

“*This* is what you bring into a house of mourning,” Aunt Fanny said bitterly to Mrs. Halloran.

Mrs. Willow was not listening; she had moved Richard’s chair enough away from the fire to allow her to stand wholly in front of the fireplace, and she lifted her skirt in back to warm her legs.

“I shall expect you to keep away from the servants, Augusta,” Mrs. Halloran said.

“Well, now,” and Mrs. Willow laughed, and the chandelier jingled. “Just because of one time I could tell you about,” and she turned to include the room in her confidential smile. “Imagine old Orianna remembering — I’ll tell *you*,” she added pointedly to Essex, “when my gels aren’t around. Now,” she said, “why don’t we get caught up on old times? Orianna, tell me everything that’s happened since I saw you last.”

Arabella, who was the pretty one, was already whispering confidentially into the ear of Essex, and Julia, who was the clever one, was listening to Miss Ogilvie’s whisper; “Someone to *talk* to around here,” Arabella was saying, and “Snake behind the bookcase,” Julia was hearing.

“I think you have quite enough company without me,” Aunt Fanny said to Mrs. Halloran. “Perhaps I might be permitted to spend the evening privately with my brother?”

“Splendid,” Mrs. Willow said heartily. “Poor Richard badly wants cheering. You give him a few good laughs, my dearie, and he’ll perk up a wonder.”

“Orianna?” said Aunt Fanny remotely.

“Of course, Aunt Fanny.” Mrs. Halloran looked without fondness upon Arabella. “Richard,” she asked, “shall we take you back to your room now?”

“I will not have eggs again,” Richard Halloran said. “Orianna, tell them in the kitchen that I will not have eggs again.”

“Certainly you will not. And Aunt Fanny will be with you; I believe that they have made you a chocolate pudding.”

“Orianna,” said Aunt Fanny in sudden apprehension, “where are you putting Mrs. Willow and her daughters? Naturally, in the left wing with Maryjane?”

“We must not intrude upon Maryjane’s grief, Aunt Fanny. They will be at the end of the long hall near the stairway, and on the floor above you. You cannot possibly hear them.”

“I *will* hear them, Orianna,” Aunt Fanny said tautly. “You know perfectly well. I will hear them; my rest will be constantly disturbed.”

“Then don’t tell anyone what goes on.” Mrs. Willow gave a huge wink and Aunt Fanny put her hand to her throat, and closed her eyes.

“Will you say goodnight, Richard?” Mrs. Halloran asked, turning the wheel chair, and Mr. Halloran bowed his head graciously and said, “Goodnight to all of you.”

“Sweet dreams to you,” Mrs. Willow said, and Miss Ogilvie said, “Goodnight, Mr. Halloran,” and Julia and Arabella glanced up, and down again. Mrs. Halloran took the wheel chair slowly out of the room and across the hall and Aunt Fanny gave one last malevolent glance at Mrs. Willow and followed her.

“*That* was sweet of you,” Julia said spitefully to her sister, “hanging around and whispering around her, and that big innocent stare.”

"We're supposed to get along," Arabella said, touching her blond curls lazily.

"Trying to cut me out with her the first five minutes we're here."

"We could *see* how she fell in love with *you.*"

"Shut up, both of you," Mrs. Willow said. "You're not here to squabble, my pretties. Belle, tomorrow I want you to offer to read to her, or hold her knitting, or some such — just stay around her. Admire the gardens, and get her to show them to you, and you can put in some good work *there* — *you* know, flatter her a little; we all like *that*. Julia, you've got more patience — you take up with — what's the little one's name?" she asked Essex.

"Fancy," said Essex, enchanted.

"Fancy. Julia, you get after the little girl. Play with her. Tell her stories, comb her hair, look at her toys. Romp."

"If you please," Miss Ogilvie said stiffly, "Fancy is my pupil. She will be engaged at her schoolwork for the greater part of the day."

"She will?" Mrs. Willow looked at Miss Ogilvie. "No one's going to cut you out," she said at last. "There's plenty for all of us, honey."

Miss Ogilvie laughed shortly. "Aunt Fanny's father might not think so."

Mrs. Willow frowned. "What have I got to do with Aunt Fanny's father?" she asked. "The old boy's dead fifteen years."

Miss Ogilvie laughed again, glanced at Essex, and then leaned forward. "I suppose *I* had better be the one to tell you," she said.

"Good *morning*, Aunt Fanny," Mrs. Willow said; the sun was shining goldenly on the terrace where Aunt Fanny and Maryjane were sitting after breakfast, "good morning to you. And to *you*," she said, to Maryjane. "Are you the mother of that delightful child? My gels are both in love with her already."

“You won’t get any breakfast,” Aunt Fanny said with satisfaction. “The table was cleared an hour ago.”

“I’ll run along down the kitchen in a minute. They will be sure to have something for a starving old woman. How well your brother is looking, Aunt Fanny. I am quite surprised to see how well he looks.”

“He has had a blow recently, ma’am; he could scarcely look *very* well.”

“A blow indeed,” Maryjane said darkly. “Unmotherly monster.”

“I?”

“A mother,” Maryjane explained, “who pushes her only son down the stairs and leaves his devoted wife a widow.”

“Maryjane,” Aunt Fanny said. “Not before this lady, please.”

“A widow,” Maryjane said. “A fatherless orphan.”

“I’m very sorry to hear it,” Mrs. Willow said inadequately, and then, in a rush to Aunt Fanny, “I think you were away when I visited here long ago; I have always remembered the magnificence of this house, and the kindness of your father.”

“My father was an upright, courteous man.”

Mrs. Willow’s voice was saddened. “You will certainly not believe this, but his passing was a deep personal loss to me. I valued him more than I can say; a truly upright man, as you say.”

“You are right,” Aunt Fanny said. “I certainly do not believe that.”

“Aunt Fanny,” said Mrs. Willow, “I do not want to keep on offending you. I have the greatest admiration and fondness for every member of your family, and so do my two daughters.”

“And well you should,” Aunt Fanny said. “I was not brought up to make friends out of my own class, Mrs. Willow.”

“But there are to be no more differing classes, are there?”

“What do you mean?”

“Miss Ogilvie told us last night of the joyful message you had from your father; Aunt Fanny, you have been very much favored.”

“Good heavens,” said Aunt Fanny. “She actually *told* you?”

“I thought your father instructed specifically that all within the house were among the … ah … blessed. We have come, my daughters and I, in very good time.”

“Good heavens,” Aunt Fanny said again. “Good heavens.”

“Yes,” Maryjane said, “it is quite true. I am to have no more asthma. Aunt Fanny’s father said clearly that sickness, like my asthma, would vanish from the earth. I will never have asthma again, after the world has been cleansed.”

After a minute Aunt Fanny spoke faintly. “I have never disobeyed my father,” she said. “His instructions were quite clear; perhaps I was wrong in not telling you myself. Mrs. Willow, you and your daughters are—” Aunt Fanny gasped, and nearly choked “ — welcome here,” she finished at last.

“Thank you,” Mrs. Willow said gravely. “We will try to deserve your kindness. And now,” she said, “I think I will dig up a little breakfast, and then drop in on old Orianna and pass the time of day.”

Mrs. Willow settled herself dubiously into a delicate flowered armchair and relaxed slowly, listening for cracks in the wood. “Orianna,” she said, “you know perfectly well you ought to do something for me, me and my gels.”

“Girls,” Mrs. Halloran said. She had been working at the household accounts when Mrs. Willow interrupted her, and she kept one hand protectively on her pen, but without optimism. “Girls, if you please.”

“My little affectations,” Mrs. Willow said. “You know *perfectly* well you will have to do something for me.”

“And your daughters. Gels.”

"My big hope is getting rid of them, naturally. I always thought that bringing up children was a matter of telling them what to do, but they certainly make it hard for me. There's no denying, for instance, that my clever Julia is a fool and my lovely Arabella is a—"

"Flirt," Mrs. Halloran said.

"Well, I was going to say tart, but it's your house, after all. Anyway, it's money we need, as if there was ever anything else. I don't figure there's any way you can come right out and *give* us some, but people as rich as you are must know other people as rich as you are and somewhere along the line there must be someone you can help us get a dime out of. Marriage would be best, of course; we might as well aim high while we're about it. It better be Belle, though; she's prettier and if you tell her anything enough times she'll do it eventually. Besides if Belle married money the chances are good I could ease a little of it out of her; with Julia, I could whistle. Who's this young character with the little kid?"

"She's what my son Lionel married."

"God almighty." Mrs. Willow was wistful. "All his money. Even so, though, I don't think I would have wished it on either of my girls, even Julia. On account of you, I mean; there's no sense taking *you* on just to get our hands on enough money to try and live. I think," Mrs. Willow said, "I'd rather die, actually. No offense intended, of course. She talks a lot, doesn't she?"

"Maryjane?"

"Haven't you heard the kind of things she says?"

Mrs. Halloran laughed, and Mrs. Willow nodded, and sighed. "Now *that*'s no way to go about it," she said sadly, "you imagine *me* in a soft spot like that? What does she think it's going to get her?"

"Perhaps it helps her asthma."

"If it was one of *my* gels," Mrs. Willow said with feeling, "I'd see that she managed it altogether different; she's got the kid, after all, and there's no one else, you've *got* to leave it to the kid unless she fouls it up somehow. She could be talking the kid right out of everything; what she wants to do is keep her mouth shut until it *counts*. Well." She sighed. "You always see other people getting the good chances."

"You might tell your daughter Arabella that Essex is penniless."

"What?" Mrs. Willow glanced up sharply. "Yes? Well, I'll tell her. You know," she went on slowly, "they're not bad girls. That is," she said unwillingly, "they're probably bad girls the way we understood it when you and I were bad girls … I mean, *bad*. But they're not dishonest, or unkind. Not bad girls."

"Just *bad*." Mrs. Halloran smiled.

"You remember, do you? Then you see they do deserve some kind of help? After all …" Mrs. Willow shrugged, and was silent. After a minute or so, during which Mrs. Halloran regained her pen hopefully, Mrs. Willow went on, "I tell you, Orianna, I've *got* to get rid of those girls; every time some young fellow looks twice at Belle or dances with Julia my hands start to shake and I get so anxious my teeth chatter. I just can't afford them much longer, and you can see as well as I do that they're not up to most of the competition they meet; Belle's past twenty-five and even her hairdresser—"

"I suppose it's too late for them to learn shorthand?"

"It's almost too late for them to learn new dances," Mrs. Willow said sullenly. In a fever of irritation she put out her cigarette and got up to pace furiously up and down the satin room. "For God's sake," she said, "I'd take *any*body. Even somebody penniless. If he had rich friends."

There was a long silence. Mrs. Willow walked back and forth, eyeing the draperies, the jade cigarette box, the fine thin legs of the furniture. Mrs.

Halloran stared down at her desk, at her unfinished accounts. Then Mrs. Willow said abruptly, “What a *hell* of a thing to do,” and Mrs. Halloran raised her head. “Orianna,” Mrs. Willow said, “what is this?”

Mrs. Halloran turned curiously, and Mrs. Willow said, “Look at this thing. It’s disgusting. What’s the idea?”

“Augusta,” Mrs. Halloran said, “I can generally follow your conversation, since it rarely departs from one or two favorite subjects. But I confess that at present—”

“Look, then, damn it. If you don’t want people to see it why do you leave it standing there?” Mrs. Willow brought it over; it was a framed photograph of Mrs. Halloran with a hatpin pushed through the tinted throat so that the pin stood out, wickedly behind the photograph and the rhinestone head of the pin sparkled like a huge diamond against the throat of Mrs. Halloran in the photograph.

“Dear me,” said Mrs. Halloran. She took the photograph in her hand and looked at it thoughtfully. Then, “No,” she said, handing it back, “I have no idea how it got there.”

“Hell of a practical joke,” said Mrs. Willow, pulling at the hatpin. “Hardly get it out.”

“Then leave it in,” Mrs. Halloran said indifferently.

“It gives me the creeps. There.” Mrs. Willow set the picture down and the hatpin on the low table beside it. “Well,” she said, running her finger carefully along the picture frame, “do you think you can?”

“Can what, Augusta?”

“Do a little something for my gels — girls? Not much, just something?”

“I believe there may be an opening here for a housemaid.”

“I’m not an idiot,” Mrs. Willow said slowly, “at least not idiot enough to threaten you. I didn’t go sticking a hatpin through your picture—”

“That was probably Fancy; she’s been told not to come in here.”

“ — and yet it seems to me that you could use a friend or so, and particularly someone who’s known you a long time and doesn’t have anything to lose by you, only something to gain. But you might as well know that your sister Fanny—”

“Who hasn’t a cent.”

“ — has bidden us welcome to this house; we may stay as long as we like.”

Mrs. Halloran turned, staring. “Did she *tell* you?”

“Put it,” Mrs. Willow said carefully, “that either we hustle off with a little check in our hands, or we stay, and—” she grinned, “ — get born again with all of you.”

“I will not pay you to go, certainly.” Mrs. Halloran’s voice was quiet. “And I will not go against Aunt Fanny, although I believe she is sadly mistaken here. Yet,” she said sadly, “you and I have so little else to hope for.”

4

MRS. HALLORAN, WHO was a tired and sometimes lonely person, sat by herself in her room before the thin-legged desk; it was late evening, her accounts still undone, and distantly she could hear the voices of the other people in the house, and sometimes laughter. Only human beings and rabid animals turn on their own kind, she was thinking; gratuitous pain is unknown in nature. At what point, she wondered, could I have been brought to deny myself all this? Lose the house? How could I have turned aside? And could I bear to lose it now?

She told them over softly. Richard, Fanny, Maryjane, Fancy, Augusta Willow, Julia, Arabella. Essex. Miss Ogilvie. Could I really die? she wondered, and then, resolute, turned to her accounts. All things must be neat and shipshape at her hands; even if the world outside withered and dissolved Mrs. Halloran would face a new world, herself in order, and balanced, relinquishing nothing of what was her own.

Downstairs, they were in the library. In his room Mr. Halloran slept, his nurse nodding beside him, but in the library, Aunt Fanny and Mrs. Willow were playing bridge against Miss Ogilvie and Julia, while Maryjane told Arabella the plot of a movie she had recently seen, and Essex, constrained by Aunt Fanny, advised the play.

“These are not new cards,” Aunt Fanny said, turning her hand over. “There should always be new cards in the card cupboard, Essex.”

“I’m afraid I took them out,” Miss Ogilvie said. “I took the first I came to.”

“We must have new cards for my deal,” Aunt Fanny said. “Essex, do you see my cards?”

“Yes, Aunt Fanny.”

“My father never touched a soiled card.”

“I dealt.” Mrs. Willow overrode Aunt Fanny. She looked deeply into her hand, sighed, thought, adjusted a card, sighed again, and put her cards down on the table. “Pass,” she said. “Will Orianna be down tonight?”

“I hardly think so,” Essex said.

“She is adding up how much we all cost her,” Maryjane said. “Every time she goes up to look over the bills I wish I had bought more in the village.”

“Who dealt?” Miss Ogilvie asked.

“He was a doctor in *this* movie,” Maryjane said to Arabella, “you know, with a white coat and devoted to his profession? And his wife, you know?”

“I guess I pass,” Miss Ogilvie said.

“Really, partner!” Julia said; she was prepared to suffer much at Miss Ogilvie’s hands.

“Two hearts,” Aunt Fanny said, “Essex, come and look at this hand.”

“Two?” Mrs. Willow said. “*Two* hearts, partner? Essex, does she really mean *two* hearts?”

“Mrs. Willow, I was taught bridge by a professional. My father believed that no expense should be spared on my education. Bridge, dancing, lessons in drawing and on the harp. Italian. Astronomy—”

“Four spades,” said Julia in some haste.

“Julia, pet, you interrupt Aunt Fanny.”

“What does four spades mean?” Miss Ogilvie asked. “Essex, what does she mean by four spades?”

Aunt Fanny went on. “I was only trying to explain that my education was not, as you sometimes seem to believe, wholly neglected. I was not, perhaps, a diligent student, but that implies no criticism of my father, whose only aim was to see me a cultivated, gracious woman.”

“And *she* refused to believe him,” Maryjane said to Arabella, “because she had no faith, you know? And of course he *had* lied to her before, about adopting the child. And then the natives got cholera … cholera? Essex?”

“Pass,” said Mrs. Willow. “I have absolutely nothing at all,” she explained to Aunt Fanny.

“Talking across the table,” said Miss Ogilvie roguishly. “Now, Mrs. Willow, *you* know better.”

“I shall of course withdraw my bid,” Aunt Fanny said stiffly.

“Not at all,” Miss Ogilvie said. “We wouldn’t *dream*—”

“I was taught by a professional, Miss Ogilvie. If my partner reveals her hand, intentionally or unintentionally—”

“Essex,” Miss Ogilvie said, “what shall I do? Julia has bid four spades, and Aunt Fanny has withdrawn her bid, so what shall *I* do?”

“ — and of course he had to inject the stuff into himself first, to *show* them, and he didn’t know his wife had—”

“Five hearts, then, I guess.”

“That was Aunt Fanny’s suit, Miss Ogilvie.”

“Oh, dear.” Miss Ogilvie consulted her hand. “I guess I didn’t mean hearts, anyway. I’m sorry, everybody. I *did* mean diamonds.”

“Five diamonds?” Julia asked.

“I stand corrected,” Aunt Fanny said. “I was under the impression that one’s first bid was of the suit one intended. I am happy to know that I have been wrong all these years, and so, of course, was the professional teacher from whom I learned. I have not, of course, kept up with the newer rules, so I am now aware of a kind of bid I had always thought illegal."

" — and the chief's little son, the apple of his eye, and really the *cutest* little fellow, even though he was—"

"Essex?" said Miss Ogilvie helplessly.

"Six no trump," Julia said.

Aunt Fanny folded her cards and put them in the center of the table. "If we should ever play bridge again," she said, "will you, Essex, see that we have clean cards? I had not passed, Julia; you had no authority to bid." She turned her chair away from the table and, awkwardly, the others set down their cards. "Essex," said Aunt Fanny, "have our guests been offered drinks? Cigars?"

"Mrs. Willow," said Essex gravely, "will you have a cigar?"

" — and then, of course, all the other natives, and I wish you could have seen it; he was so tall and dignified, and yet he was so happy, too, and in spite of his wife—"

"I *will* have a drink, however," Mrs. Willow said.

" — and *she* died, although actually in real life they are *still* happily—"

Julia gathered up the cards and laid out a game of solitaire; she began to whistle softly.

"Consider," said Essex, "consider — you drink straight Scotch, Mrs. Willow? — consider our several methods of estimating reality. We are, not to put too fine a point on it, gathered here waiting, and yet we have no way to prepare; this is not real, what we are doing now — we have no function, beyond waiting."

"A pleasant way to wait," Mrs. Willow said, looking at the light through her drink.

"Nothing is actually quite concrete," Essex said; the absence of Mrs. Halloran made him a little free and he was, in any case, slightly drunk. "We cannot concern ourselves with anything of this world, and we are far from achieving the next; Aunt Fanny, is there nothing we can do?"

"I am tired of waiting, myself, Essex. But my father said we would be told in time. I think," said Aunt Fanny, with an unusual burst of confidence, "that we are like people at a summer resort, waiting for their vacations to end. We have *never* had anything to *do*, you know, but now we are waiting besides, and it is almost unbearable."

"Reality," Essex said. "Reality. What is real, Aunt Fanny?"

"The truth," said Aunt Fanny at once.

"Mrs. Willow, what is real?"

"Comfort," said Mrs. Willow.

"Miss Ogilvie, what is real?"

"Oh, dear." Miss Ogilvie looked for help to Mrs. Willow, to Julia. "I couldn't really say, not haying had that much experience. Well … food, I guess."

"Maryjane," said Essex, "what is reality?"

"What?" Maryjane stared with her mouth open. "You mean, something real, like something not in the movies?"

"A dream world," Arabella supplied.

Julia laughed. "Essex," she said, "what is real?"

Essex bowed to her gravely. "*I* am real," he said. "I am not at all sure about the rest of you."

"How could you know about me, for instance?" Julia laughed.

"A few simple tests …"

"Do you actually have a *test* for reality?" Miss Ogilvie asked with interest.

"Observation, perhaps," Essex said, wickedly. "Recollection. Intention, desire, mystic perception of the absence of nothingness. I am going to be sorry that I ever named the subject."

"If you are talking about one of my gels I can promise you that you will be sorry, Master Insolence."

"Mrs. Willow, I was talking about yourself."

"Then reality, as you call it, is something I think I *do* know something about. If it's actual real things you mean, and I suppose you wouldn't be talking about it if you didn't, then there's *plenty* I can tell you. Reality!" Mrs. Willow said, as though she might be saying "Superstition!" or "Leprosy!" She sighed deeply. "*We* know, don't we?" she said to Aunt Fanny, and Aunt Fanny jumped. "We're an older school, we've been trained," Mrs. Willow said. "We've been *taught*, not like you younger things, with your schools and what not. You young people never *think*," she observed profoundly, "and that's what I *mean* by reality."

"What *kind* of tests?" Miss Ogilvie could not be stopped. "You mean … intelligence tests?" She glanced around, blushing. "I mean," she explained, "the more we know about such things the better able we are …" Her voice trailed off, as though even Miss Ogilvie could not contemplate an increase in her own abilities; even a test of intelligence, the silence said clearly, would not appreciably profit Miss Ogilvie.

"Well, reality," Mrs. Willow said finally, "all it means is money. A roof over your head, of course, and a little something three times a day and maybe a drop to drink. But mostly money. Clothes. Looking nice, and feeling a little chipper, and of course," she added, giving Essex a wink — and provoking Arabella into saying "Mother, *dear!*"— "a man in your bed. Reality!" and now it sounded as though Mrs. Willow might be saying "May wine," or even possibly "tropical moonlight," and she gave a happy little sigh.

"Fortune telling," Essex said to Miss Ogilvie. "Intelligence tests — palmistry — tea reading — projective tests—"

"I *adore* them," Julia said. "*Can* we?"

"Table tipping," Essex said.

"Then," Miss Ogilvie said, trailing a little, "Aunt Fanny's father—"

" — and they found the buried treasure right on that spot," Arabella was saying to Maryjane. "I mean, right where the figure had been beckoning to them. Isn't it *divine?*"

"Now I don't hold with spiritualism," Mrs. Willow said. "Present company excepted, of course," she said to Aunt Fanny. "I've seen many a good woman waste the little bit she had left on nothing but a white shadow with a creepy voice, calling and crying over it and spending her life and even her money wasting away to nothing but a shadow herself. Mediums, you know," Mrs. Willow said in explanation to Miss Ogilvie, who had her mouth open again. "Mediums preying."

"Good heavens," said Miss Ogilvie.

"You surely cannot mean to include *me* with—"

"Well, Aunt Fanny, the way I see it you're a lady, and a lady isn't going to tell lies about her own father. I like to think I've got an open mind on any subject, but I sure as almighty hell wish I'd been there when Daddy came."

"Maybe he'll come again," Julia said.

"I'd really *die*," Arabella said.

Essex said rather sternly, "Aunt Fanny is not a medium or a charlatan, Mrs. Willow."

"Lord, dear, I never said she was. I'm curious, is all; there's a lot more I need to know about all this. And who the devil," she went on, "are *you?*"

"How do you do."

Mrs. Willow's voice had been so level that no one had turned, accustomed by now to her grasshopper speech; when they heard another, a strange voice, answer, all of them were startled and wheeled toward the doorway, all except Miss Ogilvie, who assumed immediately that Mrs. Willow had successfully raised an apparition (perhaps Aunt Fanny's father, come to undertake his own defense, and Miss Ogilvie having showed surprise; even, perhaps … skepticism). Miss Ogilvie gasped and covered her eyes.

"How do you do," Mrs. Willow said formally, herself a little shocked by the promptness with which she had summoned a stranger into Mrs. Halloran's library; almost lowering her voice Mrs. Willow went on, "Are you looking for someone?"

"Knock twice for yes, once for no," Essex murmured.

"Mrs. Halloran?"

Thus adequately convinced of either the mortal simplicity of the appearance before her, or — not impossibly — the utter lack of an adequate intelligence system among the inhabitants of another world, Mrs. Willow laughed and said in her normal voice, "Mrs. Halloran has retired. Can I help you?"

"I'm Gloria Desmond."

"Gloria." Mrs. Willow inclined her head regally. "I am Augusta Willow. My daughters, Arabella and Julia. Mr. Essex. Miss Ogilvie. Miss Frances Halloran."

Aunt Fanny came forward; she had, after all, had more ghostly experience than any of them. "I am Miss Halloran," she said. "My brother is resting, and my sister-in-law is engaged; I am afraid you will not be able to see her tonight. If I can—"

“I will be glad to send up a message,” Mrs. Willow said, moving in. “What did you want to see her about?”

“I have a letter for her.”

“What does it say?” Mrs. Willow inquired.

“It asks if I can stay here with her till my father comes home.”

“Who wrote it?”

“My father did. He’s Mrs. Halloran’s cousin.”

“Unusually ladylike for *that* family,” Aunt Fanny told Miss Ogilvie, who, somewhat reassured, was staring with her mouth open.

“Where did he go, your father?”

“Africa.”

“What for?”

“To shoot lions, of course.”

“What on earth *for?*” said Mrs. Willow blankly.

“Some people shoot lions,” the girl said pleasantly, “and some people do not shoot lions. My father is one of the people who do.”

Aunt Fanny leaned forward. “How old are you?”

“Seventeen.”

“Where did you come from?”

“My home. In Massachusetts.”

“How did you get *here?*”

“By plane. My father left for Africa yesterday and before he left he wrote this letter to Mrs. Halloran asking if she would put me up until he gets back because the people I was supposed to stay with had a death in the family and so my father put me on the plane and said Mrs. Halloran had written him once asking him to come for a visit and he supposed the invitation was still open and there wasn’t time to telegraph or anything because we thought I would be here practically by the time the telegram arrived. We did not know," the girl went on, "that I would get off the plane and have to take a two-hour bus trip and then a taxi from your village and then climb over a locked gate and walk in these shoes up a thousand miles of drive and then bang on the front door till I was tired and finally walk in here and come to this room where I heard voices and then stand here answering a million silly questions before anyone even told me I could put my suitcase down but now I think I will put my suitcase down and take off my shoes and then if you have any more questions—"

"It's because we thought you were a ghost," Arabella explained helpfully.

"A ghost? Why would I be a ghost?"

"We have had a death in this family, too," Aunt Fanny said. "You have come to a house of mourning, child. But I am sure that my brother will welcome you, even in his grief."

"You really climbed over the gate?" Essex asked.

"When I am visiting a place," Gloria said, "I don't like being locked out, even if they don't know I'm coming."

"The least your father could do," Mrs. Halloran said pleasantly to Gloria at the breakfast table, "is bring me back a lion."

"We used to do it when we were girls," Mrs. Willow said. "It's very easy, and very accurate. And of course, needing information the way we do—"

"My father—"

"I'm not saying a word against him, dearie. Only he does seem kind of … vague. Inconclusive. What *we* want to know is who, what, where, when, and how. And this is how to do it."

"I am not sure," Aunt Fanny said, "that my father would agree …"

"Only trouble is," Mrs. Willow said, "and of course it's not really a trouble, but we need a virgin."

"That is a subject," Mrs. Halloran said with unseemly haste, "which, if pursued, could only develop into low comedy. I suggest we turn our minds to something else at *once*."

"We used to do it when we were girls," Mrs. Willow said in explanation. She pulled a small table away from the wall and set it near the fire, checking earnestly to make sure that there was no glare of reflected light. Next to the table she put a straight, stiff chair, which had perhaps never been sat upon before. It came from a dark corner of the drawing room, and was upholstered in dead green satin. Its legs were carved and gilded; it was clearly uncomfortable and slippery. "The mirror," Mrs. Willow said. "Bring the one on the wall there, Essex." She laughed. "It's reflected all of us so many times it must know our faces by now." Essex brought the mirror, awkwardly; when he took it down from the wall it was unexpectedly heavy, and Mrs. Willow had to leap forward to catch it before it fell. Mrs. Halloran, stony-faced, looked for a minute at the darker spot on the silvered wallpaper which the mirror had left behind.

"Some of these things," Mrs. Halloran said, "have not been moved since the house was built."

"I don't doubt it," Mrs. Willow agreed amiably. "You should have this room done over, dear. It's perfectly impossible." Then, reflecting, she went on, "Although that sounds silly, now, doesn't it? Because even if you wanted to do it over, why bother? For such a short time, probably, I mean, and afterward, of course, there won't be anyone to do it."

"I have always liked it the way it is," Mrs. Halloran said.

Mrs. Willow and Essex put the mirror down onto the table and it reflected dutifully the carved cupids and painted clouds of the ceiling. The heavy frame of the mirror was gilded, and there was an expensive fault in the glass, so that a wave seemingly passed across it, altering the cupid faces and giving a look of sea-depth; Mrs. Willow had taken from the kitchen a small can of imported olive oil, and now she carefully poured a little onto the mirror, and it spread and ran and flattened, and the mirror caught light and shone. “Now,” Mrs. Willow said, looking around the room.

“Low comedy,” Mrs. Halloran murmured. “Essex, do you volunteer?”

“I have an antipathy to mirrors,” Essex said.

“What do I have to do?” Gloria came forward. “Just look in the glass?”

“As though it were a window,” Mrs. Willow said, and Gloria sat down gingerly on the green satin chair.

Gloria giggled, and Mrs. Willow put her hand on Gloria’s head, protectively, and said in a steady tone, “Rest your arms on the table on either side of the window. Put your face down close to the window and keep your eyes wide. Try not to blink. Try not to think. We will all be very quiet, and in a little while you will see through the window to what is on the other side. When you see something there, just tell us simply what you see.”

“Suppose I don’t see anything?”

“Then someone else will try. We used to do this all the time, dear, when we were girls. Now, everyone, sit well away from Gloria, so you will not cast a shadow. And be quiet, if you please.”

Mrs. Halloran, with the air of one divorcing herself from a dull parlor trick, although one which had been perfectly acceptable when she was a girl, sat in her usual chair by the fire, and Essex sat near her. Julia and Arabella sat together, prettily, upon a rose-colored sofa near the fire, and Miss Ogilvie took a place in a far corner, as befitted one in a humble station and not expected to be the first to face any danger. Mrs. Willow and Aunt Fanny hovered near Gloria, silently pressing one another to move back. Gloria leaned her head forward, and her long hair fell down along either cheek.

"It hurts your eyes," she said.

"Gloria," Mrs. Willow said hypnotically, "you are looking through a window, a strange window because it looks out onto a world you have never seen before. It is dark there now, perhaps, because on the other side they still have not found the way to the window, but remember, when they know the window is there they will come to speak to us. You are waiting at this window to be given a vital message. Be alert, child, be ready; remember that you are on guard at this window and when they come you must be prepared to see them."

"Please don't breathe on my neck," Gloria said.

"Gloria," Aunt Fanny said, "can you see my father? Tall, very pale?"

"I can see the sundial, I *think*," Gloria said hesitantly. "No, it is not the sundial. It is a white rock. There is water around it — no grass. It is like the sundial because it stands there alone with grass all around it, but it is only a white rock."

"A trysting place," said Mrs. Willow with satisfaction.

"Not on *my* land," Mrs. Halloran said firmly.

"Now the rock is a mountain. And the grass is tops of trees. There is water running down the mountain; it is a waterfall. Like one of those toys — everything shifts and changes, and by the time I see something it is gone. Now it is the sun, very bright. It hurts my eyes. A fire. White. All over, covering everything, even the trees and the waterfall. And colors, red and black. I've got to close my eyes." She put both hands over her eyes and Mrs. Willow sighed.

"It was my father, almost certainly," Aunt Fanny said. "Very bright."

Gloria leaned forward again and said, "It's still there, only getting darker. Circles of color, blacker and blacker. No, no, stop," she said, and she half-rose, her face close to the mirror. "I don't want to watch," she said, staring.

“Like eyes, eyes all looking, they are going to get out — they are going to get out — shut the window against them, quick — shut the mirror, before they get out! No, wait,” and without looking away she waved Mrs. Willow back, “it’s quiet now. They can’t get out. The others are there. Standing, in a row. Looking at us. They want something.”

“Who do they want?” It was Miss Ogilvie from her corner, straining against her chair as though tied.

“It is the house. They were standing all in a row and now it is the windows of the house; it looks tiny. It looks like a tiny picture, barely colored. The sun is not shining. There is a bird walking down the terrace, even from here I can see how bright he is, red and blue and green, like jewels.”

“We have *never* had peacocks on the terrace,” Mrs. Halloran said. “My father-in-law thought them feeble-minded.”

“It is walking down the terrace and now down the steps onto the lawn. Blue, and green. Tiny, and bright. It is coming straight down the lawn, right at me. I think it sees me and is coming right at me. It has a sharp nose and red eyes and it is smiling, bright and colored and coming faster — make him stop — make him go away — it’s hideous — make him go away!”

Gloria wrenched away from the table and covered her eyes. Mrs. Willow patted her shoulder and said, “A little brandy, Essex, please,” and looked over Gloria’s shoulder into the mirror skimmed with oil, reflecting distorted cupids and dirty clouds.

“I am sure that it was my father,” Aunt Fanny said. “I would not look into that mirror, of course, but it is not necessary. I know that it was my father, and he has come to see if we are mindful of his instructions. Don’t be afraid,” she said to Gloria. “That was my father you saw.”

“It was awful,” Gloria said.

“He was always a very strict man,” Aunt Fanny said, “but good to his children. If I had been in your place, Gloria, I should have said something, or at least made some gesture to show you recognized him. Because of course he has *his* feelings, too.”

5

"YOU ARE NOT familiar, I think," Essex said slowly, "with a kind of unholy, unspeakable longing? I mention it to you because I think you may be the only person here who is capable of recognizing such an emotion. It is not a pretty thing to feel."

"Perhaps you might teach me," Arabella said.

"It is a longing so intense that it creates what it desires, it cannot endure any touch of correction; it is, as I say, unspeakable."

"No," said Arabella, "I do not think I can remember that I ever felt anything like that."

"It is unholy because it is heretic. It is foul. It is abominable to need something so badly that you cannot picture living without it. It is a contradiction to the condition of mankind."

"I have always lived very well, you see," Arabella said. "My mother has made a particular point of seeing that I lacked for nothing."

"I dread that it may be only a longing for annihilation. No person who has seen his own face plain can want to live longer."

"Well, I can't understand *that*. I mean, I can understand a person's not liking his own face, but people can't help their faces, after all. I know I always feel very sorry for girls who are not nice-looking. And I'm sure I think you've got a very pleasant face."

"The sight of one's own heart is degrading; people are not *meant* to look inward — that's why they've been given bodies, to hide their souls."

"Of course, I was very lucky, and please don't think I believe it *was* anything but luck; beauty is only an accident, like the way a person is born.”

“I am filthy, sickened, beastly. I have seen myself plain.”

“My sister Julia, on the other hand—”

“I am rotten; that is why I am so frightened — I am terribly afraid that this hope which Aunt Fanny—”

“Aunt *Fanny,*” said Arabella, “you’re talking about Aunt *Fanny?* But I thought all your unspeakable thoughts were about *me*.”

“Well, *I* don’t care what the old biddy says,” Julia said, taking the turn by the gates in a wide sweep of the steering wheel, and barely slowing the car, “*I*’d go anywhere *I* pleased.”

“It’s very difficult,” Miss Ogilvie said hesitantly. “That is, she *does* mind, and being dependent, I suppose it’s the least we can do, not asking to have the gates unlocked.”

“Not *me*,” Julia said. “You saw the way *I* take care of things; I just told him it was all right with the old lady, and maybe he thought I was taking you two to church or something, because he wouldn’t *dare* to keep *me* inside.”

“I merely do not choose, often, to leave my home,” Aunt Fanny observed from the back seat. “Your modern automobiles … particularly this one; Julia, do you mind moving just a *little* more slowly? Automobiles, and noise and dust and strange people … I prefer a somewhat less feverish life, thank you.”

“What will she say when she hears you two have been gallivanting around?” Julia asked, peering at them in the rear-view mirror.

“I do not gallivant around,” Aunt Fanny said, and Miss Ogilvie said, “We didn’t think she’d have to know. Unless *you* tell her.”

“I keep your secrets,” Julia said darkly, “and you keep mine.”

Although the fact had probably not influenced the first Mr. Halloran in his choice of a site for his house, the village had been, shortly before his time, very much the subject of sensational publicity. Young Harriet Stuart, it was generally believed, had one morning arisen unusually early in the Stuart house just outside the village, and taken up a hammer with which she murdered her father, her mother, and her two younger brothers, putting an abrupt end to the Stuart family tree. Fall River, Massachusetts, was nothing to the villagers near Mr. Halloran's proposed big house; Harriet Stuart was their enshrined murderess. During Harriet's arrest and trial, the villagers met more strangers than had ever come their way before, and after Harriet's acquittal it was customary for almost daily groups of tourists to get off the bus in front of the Carriage Stop Inn, and wander, guided by a villager, up the half mile to the Stuart house, where they were occasionally rewarded by a fleeting glimpse of Harriet's housekeeper and guardian, an aunt who must sometimes have wondered if Harriet's hammer days were over, working in the garden or taking in the groceries. Sometimes the most persistent, staying past the departure of the second bus (and thus making necessary a night spent in the arms of the Carriage Stop Inn) were able to catch sight of a tall figure dressed in black, moving past the upper windows of the house.

The village story, no matter who was lucky enough to capture the tourists, seldom varied: "They couldn't prove it on her, see, because no one knew *why* she did it, and being fifteen years old and all, she got off. They said at the time it was a crazy idea she was even put on trial, because no jury in their right minds could see her sitting there, quiet and sad and looking like any young kid, and really *believe* she did it. *We* knew her around the village — she was born here, after all, and her two brothers besides, and even *we* couldn't think, sometimes, she was up to it. Now right here, right along these bushes here by the road, is where she fell when she said she was running for help, and here's where they found the hammer later, and she said it was a tramp chasing her, one got in through the back cellar window and he must have dropped the hammer here. She run all the way down the road to Parker's Bakery yelling for help. Later we'll go round the back and look through the fence and you can see the window she said the tramp got in at, even though they said, the prosecution, it hadn't been opened for years, but the defense got an expert said there were clear signs someone had been walking around the cellar near the window. Right there, that window on the second floor third from the end, that was the window of the room where her mother and father slept and they say *she* sleeps in there now — remorse, or something. Or maybe it just has the best bed, though not many people would want to sleep in *that* bed, I guess — it's where she did them in, you know. The two boys were around back, we can see their window when we go around. *Her* room was on the very end, down there, and they say she got up when it was still dark and she had the hammer with her — took it to bed with her the night before, you know — and came right down the hall to her parent's bedroom and *wham!* Then, across the hall to the boys. *Wham* again. Nothing to it, says Harriet. Then, down the stairs, and down the front walk, left the gate open, fell into the bushes back where I showed you, dropped the hammer, and down the road in her nightgown to Parker's Bakery; Bill Parker, *he* didn't believe her at first — she yelled him out of bed and he put his head out of the window and told her to go home. Then she told him again and he got some pants on and got up Straus the butcher and old Watkins and they went up — before you take the bus you go see old Watkins; he'll tell you what it looked like when they got up here. One funny thing — she was barefoot and all cut and scratched from the bushes when Mrs. Parker took her in, but no blood on her. The prosecution, they said she couldn't hardly do such a set of things as *that* without getting blood on her, and they say she did it and then washed herself and put on a clean nightgown. The prosecution said she burned the bloody nightgown in the stove, but the defense, *they* got in an expert said it wasn't nothing but old rags in the stove, even though no one said why anyone wanted to go burning old rags; round here, we mostly take our old junk over to the dump, although you ask my wife, she'll tell you she *wears* our old rags.

"No one ever knew, though. She got off, and she came back here to the house where she was born, and she lives there now. Goes out for walks at night, they say, although me, *I* wouldn't like to meet her — can't tell what might happen if she come to take a dislike to you. Funny thing, though, Straus — he's the butcher — says they never order meat, though they used to. A vegetarian, Harriet Stuart.

"Come around the side and I'll show you the shed the hammer come from, and then we'll look through the fence and maybe get a look at Auntie and anyway see those other windows. He was a carpenter, Stuart — built most of this place himself, though Harriet had the fence put up, of course, after she come home. Used to be kids throwing rocks through the windows, sometimes, or yelling things from the road. Seems to me people could bring up their kids better, somehow, teach them to respect other people and other people's property."

Harriet Stuart died quietly in her sleep some ten or twelve years after Mr. Halloran had built the big house, her aunt removed to another town and was known to have changed her name, and the Stuart house stayed empty. No one was willing to live in it because of its lack of sanitary accommodations, and the villagers kept it in repair because tourists came to look at it. The fence was taken down, and it was not thought in doubtful taste to tack neatly lettered little signs upon the doors to the significant rooms, and set a small metal standard beside the bush where the hammer was found. The villagers tried valiantly to pretend that the house was haunted, and occasionally Mr. Straus, who had re-taken possession of the property when the Stuart mortgage lapsed, received letters from scholarly folk who wanted to visit the house in order to write gently humorous, cynical articles proving that Harriet Stuart was innocent, or that she was guilty. One such article referred to the village as "a quiet place, untouched by time or progress."

The present Mr. Straus, who owned the butcher shop, was the son of the original Mr. Straus who owned the butcher shop and had gone with Mr. Parker and old Watkins to the Stuart house; the present Mr. Straus had heard the Harriet Stuart story so often from his father that he could repeat it, now, without hesitation, when people came by the shop and asked him; he knew perfectly where the blood had been spilled and how Mrs. Stuart had made it halfway to the door before the hammer caught up with her, and he could re-create, with telling effect, the look in the dead eyes of Mr. Stuart, gazing with horror upon his murderer; his pathetic recital of how the two young boys were found in one another's arms was very apt to move his hearers to tears. The Stuart house was listed in local guide books as a spot of some grisly interest. Mr. Peabody, when he took over the Carriage Stop Inn, had actually debated for some time the wisdom of renaming the Inn the Harriet Stuart Lodge, but had been dissuaded by the sterner heads in town, and particularly the Misses Inverness, who ran the gift shop next to the Inn, and who regarded the entire Harriet Stuart affair as uncouth, and criminally unfilial. No curios or mementos of the Stuart family were to be found in the gift shop run by the Misses Inverness, although several books discussing the murder were in the Inn library, and a rude pamphlet, purporting to be the work of one of the party who visited the house that night, was on sale in several shops in the village; it gave a vivid and gory description of the house, and had sketches of Harriet Stuart, her unfortunate family, and a map of the probable route she had taken from arising that morning to her eventual arrival at Parker’s Bakery.

Harriet Stuart lured a small regular stream of tourists to the village; two busses a day stopped in front of the Carriage Stop Inn, and there was time between them for a visit to the Harriet Stuart house, and a country-style dinner at the Inn, with a few minutes for browsing with the Misses Inverness, and a walk down the one street of the village to purchase homemade jelly and preserves in Mrs. Martin’s little shop, regard the site of Parker’s Bakery, now, with Parker, defunct; look at antiques in the big barn back of the Basses’ house, and inspect, with shudders, the Stuart family memorial in the cemetery, which gave no more than the names of the murdered family and, horribly, their one common date of death. Most of the villagers managed to sell a little something to tourists, and keep their own small businesses besides. Miss Bass, sister to the Mr. Bass who kept antiques in his barn, gave lessons in piano and voice. Mrs. Otis, whom people believed to be a divorced woman living upon alimony, gave dancing lessons and did hair. The village children went to a one-room school, taught for the past seventeen years by a Miss Comstock; her salary was paid, as had been that of her predecessor, by the Halloran family. The first Mr. Halloran had been responsible for the further education, in college, in medical school, in law school, or in art school, of those village children who showed promise; the present Mrs. Halloran had continued this policy, but teachable children were getting fewer every year; those young people sent away to college had, of course, never come back, and the village grew smaller and older, although the Harriet Stuart stories were handed down as faithfully as the several small annuities from the Halloran family. Mr. Halloran had once made an offer to buy the Stuart house and land, but Mr. Straus had firmly refused, and as a result — the first Mr. Halloran disliking not being able to buy something he wanted — the Stuart legends were not discussed by the Hallorans, and naturally tourists were never admitted inside the walls of the big house. The Hallorans made a particular point of bringing as much of their trade as possible to the village; they bought their meat from Mr. Straus, in spite of the coolness which had arisen over the Stuart holding, and had much of their dressmaking and simple sewing done by old Mrs. Martin, who also made the homemade jellies and jams and an occasional pie upon order. Although the Halloran house received regular deliveries from the big stores in the city, nine miles away, they placed a standing order for groceries from Mr. Hawthorne, borrowed their books from the lending library in the gift shop run by the Misses Inverness, sent down for the mail from Mr. Armstrong, the postmaster, took their petty hardware from Atkins Hardware, and bought, as far as possible, fresh eggs and chickens and vegetables and fruit from the farmers who were legitimately part of the village. On one point, however, the first Mr. Halloran had made an unbreakable law: the servants in the big house came, without exception, from the city. Villagers, Mr. Halloran maintained, belonged in the village, and not within the walls of the big house.

Julia parked the car at the main corner of the village, where the Carriage Stop Inn faced the hardware store. “Any place in particular?” she asked. “The nearest subway station, maybe?”

“I plan to visit every shop in the village,” Aunt Fanny said stiffly. “Aside from certain preparations which must be made, I feel it incumbent upon me to make one or two last purchases from each shop; a gesture of some importance, as I see it. The villagers must see that we do not break faith with them, even now.”

“What about Miss Ogilvie here?” Julia asked. “You don’t mean her to come with *me*, I suppose?”

“I will accompany Aunt Fanny,” Miss Ogilvie said. “Perhaps I shall drop in at the lending library and browse.”

“And you, Julia?” Aunt Fanny asked. “Can you amuse yourself for an hour at least, perhaps even an hour and a half? I hesitate to propose the lending library.”

“I’ll find something to do,” Julia said vaguely. “Don’t worry about me. Just getting out of that house is enough.”

“Those two young men you are looking at in that field are the Watkins brothers,” Aunt Fanny said tartly. “Good for nothing, both of them. They may look as though they are lying in the shade under a tree, but they will tell you that they are actually out shooting rabbit, or picking apples, or some such nonsense. The Halloran family arranged for the older one to drive one of the dairy trucks from the city, but at the end of a month or so he left them, although they could never actually prove that he had made off with the collection money.”

“I wouldn’t dream of going near them,” Julia said. “I’ll meet you right here in an hour and a half.”

“Perhaps,” Miss Ogilvie suggested timidly, “Julia would be interested in seeing — I know *I* have always wanted to — in seeing the Harriet—”

“Miss Ogilvie,” Aunt Fanny said, “I would not suppose that even Julia would be guilty of such self-indulgence. Julia, I would recommend the cemetery. There are several old markers, the oldest in this part of the country. The Halloran family vault is particularly well-carved; my father and mother rest there.”

“The cemetery,” Julia said. “Naturally. Will I have trouble finding it?”

“I hardly think so,” Aunt Fanny said. “The last building on your right is the church. The cemetery is just beyond it.”

“If I get lost,” Julia said, “I will ask a policeman.”

She drove off, going slowly, and Aunt Fanny and Miss Ogilvie stood for a minute, looking after her. Then Aunt Fanny settled herself briskly and said, “Miss Ogilvie, as I told you, I have really a good deal to do. I must not lose time. I have already sent off a great many orders to stores in the city, and today I must complete my shopping; small purchases I cannot overlook.”

“Why?” said Miss Ogilvie. “I mean—” she blushed “ — why do you have to buy things *now*, when … when …”

“*Dear* Miss Ogilvie. There are *so* many things one is reluctant to leave behind. Even you must perceive that we do not know, yet, what we shall wish, afterward, that we had brought with us, and there will be no coming back, afterward, to collect items we have forgotten.”

“Food,” said Miss Ogilvie, nodding. “I understand.”

“I have absolute faith in my father. But we must try to think of *everything*.”

“Perhaps I can help, then,” Miss Ogilvie said. “At least, I can help you carry your packages.”

“Carry packages? I?”

“Small things …” Miss Ogilvie made a helpless gesture.

“Miss Ogilvie, please do try to be more sensible. I cannot stand here in public, in what is after all the very center of the village, trying to teach you the habits of a lady. I have really no time at all to spend reasoning with you.” Purposefully, Aunt Fanny crossed the street and went into the hardware store, Miss Ogilvie following wretchedly.

After the hardware store, Aunt Fanny visited the grocery and then the little shop where Mrs. Martin sold her jams and jellies and yard goods and an occasional pie upon order. When they left old Mrs. Martin, Miss Ogilvie hesitated and glanced wistfully across the street. “The lending library,” she said apologetically. “Something to pass the time, you know. I don’t suppose,” she added with a flash at Aunt Fanny, “that I need worry about *returning* it.”

“As a matter of fact,” Aunt Fanny said, “I believe I also need a book.”

The lending library was tucked into one corner of the gift shop run by the Misses Inverness, and relied for trade rather heavily upon the transient souvenir-hunter rendered into a stupor by the home-fried chicken and pecan pie of the Carriage Stop Inn next door. Miss Inverness kept the library and Miss Deborah Inverness sold gifts; some inner integrity had preserved their shop from being a shoppe, but when the Misses Inverness had first decided to go into trade Miss Inverness had taken some of the stigma away from the shop by hiring Mr. Ossian, the carpenter, to put Elizabethan half-timbering across the front, and to set in an inglenook around the fireplace. The gifts were almost without exception made of china, delicately colored, and involving numberless small deer and kittens and scottie dogs. Miss Deborah did the dusting herself, naturally, and her sister kept the books. Miss Inverness wore purple crepe with her mother’s garnet brooch, and tended to be brusque, although she knew — none better — that her heart was really of gold; Miss Deborah wore a little locket around her faded neck and had once been in love with a music teacher.

There had been a little tiff between them three summers ago over ashtrays, since the late Mrs. Inverness had not permitted smoking indoors, and the late Mr. Inverness had been accustomed to take his cigar in the lobby of the Carriage Stop Inn. Miss Deborah had insisted with unusual spirit that even proper ladies — Mrs. Halloran up at the big house, for one — used ashtrays nowadays and had as much as accused her sister of not keeping up with the times. Miss Inverness had capitulated, asking her sister irritably how long Mrs. Halloran at the big house had been setting the standards for the Inverness family? and the gift shop now stocked tiny porcelain shell ashtrays. Miss Inverness read a chapter from Henry James aloud every evening, and they drank their tea from fragile, gold-rimmed cups which had been a legacy to their mother from the first, mortal, Mrs. Halloran.

When Aunt Fanny opened the door a little bell rang musically, and Miss Inverness rose from her seat in the inglenook; Miss Deborah, cornered among the china, could only smile most cordially.

“Caroline,” Aunt Fanny said; she and Miss Inverness had played together as children. “How nice to see you.”

“Miss Halloran,” said Miss Inverness, “Deborah, Miss Halloran is here. And Miss Ogilvie,” she said. “How nice.”

“How nice,” said Miss Deborah, coming with caution between the tables. “Miss Halloran. Miss Ogilvie. How very nice.”

“How nice,” Miss Ogilvie said to Miss Inverness, and to Miss Deborah, “How nice to see you again.”

“How well you look,” Miss Inverness said. “And Mr. Halloran — is he well?”

“Not well at all,” Aunt Fanny said, and Miss Ogilvie nodded sadly. “I am sorry to say that he does not keep well,” Aunt Fanny said. “My nephew’s death …”

“Such a terrible blow,” Miss Inverness said, and Miss Deborah murmured, “Tragic.”

“It is a very sad thing to lose an only son,” Miss Ogilvie confirmed.

“And dear little Fancy?” Miss Inverness turned to her sister with a brightening face. “Dear little Fancy?” she said.

“Such a sweet child,” Miss Deborah said. “She was in here with her mother not long ago. Of course, it was before …” her voice trailed off, and she moved a hand eloquently.

“Naturally,” Miss Inverness said. “She took a great pleasure in our new little china dogs, made in Italy, you know. Such a *careful* child. She was really quite *quite* taken with them.”

“You must see them,” Miss Deborah said. “Miss Halloran, you positively must see our new little dogs. The Italians do these things so colorfully, I always think. Dear little Fancy was positively enchanted. I think she was particularly taken with a dear little blue poodle, sister?”

“Such an engaging toy,” Miss Inverness said.

“Dare I take Fancy a little something?” Miss Ogilvie said to Aunt Fanny. “Do you think it might be … perhaps … a little consolation to her?”

“Children are so easily comforted,” Miss Inverness said, and Miss Deborah said, “Poor child, some small pleasure might mean everything in the world to her right now.”

“We’ll certainly take it to her,” Aunt Fanny said. “And we are interested, Miss Inverness, in books.”

“Of course,” Miss Inverness said. “Something to read?”

“Light, please,” Miss Ogilvie said. “Some cheerful light reading. It’s only to pass the time. So difficult, just waiting,” she explained to Miss Deborah.

Miss Inverness laughed roguishly. “I know better than to offer Miss Halloran most of the poor things they are publishing today. There are, however, some few really *excellent* books, some I can honestly recommend, I mean. Some I have read myself, and so has my sister.”

“We had better take several,” Miss Ogilvie said. “We have no idea how long we will have to wait.”

“I see,” said Miss Inverness. “Then you would naturally need several.”

“*I* want,” Aunt Fanny said, “at least one book on surviving in the wilds.”

"I beg your pardon?" said Miss Inverness, and Miss Deborah said, after a moment, *"Surviving?"*

"A book which would tell how to build a fire and how to catch animals for food. A certain amount of first aid, too, I expect. Such information as that."

"I can hardly begin to think—" Miss Inverness began.

"A Boy Scout Handbook," Miss Ogilvie said unexpectedly. "I used to have a brother," she confided in Miss Deborah.

Miss Inverness breathed again. "For Fancy," she said. *"Naturally."*

"To comfort her," Miss Deborah said.

"And," said Aunt Fanny, "I would like, if possible, a fairly elementary book on engineering, and chemicals, and perhaps the various uses of herbs. Perhaps an encyclopedia."

"Well, now," said Miss Inverness, "I *know* that we would not have an *encyclopedia*. Perhaps the library in the big house …"

"It's fairly old," Aunt Fanny said. "No really *new* information. Physics, you know, and politics. I wonder if we have time to order a new one."

"But what would little Fancy want with an encyclopedia?" Miss Deborah wondered. "Are you going to send her to school?"

"I was not brought up to be evasive, Miss Deborah," Aunt Fanny said. "I have immediate need for a good deal of practical information on primitive living. Survival. I have no way of knowing what we may be called upon to do for ourselves."

"Aunt Fanny," Miss Ogilvie said, "Miss Inverness and Miss Deborah have always been so kind … so thoughtful. Would it not be an act of friendship to include them in our future?"

"I confess I had thought of it," Aunt Fanny said. "But I do not think it will offend Caroline or Deborah if I point out, frankly, that our need will be for more sturdy, more *rugged* personalities. Remember, our little group must include builders and workers as well as—" she blushed faintly— "the mothers of future generations."

"I am sure," Miss Inverness said with some stiffness, "that neither my sister nor myself has any desire to be looked upon as a worker, and it is long since we gave up any notion of breeding children. I am astonished, Frances Halloran, to hear you talk so coarsely. I would not have expected it, not in front of my sister."

"I apologize," said Aunt Fanny, who could afford to be mild. She turned to Miss Ogilvie. "You see," she said, "it is not fair to *them*. We need a different kind of person altogether."

"If your needs are what they seem to be," Miss Inverness said, not altogether mollified, "I assure you that my sister and myself must refuse, most firmly, to be included in any way whatsoever."

"Caroline, dear," Miss Deborah said gently.

"I am sorry," Miss Ogilvie said. "I should never have said anything at all. It was only because one so rarely meets congenial persons, really congenial, and I thought it would be a shame to lose Miss Inverness and Miss Deborah as friends. I am sure they have always been *most* respectable, and it will be sad to think of them after they are gone."

"Our mother brought us up to be respectable, I hope, Miss Ogilvie. I will get your Boy Scout Handbook."

Still contrite, Aunt Fanny selected half a dozen novels, the blue poodle for Fancy, and a shell ashtray for Essex. Miss Deborah made everything into a neat package, which was left in the shop for Julia to gather in later when she came back with the car. Miss Inverness was cool in her farewell to Aunt Fanny, and gave Miss Ogilvie only a small bow; Miss Deborah accompanied them to the door of the shop, troubled and civil, and opened the door for them, the faint musical tinkle of the door-bells for a moment overriding her voice before her sister called her sharply.

On the sidewalk outside the shop Miss Ogilvie said, “Well, I’m happy to think that we will probably never go in *there* again. I think Miss Inverness has gotten very crotchety.”

“Like her mother,” Aunt Fanny said. “Candles,” she said, “candles. I forgot candles.”

“Then I’ll just run in and have a cup of coffee, dear,” Miss Ogilvie said. “In the drug store, because they look at you so strangely in the Inn when you only order coffee.”

“Don’t *talk* to anyone,” Aunt Fanny said. “Put out of your mind any ideas except that we have come into the village for a morning’s shopping. I will meet you here in fifteen minutes, and I beg of you to be silent about the future.”

“Naturally,” Miss Ogilvie said placidly. “It’s so difficult for me to describe, anyway.”

The drug store, like every other store in the village, sold an enormous variety of goods; no storekeeper in the village found himself able to exist on the marketing of any single commodity; the grocer sold light bulbs and paper supplies, the antique shop carried a sideline of homemade candies and jellies, the hardware store sold toys and newspapers, and the drug store sold them all, besides cigarettes, paperback books, and an unending series of chemicals at its soda fountain. Miss Ogilvie, easing herself gracelessly onto a high stool at the soda fountain, found herself alone in the store except for the soda fountain clerk, a young man with poor hair and pimples, leaning listlessly against a sign showing a tempting chicken salad sandwich adorned with pickles and potato chips; “You want something?” the young man said, picking at his cheek.

Miss Ogilvie sighed happily. “Peach pie,” she said, “with chocolate ice cream on top.” It was only half-past ten, and luncheon at the big house was not served until one. Miss Ogilvie made a series of small wriggling gestures in order to straighten out her skirt under her, and set her pocketbook on the counter next to her and cleared away an obtrusive ashtray and a container of paper napkins. When the young man set the peach pie with chocolate ice cream on top in front of her Miss Ogilvie smiled at it, and then, congratulatingly, at the young man.

“One of the things I *am* going to miss,” she said confidentially, “is fancy food.”

The young man let his eye rest briefly on the peach pie, and retired to lean once more against the chicken salad sandwich. “Don’t care much for pie, myself,” he said. “Cake’s more my line.”

Miss Ogilvie snapped her fingers in sudden irritation. “I forgot,” she said, “I completely forgot; I was so sure I was going to remember to tell Aunt Fanny to get lots and *lots* of those prepared cake mixes. They’re so much easier, and it’s hard to think how we’d get any baking done, otherwise.”

“Or cookies,” the young man said. “Lots of people like cookies.”

“And blueberry muffins,” Miss Ogilvie said. “Dear heavens, I hope I remember to remind Aunt Fanny when I see her.”

“Working in a place like this,” the young man said, “you’d think I’d be crazy about ice cream. Wouldn’t you?”

“Well, *that*’s one thing we can’t take,” Miss Ogilvie said. “It would melt,” she explained. “Since I suppose the electricity will all go off, and then the refrigerator won’t stay cold.”

“The electricity don’t go off,” the young man said. “This time of year, with no storms, the electricity stays on without any trouble. My brother’s on the lines, he'd tell me."

"But of course," Miss Ogilvie said, wide-eyed, "*that* night the buildings will be gone. The places they send the electricity *from*, I mean. And of course the wires."

"What night?" the young man asked idly.

"I'm not supposed to talk about it, but I guess it's all right to tell *you*, so you can tell your brother that it won't be any use." Miss Ogilvie swallowed a piece of peach pie. "Aunt Fanny told us all about it. It's coming very soon. Fire and floods and sidewalks melting away and the earth running with boiling lava and all the poor people trying to get away." She sighed, and looked down at her pie with sympathy. "All over the world," she said, "*everywhere*. And in the morning there will be nothing left. I suppose it's very hard for you to picture it, but there will be simply nothing; we will look out of the windows — that's all of us, in the big house, not *you*, I am afraid, and I am really terribly sorry. But we will all look out the windows and in all the world there will be nothing but drying earth, with the grass beginning to grow. All the houses and people and automobiles and everything will be just melted away." She sighed again. "I just don't know how we're going to make our coffee that first morning," she said. "I suppose we will have to build a little fire somehow. Kindling," she said. "I will tell Aunt Fanny to get kindling."

"You want to be careful, starting fires," the young man said. "It's pretty dry this time of year."

Miss Ogilvie stared. "You don't understand," she said. "There won't be anything left to burn."

The young man thought deeply. "You saying," he asked at last, "that the day of Armageddon is coming? Like that?"

"I think so," Miss Ogilvie said uncertainly.

"Like where it says in the Bible the day of Last Judgment? The final trump?"

"I think that's different," Miss Ogilvie said. "I mean, the *rest* of you—"

"My ma, she talks like that. She's got this club, the True Believers, they call theirselves. They *all* talk like that. Got people coming over from the city to meet with them, *they* talk like that too."

"You mean there are others?" Miss Ogilvie said, barely breathing.

"The True Believers is what they call theirselves. I listen sometimes, me and my brother, the one I was telling you about; he's on the lines. He says to me, 'Don't you believe it, bud, I see enough electricity to know it's scientifically impossible. *Scientifically* impossible. Let them talk,' he says, 'they got nothing else to do. But don't you get taken in, because them scientific fellows have proved that the world didn't start the way they say, and it ain't going to end the way they say either. Protons and neutrons — that's the answer. Electric force.'"

"These True Believers," Miss Ogilvie asked anxiously, "how many of them are there?"

"Ten, maybe. They meet and get messages from the spirit world. Ma's got a control named Liliokawani, used to be a Egyptian queen. Tells her things." He laughed richly. "Liliokawani," he said. "Boy, did they use to live it up, those Egyptian queens."

Miss Ogilvie pushed her peach pie away suddenly. "Ten *more*," she said. "I better go right away and find Aunt Fanny and tell her. I'm not sure she's going to be pleased. We thought," she explained, "that it was just going to be *us*, just our little circle. We really get along quite well together, so congenial and all, and so refined and everything, and now strangers …" She slid hastily off the stool.

"I'll tell Ma you was asking," the young man said. "That'll be a quarter for the pie and fifteen more for the ice cream."

"My father," said Aunt Fanny, "was beyond all things a democratic man. He believed in encouraging the villagers in every possible manner, although I do not recall that he ever mingled among them socially. I cannot picture him visiting this young man's mother. She may easily have been deceived."

"The young man himself was quite positive about it," Miss Ogilvie said miserably. "But really — ten extra people, and we had counted *so* on being alone."

"I do not see that we need bother about it further," Aunt Fanny said. "I am quite positive that my father would agree with me." Her voice went vague; she was looking across the street toward the spot where the bus stopped, bringing Harriet Stuart's visitors, or an occasional traveller interested in dining at the Carriage Stop Inn, or an elderly person come to count the number of people still alive in the village. Mr. Devers, the postman, had gotten off the bus today, because as everyone in the village knew he had gone yesterday to the city to see his only son off for the army, and now Mr. Devers was standing on the corner with his suitcase talking to a stranger. Aunt Fanny was looking at the stranger.

Yes, the stranger agreed over tea and sandwiches at the Carriage Stop Inn, yes, he was a stranger. His tone implied that in faraway villages all over the world he was well-known, and a stranger in this village only. He hinted at himself striding recognized down exotic streets, walking in sandals through dust, moving slowly behind an oxcart or a rickshaw or a dog-sled, kicking aside the encumbrance of a cashmere robe, a furred cloak, shading his eyes from the sun, sheltering his head from the snow, regarding unmoved typhoon and flood, seeing with familiarity such scenes as the quiet eye could not envisage, laughing and looking easily and speaking intimately in strange tongues; yes, he agreed, he was a stranger. It was not possible even for Aunt Fanny to ask where he was from, but Aunt Fanny asked where he was going, as if she had not known when she saw him standing by the bus.

He was genuinely surprised when Aunt Fanny asked him to visit the big house, as though the invitation should not have come quite so soon, as though he had been caught unaware with his persuasions and insidious compliments unexpectedly useless; “Don’t you even want to know my name?” he asked blankly.

“I suppose I shall have to introduce you to my brother,” Aunt Fanny said. “Although I don’t believe any name you might give would be important.”

He looked from Aunt Fanny to Miss Ogilvie and back again. “How about my references?” he asked.

“I expect they would be forged,” Aunt Fanny said agreeably. “My mother once hired a butler who gave forged references, because he had been a convict.”

“I see,” said the stranger.

“My father suspected something in the way he walked. Naturally, when I invite you to my house as a guest I would hardly ask for references.”

“I hadn’t thought of it that way,” said the stranger.

Miss Ogilvie, blushing, said to Aunt Fanny, “He seems to me to have something of a military bearing.” She spoke as though the stranger, being so very strange indeed, could not hear her.

“Captain Scarabombardon,” said Aunt Fanny unexpectedly.

“At your service,” said the stranger, who was clearly extremely bewildered.

“In any case,” Miss Ogilvie said, “we will all stand as one when the time comes. Cleansed. Pure.”

“I do not recall that my father mentioned anything of our standing as one, Miss Ogilvie. You are a very fortunate man, Captain Scarabombardon.” She picked up her gloves. “Julia should be coming with the car,” she said. “Come along, Captain.”

“Well,” said Julia, when the stranger handed Aunt Fanny into the car, “and who might *you* be?”

“He is the captain,” Miss Ogilvie explained eagerly. “He is coming home with us, Aunt Fanny invited him.”

“Captain?” said Julia, who was not at all that bright, “captain of what?”

“I wish I knew,” said the captain.

“Captain Scarabombardon?” said Essex, “am I to be an Harlequin now? I had dreamed of something more heroic. Did I ever tell you,” he asked Mrs. Halloran, “of my trip to the moon?”

“Captain,” Mrs. Halloran said, “will you have wine?”

The True Believers did not delay; perhaps the shortness of their time encouraged haste; at any rate Mrs. Halloran received, at the breakfast table the next morning, a letter written on violet paper with brown ink. The letter was heavily scented with carnation, and Mrs. Halloran read it aloud, holding it at arm’s length.

Dear Fellows in Trust and Faith:

It is with the utmost joy that we here in our humble Society of True Believers, being as far as we knew until now the only select group to be chosen to carry the torch of mankind salute you. If we had known there was any other group like ours we could of gotten together sooner, but it is not yet too late. If you are of genuine faith and truly deserve the higher levels and will repent and sincerely follow the path of true teaching and never turn aside. Our leader will give herself the pleasure of calling upon you very soon and she will of course be able to tell right off whether you are on a spiritual level high enough to join our humble little band. In all life there is hope but of course it will not last much longer. Be prepared.

(Mrs.) Hazel Ossman, Secretary.

Mrs. Halloran folded the letter and put it carefully back into its envelope. "I assume," she said at last, "that someone will offer me a rational explanation of this. I am most reluctant to believe that I am going mad."

"It's that boy in the drug store," Miss Ogilvie said helpfully, anxious that Mrs. Halloran should not believe that she was going mad. "We were talking, yesterday, while Aunt Fanny was shopping."

"Aunt Fanny went shopping? I had not heard."

"I believe that I may go into the village, Orianna, without troubling to ask your permission. I have been accustomed to the village since I was a child, and I cannot remember ever having to ask permission to go there."

"How did you get there, Aunt Fanny? Did you walk?"

"Certainly not. Julia took a car from the garages."

Mrs. Halloran turned her eyes on Julia, who flushed and said defiantly, "No one told me not to."

"Besides," Aunt Fanny added maliciously, "how did you think the captain got here? We brought him back with us."

"I had done you the courtesy of assuming, Aunt Fanny, that the captain was another of your ghostly manifestations."

"Now wait a minute," the captain said. "I understood I was welcome here, and if I'm not I certainly know what to do about it," but he made no move to rise from the breakfast table.

"Captain," said Mrs. Halloran, "Aunt Fanny is kind enough to allow me to entertain my friends here; I can hardly refuse her the same civility. Julia, if you ever again touch anything belonging to me I shall send you away from this house. I leave it to your mother to point out to you what you would then forfeit. Aunt Fanny, you are surely right: you have never had to ask anyone's permission to go into the village, and I am sure that the villagers are used to you by now."

"My father took a great interest in the village. I have always tried to carry on his plans."

"Some of your father's activities in the village, Aunt Fanny, were luckily discontinued with his death. But I see no reason why you should be kept away from your subjects; next time please ask me for a car and I will send a reliable driver with you. Miss Ogilvie, I will expect you to receive these people with me, since you clearly know them better than I."

"I don't know them at all," Miss Ogilvie cried, "they are certainly not friends of *mine*."

"They may very well become friends of yours, however, and perhaps even closer than that; perhaps fellow survivors. We must not be overselect, Miss Ogilvie."

"Aunt Fanny," cried Miss Ogilvie pathetically, but she was abandoned; Aunt Fanny was speaking to Essex.

The leader of the True Believers was a lady of indeterminate shape, but vigorous presence, perhaps fortified by the silent support of Liliokawani, queen in Egypt. She swept into Mrs. Halloran's ballroom with the air of one testing the floor for durability; she was wearing a purple dress which presumably fit her, and a fur boa of color and fluff. Behind her came a second, also purple, lady, whose hair was red, and, behind her, a man whose determined majesty was most convincing; he had magnificent hair, which suffered a little by comparison with the leader's fluffy fur, and he wore, perhaps out of deference, a white waistcoat. At the very last came a withered little lady, peering.

"I am Edna," said the leader. "Our committee. Hazel, who is also our secretary. Arthur. Ah … Mrs. Peterson."

"Mrs. Peterson," said Mrs. Halloran majestically. She had been wise in her choice of the ballroom; beneath the sweeping carved ceiling and the white and gold candle sconces these four little people looked toylike; not so much out of place as decorative.

"We have come," said Edna, not faltering, "to inquire into your present position with regard to supernatural visitations. Prophecies. The end of the world, in fact. Someone told us, down in the village, and being as we're in much the same line …" She spread her hands eloquently.

"Dreadful are the hopes of man," said Mrs. Peterson drearily.

"Naturally," Edna continued, "we thought we might like to get together with you folks, if your ideas go along with ours. We don't take converts, as a rule, but naturally if you folks got to believing by yourselves I guess we got no choice. Anyway," she finished, "we got to get a place to meet."

"Everlasting darkness is the end of mortal life," Mrs. Peterson added.

"I'm the seer in our group," Edna said. "Who's yours?"

"I am not altogether sure," said Mrs. Halloran at last, "that we have a seer. What we do have, of course, is a place to meet. In that respect we are more fortunate."

"Eternal damnation attends us," Essex said helpfully.

"Well, who gets your messages?" Edna asked. "Her?" She gestured toward Miss Ogilvie, who gave a little gasp and took a step backward.

"Miss Ogilvie does not receive messages," Mrs. Halloran said. "Miss Ogilvie is our … contact with the outside world." Miss Ogilvie wrung her hands and looked ready to cry.

"When?" Edna demanded.

"When?" Mrs. Halloran was puzzled.

“My sword shall destroy life,” said Essex.

“Horrible is the future ahead,” said Mrs. Peterson.

“When is your date? Your outside limit?”

“We have not been so far honored …” Mrs. Halloran began.

“Jeepers.” Edna was surprised. “Ever hear anything like it?” she asked her committee, and the woman with red hair and the man in the white waistcoat nodded and looked mournful.

“You, sir,” the man said, addressing Essex. “Do you atone?”

“Daily,” said Essex.

“Sin?”

“When I can,” said Essex manfully.

“Metal?”

“I beg your pardon?”

“How do you stand on metal? Allow yourselves metal fastenings? Meat? Ills of the flesh?”

“I am heir to all of them,” said Essex, inspired.

The man in the white waistcoat looked puzzled and turned to whisper into the ear of Edna.

“The time is near at hand, and vengeance is swift,” said Mrs. Peterson.

Edna nodded vigorously at the man in the white waistcoat and came forward to speak earnestly to Mrs. Halloran. “Look,” she said, “we’re a whole lot further along than you folks, but even so we’re willing to take you in with us on condition you try to catch up some, and of course we could meet here only out on your lawn, maybe, because we largely don’t believe in roofs over our heads. Now I may as well tell you right off that we got all our messages already, so we just happen to know that the spacemen are coming—”

“Spacemen?” said Mrs. Halloran faintly.

"Spacemen, from Saturn. Why? Do you—"

"Not at all," said Mrs. Halloran.

"Well, we get it they're due along about the end of August, because the skies are clearest then. Early September, maybe, if it takes longer than they figure now to get here. And the saucers could land right out there on your lawn, see? It would be a good clear place. We're all going to be right there, ready and waiting, with no metal fastenings and what not, and we figure we go to Saturn where we get translated into a higher state of being, but I can tell you more about *that* as we go along. Anyway, you got to start now practicing, get rid of all metal, and no meat and of course no alcoholic beverages and none of them fancy wines you probably got around here. Mrs. Peterson here is *our* cook."

"All hope is hopeless," Mrs. Peterson pointed out, "all striving vain."

"The *main* thing," Edna said, "the most important *main* thing, is we got to be ready when they come. There's no second trip, remember. You miss the first saucer — you never get a second chance. Once that saucer with your name on it leaves, it's *gone*. And remember they won't take you if you're wearing metal or been indulging in fancy wines. They *know*."

"What do they drink on Saturn?" Mrs. Halloran asked with interest.

"Ambrosia," said Edna unhesitatingly. "We got it in a message, because Arthur here was asking that very same thing. Now suppose we figure out a schedule of meetings with you folks, and after a couple times you'll get used to our ways, and then you'll come out on the lawn with us, and—"

"Where have you been meeting until now?" Mrs. Halloran asked.

Edna sighed. "Right now we've been meeting over to Mrs. Peterson's, except her husband's kind of nasty about it and Mrs. Peterson figures we better start going some place else, particularly to eat."

"I am sorry," Mrs. Halloran said — she was frequently gentle when she perceived that sharpness would be wasted— "I am sorry, but I am afraid that we will not be able to qualify for your space ship. I myself cannot do without my fancy wines, and I believe that my associates — except possibly Miss Ogilvie — use entirely metal fastenings. Miss Ogilvie?"

"Zippers," Miss Ogilvie whispered, pale. "Nothing but zippers. Everywhere."

"So you see," Mrs. Halloran continued, "we shall have to make our own destinies, in addition to which I cannot possibly hope to persuade my little group to leave this planet for another. Perhaps — after you have gone, of course — we may hope to inherit this one. Perhaps we may even come to like it."

"Well, you certainly don't expect—" Edna began, but was silenced when Mrs. Halloran held up one hand, regally.

"We wish you a pleasant journey," Mrs. Halloran said. "We hope that you will be very happy on Saturn, in … a higher order of being? Perhaps you will keep us under observation?"

"This earth has no temptations for us," Edna said stiffly, and Mrs. Peterson droned behind her, "A world well lost, and dire be its fate."

"Thank you," Mrs. Halloran said. "Mrs. Peterson, good day."

"Woe, woe," Mrs. Peterson said, and they filed out, Edna leading and Arthur hesitating briefly to investigate an erotic carving near the doorway of the ballroom. Mrs. Halloran gestured to Miss Ogilvie to follow and see them safely down the stairs, and Miss Ogilvie went quickly, half-backing out and half skittering.

"You know," Mrs. Halloran said, leaning back in her chair, "I could *kill* Aunt Fanny."

"Man's life is but a moment run," Essex said.

"Essex, stop it at once. You would make quite a good impression on Saturn, I should think."

Essex made a face. "Ambrosia is not my drink."

"Something must be done, however. I will *not* have space ships landing on my lawn. Those people are perfectly capable of sending their saucers just anywhere, with no respect for private property. I want all the gates in the wall checked, today. You and the captain had better go. Go right around the wall, all the way. Make sure that no one can get in anywhere — there may be spots where it has weakened, or fallen away. Lock all the gates, and see that they are kept locked. You may put on new locks, if it seems necessary to you. No one is to go in or out without my permission, and I mean *particularly* Miss Ogilvie."

"Aunt Fanny?" Essex asked softly.

"Yes." Mrs. Halloran sighed. "What a plague Aunt Fanny is getting to be. I will not forbid her to visit the village, provided that she only passes through the gates with my permission. I will tell her that it is for her own protection, and trust that she will believe me. Her captain is, after all, a potential asset, and there is surely room enough inside the wall for all of us."

"This is all very well," Essex said, "but I do not see how it will keep out flying saucers."

"I could put up signs," Mrs. Halloran said irritably, "reading 'NO LANDING OF INTERSTELLAR AIRCRAFT PERMITTED HERE UNDER ANY CIRCUMSTANCES.' If any spaceships land on my lawn we will give them Aunt Fanny and Miss Ogilvie. I am really very angry, Essex; Miss Ogilvie, with her wanton chattering, has very nearly sent us all to Saturn."

"Not so long as you indulge in fancy wines," Essex pointed out.

“Furthermore,” Mrs. Halloran said, “if any True Believer attempts to enter this house again, Essex, I want you and the captain prepared to inflict the most direct bodily retribution. The one true belief I want firmly implanted in the minds of the True Believers is the unshakable conviction that I am not one of their number.”

“Much like Mr. Peterson, in fact.”

“Not at all like Mr. Peterson; I find *his* reaction piddling.”

“Perhaps,” Essex said wickedly, “Aunt Fanny has been wrong all the time; perhaps this house and everyone in it will go with the rest of the world. The True Believers would then have the last laugh, you perceive. Unless,” he added, “laughing also is forbidden on Saturn.”

6

AUNT FANNY, MEANWHILE, was lost. She had planned to take her walk no farther than the beginning of the orchard, to admire the blossoms on the apple trees, and had gone aimlessly and without hurry around the side of the house, through the sunken rose garden, and down the orchard path, but there she had somehow, dreaming, lost herself. She had either come out the wrong gate from the rose garden, or turned off on a cross path, because the orchard was not ahead of her at all; it was not for several minutes that she realized that she had somehow gotten herself into the maze.

Now, the maze was not at all frightening to Aunt Fanny, who had grown up knowing its secrets. Like all mazes, it went to a pattern, and the pattern had been, romantically, built around the name of Aunt Fanny's mother, Anna. One turned right, left, left, right, and then left, right, right, left, and so on, alternating, until the center of the maze was attained. When Aunt Fanny had been a child it had been a dear puzzle to her, and she had spent hours trying to lose herself in the maze, but she could never forget her mother's name. Again and again, coming unerringly to the center of the maze, where there was a stone bench and a marble figure tantalizingly named Anna — although of course Aunt Fanny's mother would never have permitted herself to be portrayed from life in that state of undress; not, at the very least, without a petticoat — Aunt Fanny had thrown herself down in tears. Was she to be disappointed, always, because she could not forget the answer? Was she never to lose herself, as other people did so easily, could she never escape into the mad labyrinths and run confused?

And yet now, not a child any more, and long forgetting the maze, Aunt Fanny was at last lost. She stood with her back against a hedge, looking right and left at a divided path, and thought: I have not been here for so long, and it has not been kept up as it should. She was not frightened at first, because she had never yet succeeded in losing herself in the maze. The tall hedges grew up past sight on either side, although they should have been cut to just above her height, and they were not trimmed. The hedges had not been trimmed, before, along the walk to the secret garden, and Aunt Fanny sighed irritably; it was because she was the only person who traveled these ways, and it must not be tolerated.

Anna, she thought, Anna. She could at one time have almost drawn a picture of the maze, knowing so well its trickful turns and alleys, could have pictured faithfully the mysteries where she could not lose herself. There was one point where the path seemed to be going in a circle; although it was the right path, there was one false turn where long ago she had found a bird’s nest. The finish, the climax, always came suddenly, when you were convinced that you were turned in the wrong direction. She had long ago made a little castle of her own in one dead end path. Now, so much later, she leaned her head back against the solid hedge and said Anna, and turned right. When I get to the center, she thought, I will check to see if the statue of Anna is as I remember; perhaps it has been neglected, or defaced. When I get out I shall tell Orianna Halloran that the hedges are a disgrace, even in the maze where no one ever comes any more. She turned left; I do not believe, she thought, wondering, that many of the others even know that there is a maze at all — there is so much that everyone has forgotten, or never been told in time. The hedges were so overgrown that the turns were indistinct, and once, where she was sure of a turn right, the branches crossed in front of her and kept her out. Irritably, Aunt Fanny went on.

Left, she turned, and then right again. Still not frightened, she stopped for a minute to remember with amusement a long forgotten fury: this, she remembered suddenly, was a turn which had particularly angered her long ago, because she knew so clearly, always, that it led to a dead end, and had never been able to fool herself with it; no matter how optimistically she had tried, telling herself that yes, this was surely the only right path, she could never make herself forget that she was leading herself down a wrong way. I never will forget it, either, I suppose, she thought, turning right, because it is part of my mind now, and has been for so long. I wish they had made it more difficult. Anna, Anna, Anna.

She was caught in a pocket of hedge. For a minute she believed that the hedges were only so overgrown that they hid the alley, and then she was at last aware that she had gone wrong, taken the bad turning somewhere, lost Anna. But then, she thought easily, wherever you are, Anna will bring you out. She turned back, moved right, hesitated, turned again, and was taken by the calculated bewilderments of the maze.

Once, running, she stopped and sank back, against the strength of the hedge and thought Minotaur, Minotaur; somewhere, the strong branches holding her around, tight away from freedom, she cried out “Anna, Anna” and turned and twisted wildly in a frantic escape from the trap of branches holding her helpless. Once she saw the way out clearly, and even reached her hands almost through the hedge into daylight but could not get through. But this is my own maze, she told herself, this is the maze I grew up in; I could not be a prisoner *here;* I know the way so perfectly, and she turned and was further lost.

It was much darker. Overhead the hedges seemed to meet, shading the alleys mortally; ahead there was nothing but a little light between the touching branches. Left, Aunt Fanny turned, right, right, left, and blundered against the taut grasping fingers of the twigs, felt her dress caught, and her hair, felt scratches on her cheeks under the sharply caressing touch; Anna, she said, turning left, Anna, turning right.

Look, she said aloud once — it was much later; it was very dark, and no one knew where she was — look, here is where I buried a doll once, when I was so small, and I buried my doll on a wrong turning so no one would ever find her grave. Right here is where I buried my doll. I could always find my way out, from here; I used to try to lose myself on this very path — this is where I used to come and hide when I was unhappy, and just beyond this turn is the spot where I cut my hand on a sharp branch and my brother bandaged it for me, because my mother was dead. We both cried, I remember; I used to come along this path pretending I was lost and could never go home again — no longer, she thought in despair; these ways are wrong now.

Then, before she would accept it, she was in the center of the maze. The hedges on either side separated and broadened, and her feet went from the gravel path onto lawn. There, in the gloom, was the marble bench, and, leaning over it pathetically, the statue named Anna, friendless now since no one ever came into the maze, leaning down with love to caress an empty place. Here was the center of the maze where no one could ever be lost who had a memory of her name. Aunt Fanny came unwillingly to the bench and fell against it. There were dried leaves blowing against the marble, and the figure leaned down overhead, holding out bare arms of tenderness and love. Aunt Fanny put her face down among the dried leaves and thought, well I am here, I am at the heart, I have come through the maze — where is the secret I am to learn from my many agonies? Here I am, here I am, where is my reward? What have I earned, learned, spurned? Mother, mother, she thought, and felt the marble warm under her cheek.

FRANCES. FRANCES HALLORAN.

Aunt Fanny found her way out of the maze without fault; she had no time to mistake the paths, running insanely (Anna, Anna) and if she was screaming there was no one to hear her or find her; FRANCES HALLORAN FRANCES FRANCES HALLORAN and Aunt Fanny pushed through twigs and leaves; FRANCES HALLORAN and she was out of the maze, onto the path to the rose garden FRANCES FRANCES FRANCES and there was Essex standing alone; "Essex," she called, "please help me, please — take me home"; FRANCES HALLORAN, and it was not Essex at all.

Aunt Fanny's second revelation was duly recorded by Mrs. Willow on four pages torn from the pad by the telephone in the main hall. Aunt Fanny's words were clearly and carefully spoken, and Mrs. Willow was able to take them down almost exactly, although her hand shook as she wrote. "It is coming," Mrs. Willow copied, "it is coming and my brother will be saved. There will be a night of horror, a night of terror and the father will watch over his children. The children must not be afraid. The children must wait. There will be screaming and imploring but the children may not go outside, the children must wait. It is coming, the father guards his children. Let the children wait."

"Why are you writing it down?" Miss Ogilvie asked. "It's almost the same as before."

"Shh," Mrs. Willow said, writing.

"My brother is not to be afraid." Aunt Fanny, turning wildly on the couch in the drawing room, tried to sit up, fell back, and threw her arms wildly. "My brother is not to be afraid," she said, urgently. "He will take us in his arms, he will shield us, he will cherish us and hide us, my brother is not to be afraid; even if it is all gone my brother will be safe. There is nothing to be afraid of, nothing to be afraid of, we are safe and warm, we are safe and warm, everything is all right, everything is all right, don't be afraid. I am right here, nothing can hurt you, nothing can get in. Brother, go back to sleep. Brother," she cried, striking at the air, "I am here, I am coming, we are safe." Then, very softly, "There will be a night of murder and a night of bloodshed but we will be saved. And now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep—"

"Why are you taking *this* down?" Miss Ogilvie asked. "Everyone knows it by heart."

Aunt Fanny was quiet, and Mrs. Willow leaned over her and asked pressingly, "Tell us quickly, what must we *do?* Are we *all* safe in this house? Are we supposed to stay here? When will it *happen?*"

"Brother," Aunt Fanny said, and Mrs. Halloran said, "Essex, take care of her."

Essex leaned over Aunt Fanny and said gently, "Fanny? Can you tell us what we should do?"

"Essex," said Aunt Fanny, holding out her hand, and Essex, glancing over his shoulder at Mrs. Halloran, took Aunt Fanny's hand and said, "Fanny, tell us what we must do."

"We are absolutely safe here," Aunt Fanny said firmly. "We must cover the windows and doors lest the screams of the dying reach our ears and touch us with compassion; or the sight of the horror send us running mad into its midst. Wrong is wrong and right is right and Father knows best." And Aunt Fanny turned her head against Essex' arm.

"Well?" Essex said, glancing again at Mrs. Halloran, and Mrs. Halloran said, "Just find out how long; I like to know things well in advance. I detest being hurried."

“Aunt Fanny,” Essex was saying, “can you tell us *when* this is going to happen? When? How long do we have?”

“You ask too many questions,” Mrs. Willow objected. “Even *I* know that the medium can only answer one question at a time. For heaven’s sake, with you clamoring at her like that—”

“When, Aunt Fanny?”

“After the snake,” said Aunt Fanny. “After the dance. After the snake. After the day the night. After the thief the flight.”

“Poetry,” said Mrs. Willow disgustedly. She threw down her pencil. “When they start saying poetry they’re no good anymore,” she explained. “It takes their mind off it somehow.”

“Miss Ogilvie,” Mrs. Halloran said, “please take Aunt Fanny upstairs and put her to bed. She is no longer of any use to Mrs. Willow.”

She had hardly finished speaking when the glass of the great picture window, which filled one short wall of the drawing room, and looked out over the sundial, shattered soundlessly from top to bottom.

7

A PLACE OF my own, Mrs. Halloran thought, turning restlessly and dreaming in the great rosy bed with silk sheets, a place all my own, a house where I can live alone and put everything I love, a little small house of my own. The woods around are dark, but the fire inside is bright, and dances in moving colors over the painted walls, and the books and the one chair; over the fireplace are the things I put there. I will sit in the one chair or I will lie on the soft rug by the fire, and no one will talk to me, and no one will hear me; there will be only one of everything — one cup, one plate, one spoon, one knife. Deep in the forest I am living in my little house and no one can ever find me.

“See, sister?” — and Mrs. Halloran dreamed the voice. “I told you we would find *some* place here in the forest.”

She turned and saw two children, a boy leading a girl, and the boy wore the face of Essex and the girl was Gloria. For a minute she hesitated, watching from her doorway to see if they were coming toward her and when she saw that they were she fled into her house and shut and locked the door.

“I am so tired,” said the girl.

“We can rest here if we want to, in this little house.”

“Do you suppose anyone lives here?”

“If they do, they will be glad to give shelter to a lost girl and boy. In such a little house we won’t find much, of course, but it will be good to stop and rest for a while. We can have them give us something to eat, and tell them we will sleep here tonight, and then tomorrow we can find our way home.”

“Suppose they don’t want us?”

“Don’t be silly. We’re lost, aren’t we? And besides, we’re only children.”

“Brother — the house! It’s made of candy!”

“Are you sure?”

“Of *course* I’m sure — come and taste it; look, the roof is sugar, and the walls are gingerbread, and the flowers are all hard and sweet and the dust is sugar dust. And taste the window frame — it’s flavored with cinnamon, and the chimney is chocolate; you must climb up and get me a piece.”

“And the tree here,” said the boy, nibbling, “the tree is mint.”

Feeling the roof being eaten away over her head, Mrs. Halloran opened the door carefully and looked out. For a minute, not knowing what to say, she only watched the boy and girl tearing great pieces away from her house and then, frightened, she shouted, “Stop it at once! This is *my* house!”

“Don’t be silly, old woman,” said the boy, his mouth full, “it’s made of candy, isn’t it?”

“I built this little house for myself and not for children to come and destroy; both of you get away at once, do you hear? This is *my* house where I live all alone.”

“Shan’t,” said the girl and the boy paused in his eating to stare. “Old lady witch,” he said at last.

“I am *not*.”

“You are so, you are so.” The boy shouted with his mouth full and Mrs. Halloran saw with terror that half the roof of her safe little house was gone, and worse, not eaten but crumbled and thrown on the ground where the children had pulled at it wildly. “You’re an old witch,” the boy chanted, and the girl took it up, throwing handfuls of dust, “You’re an ooooooold witch.”

“This is *my* house,” Mrs. Halloran said, and the boy threw a piece of chocolate at her; when it struck close to the doorway where she stood he shouted with laughter and came running over to pull away half the doorway with one great tug, and he fell to munching at it while he said, giggling, “Old witch, old witch.”

Mrs. Halloran thought clearly in her dream: if I could get them to come inside, she thought, where I live all alone, I might shut them up somewhere until they promise to spare my house; I might put them into cages until they promise to go away. “Will you come inside?” she said softly, and then, thinking, “There is even more candy inside.”

“Did you hear?” said the boy to his sister, “*She* says there’s more candy inside, come *on*.”

They pushed her rudely away, forcing themselves through the broken doorway into the house, and she said, smiling but not turning, “Son, look into that little closet beside the door; you’ll find licorice in there.” Then she almost laughed, and said, “Daughter, go into the kitchen and search the cupboards; there is peppermint, and little cream cakes.”

As the little house shook and strained with the eager burrowing of the children inside, she turned slowly and with pleasure followed them in; she closed the closet door on the boy and slammed the cupboard shut on the girl, and then came outside again to sit on the grass before her door and enjoy the evening sunlight, hearing them call pitifully to her from inside.

While she was sitting in the sunlight a woman, frantic, burst through the trees screaming, “My children — what have you done with my boy and my little gel; where are my children?” and when Mrs. Halloran looked up and laughed, the woman brushed her aside and hurried into the house, stopping as she went to break a piece of gingerbread off the roof. In a minute she returned, guarding the boy with one arm and the girl with the other, and the boy was saying “ — and she was going to cook us and eat us because she’s a witch, and she offered us pieces of her house and said there was licorice in the closet and there wasn't because all she wanted to do was get us inside and then she locked us in and she said she was going to cook us and eat us and we could hear her building the fire under the oven to roast us for her dinner."

The little girl added, "And she's a witch because she said there were cream cakes in the cupboard and she made me go inside and she was laughing all the time," and the little girl snatched away a fragment of the window frame and stuffed it into her mouth. "And I never got any chocolate from the chimney," she said, sulkily.

"Witch, witch," said the woman, turning to scowl viciously, "and don't *you* worry — we'll be back, with the others, and we'll show you what we do to witches who eat children, don't you worry." Shouting, "Witch! Witch!" they hurried off through the forest, and Mrs. Halloran, turning miserably in her sleep, looked hopelessly at her little house where she had lived alone, with one cup and one plate and one spoon, her little house which was not made of candy at all.

"There is something on the sundial," Maryjane said. "I can see it from here."

"A bird, most likely." Arabella, intending to walk slowly down the long lovely lawn, found herself turning toward the sundial in order to follow Maryjane. "I hate that thing," Arabella said. "The sundial."

"It's not a bird. It's something. But what *is* it?" as they came closer.

"My God." Arabella shuddered, and drew back. "Don't *touch* it."

"Of course I'll touch it; don't be silly. It's only one of the dolls from Fancy's doll house. But how *disgusting*."

"Stuck full of pins," said Arabella.

"Disgusting. Someone's taken one of Fancy's dolls and put pins all through it. How *can* people treat a child like that, even around here?"

“It’s an old lady doll,” said Arabella, peering.

“Of course, it’s Fancy’s grandmother doll. The last I saw it was safely in the doll house, sitting at the little table. And now someone’s taken it and ruined it.”

“Is it really spoiled?”

“I don’t care whether it’s spoiled or not, it’s just the *idea* of the thing. Fancy *loves* those dolls.”

“Can you take the pins out?”

Maryjane pulled, tugging out one pin after another and dropping them into the grass. “Sometimes people make me so *mad,*” she said.

“I don’t think it’s hurt the doll. Those little dolls are only made out of wire and padding; that’s how they can bend to sit down, you know, and look like they’re walking.”

“It *seems* all right,” Maryjane said. “I’ll take it back and put it in the doll house again and maybe Fancy won’t ever know it’s been gone.”

“Or if she does notice you can just say you don’t know what happened to it. Because you *don’t,* after all.”

On a very bright clear morning, the gates having been unlocked for the occasion, the first of Aunt Fanny’s preparations arrived, the result of her shopping in the village and her orders sent to the city. Over the next few weeks, more of Aunt Fanny’s orders kept coming, from mail order houses and supply houses in farther cities, in answer to Aunt Fanny’s letters and telegrams.

The first truck, arriving on that bright clear morning, drove up to the service entrance of the big house, but it was almost immediately clear that there was not going to be room enough in the storage basements for the truck’s contents, let alone for Aunt Fanny’s further orders. In addition, there was some furtive conviction in Aunt Fanny’s mind that the contents of the various cartons, and the exceedingly odd assortments of material she had gathered, ought to be kept as much as possible away from the servants in the big house, perhaps to avoid gossip; Mrs. Halloran, who was content to have the servants and villagers believe, as indeed they did, that Aunt Fanny's fine aristocratic mind was slipping rapidly into imbecility, directed, with some amusement, that Aunt Fanny's supplies be stored in the library, where the books lay against the walls, and the great tables and chairs in the center of the room could be pushed back to make space.

A series of mystified deliverymen carried the boxes and packages, some inadequately wrapped, through the service entrance, down the long hall into the formal portion of the house — the door between propped open by Essex with the bust of Seneca — and into the library, where everything was stored away. It was a scene not unlike the original provisioning of the library by the first Mr. Halloran, and the room of books, well dusted but not catalogued, looked down with an air of unbelieving surprise. Essex did not attempt to catalogue Aunt Fanny's purchases, but Mrs. Halloran, looking in some surprise on a carton of cans of peaches, asked Aunt Fanny, "Surely we are entering a land of milk and honey? Must we take our own lunch?"

"Sh," said Aunt Fanny, as a deliveryman entered, carrying a case of canned spaghetti. "Those cartons will fit into the bookshelves," she said, "lift some of the books out; it will give us more space for the cartons." The deliveryman set the carton down, unloaded half a shelf of books onto the floor, and put the carton into the bookshelf. He gave Aunt Fanny a puzzled look and went out. "I don't really think we'll need to supply our own food," Aunt Fanny said, with a trace of embarrassment. "It only seemed that perhaps, at first — while things are growing back, you know, and before we are quite *used* to the new ways — of course, there *will* be a period of adjustment. Put it in the bookshelf," she directed.

Mrs. Halloran regarded the little bundle of umbrellas the deliveryman was stuffing into the bookshelf.

“For the sun,” Aunt Fanny explained eagerly. “We will have to build shelters eventually, of course.”

“But surely … the house …”

“Sh,” said Aunt Fanny. “Put it on the bookshelf, please.”

Before the first truckload was delivered completely, it was quite apparent that the library was not going to hold everything, even though many of the books now sat in untidy piles on the floor and the shelves were filling up. Essex, inspired by some obscure compulsion he did not care to analyse, went to the back of the house where the orchard supplies were kept, and brought back half a dozen bushel baskets, and Aunt Fanny and Miss Ogilvie and Julia and Arabella tumbled the books into the bushel baskets. Aunt Fanny instructed the deliverymen returning to the truck to carry out bushel baskets of books and Mrs. Halloran, perhaps inspired by Essex, directed that the bushel baskets of books be carried to the barbecue pit and dumped there. While Essex industriously arranged cartons of canned milk and canned olives and canned soup on the shelves of the library, the captain and Mrs. Willow soaked the books with kerosene and watched them burn in the barbecue pit. As the first reluctant smoke rose and drifted past the library windows, Essex for a minute hesitated, moved a hand protestingly, and turned to Mrs. Halloran, who said, “They were none of them of any great value, Essex. Not a first edition among them, I should think,” and added, obscurely, “and not made of candy.”

“I suppose I should be pleased that my cataloguing days are at an end,” Essex said, and turned to set a carton of paper cups on the bookshelf.

The work of unloading the truck and loading the library shelves, carrying out and burning the books, went on swiftly. It was only noon when the enormous van backed heavily away from the service door, and the library had an odd air of not having been changed in any very fundamental manner; half the shelves were packed with cartons, but they were neat, and when Essex brought back the bust of Seneca he remarked, “A library is really a very good place to store things. I had never realized it before.”

“There is room for a good deal more,” Aunt Fanny said, looking with anticipation at the two sides of the room still holding books. “I think we shall do very nicely. Larger items, such as the bicycles, for instance, can go into the cellar.”

“I am still not clear,” Mrs. Halloran said, “on these quantities of supplies. Surely it was expressly stated that a world of plenty—”

“Even in a world of plenty,” Aunt Fanny said sharply, “you could hardly imagine that we would process our own olives, Orianna. Certain small luxuries …”

“What has happened to the old-fashioned silkworm?” Mrs. Halloran asked, fingering a bolt of scarlet synthetic fabric. “Do you expect us to dress like madwomen, Fanny?”

“I hope,” said Aunt Fanny stiffly, “that even in a better world I shall still continue a lady.”

“Aunt Fanny,” Essex said, “you understand that my belief in you is in no way failing?”

“Well?” said Aunt Fanny; she sat down in one of the great library armchairs and fanned herself lightly.

“Aunt Fanny,” Essex said, “it is not possible that you might be wrong?”

“Wrong about what, Essex?”

Essex fumbled. “Wrong … about your father?”

“How could I be wrong about my father? He was a man of complete integrity. Tall, and with a good presence. Bred well,” and Aunt Fanny glanced, fleetingly, at Mrs. Halloran.

"Aunt Fanny," Essex said, "I am not doubting your father's word."

"Hardly, Essex."

"But please do not laugh at me, because I am actually very much frightened. All these things you have brought here—"

"Acting under my father's instructions, I need hardly explain."

"It seems so remote," Essex said wildly.

"Not remote, I assure you; not remote at all. I should try to understand, if I were you, that when my father takes the trouble to come so far, the business must be very serious indeed. And I am persuaded that the end may come sooner than we realize, although of course my father has engaged to let us know in enough time."

"And you believe him?"

"Believe my father, Essex? My *father?*"

"Aunt Fanny," Essex said, "tell us about it again. What will it be like, afterwards?"

"Much as it is now, I expect. I foresee a period of adjustment; it will take some time, for instance, for the earth to recommence its cycle of reproduction, and such things as trees may take a while to grow to the point where they produce fruit. And we will have to find food somewhere. I can only suppose that we will come out, that first morning, into a world wiped clean and bare, with no sign that it has ever harbored anything living except ourselves. It will be lovely, with the loveliness of all fresh beginnings, but I cannot see how, those first few days, we can expect to live off the land. Soon it will be quite a Garden of Eden, of course. Although as I recall the Garden of Eden, it was not so well managed; I mean," said Aunt Fanny, blushing, "for all we know, there may have been hundreds of prohibitions. Not only just that one tree, for instance."

"But no prohibitions for us?" Essex asked tensely.

"None, I should think. We will of course learn a good deal more about it as time goes on. But not, I should think about things we may *not* do; I would really believe that, humanity being for all practical purposes at an end, the kind of moral disapproval which has been so necessary up until now will be wholly unnecessary; *we,* after all, will not need to learn to behave ourselves."

"You talk of our living among green meadows and flowers and trees," Essex went on insistently; "What—" and he held his breath " — what about this house? It will be here, full of valuables in this world and that."

"I have been thinking about that, too," said Aunt Fanny, and gave a kind of little laugh. "It has seemed to me that this house will become a kind of shrine, for our children and for *their* children. Living in the fields and woods as they do, living under a kindly sun and a gentle moon, with all their wants supplied from nature, they will have no thought of houses, and a roof will become to them synonymous with an altar; we may yet live to see our grandchildren worshipping in this house."

"I should hope so," Mrs. Halloran said.

"I am — instructed, as I said, by my father — arranging to accumulate in this house all those items of practical value we might otherwise leave behind. There are things which may be useful to the innocents of that other world, and they will find them here, in the shrine of their gods. Tools, for instance. Jewels, which may seem almost magical to them. The lovely lines of the stairway; we must not let a sense of beauty vanish from the world."

"My silver service," Mrs. Halloran said drily.

"Possessions of the gods," Aunt Fanny said. "My father would like that."

"Not in *my* lifetime," Mrs. Halloran said. "They are legally willed to me."

"I think," Gloria said unexpectedly from a dark corner of the room, and her tone silenced them, "I think they will come, those far-off people, moving fearfully into this house and not daring to touch anything, looking at the furniture and walls and floors the way we look at cave paintings or catacombs or ancient palaces; I think they will come on a kind of pilgrimage. They will come in little groups, walking on carefully designated paths so that they will not touch anything or brush against the walls or jar any furniture, and they will walk very softly the way people do when they are walking in the footsteps of many many dead people and are afraid of wakening them or angering them; I think they will not understand much of what they find in this house, but they will tell stories about it, and about us. I think it will be a sacred and terrible and mysterious place for them."

"I forbid all this," Mrs. Halloran said loudly and suddenly. "I will *not* leave this house in my lifetime. The rest of you may live in trees with my blessing."

"Your blessing will count for so little," Aunt Fanny murmured, "afterward."

8

"'I HAD, AS I hinted before,'" the nurse read, going slowly in her flat voice, "'a parcel of money, as well gold as silver, about thirty-six pounds sterling; alas! there the nasty, sorry, useless stuff lay; I had no manner of business for it, and I often thought with myself, that I would have given a handful of it for a gross of tobacco-pipes, or for a hand-mill to grind my corn; nay, I would have given it all for six-penny worth of turnip and carrot seed out of England, or for a handful of pease and beans, and a bottle of ink.'"

Daily Julia and Arabella and Maryjane brought in armfuls of heavy, rich roses for the silver bowls in the drawing room and the dining room. The sundial stood out more whitely against the deep green of the lawn; there were apricots on the breakfast table. Aunt Fanny, in her mother's diamonds, listened always, and late one night Mrs. Willow, aroused by what she thought was someone after the silver, found Aunt Fanny at the head of the great stairway in her nightgown, rapt and still and smiling; "The time is drawing closer," she said, when Mrs. Willow roused her.

Although Gloria was most unwilling, Mrs. Willow was not a patient woman, and disliked the vagueness of Aunt Fanny's appointments; she insisted that Gloria look into the mirror again. "You're *used* to it," Mrs. Willow explained, "you know it by now. We don't want to keep starting new people at it. Besides, no one but you will do it."

Reluctantly, Gloria sat again before the mirror where the oil ran and shivered, and leaned her face down to look. "I hope I see something pleasanter this time, that's all," she said. "If I see any more of those terrible things you can just get someone else to look, and I don't care whether they get mixed up or not on the other side."

"I wonder what nonsense we would be engaged in, if we were not doing this," Mrs. Halloran remarked.

"We are the gods," Essex said, "sitting on the front porch of Olympus, regarding the doings of men. It is probably just as well that we have some nonsense to occupy us; think of the harm we could do if we were bored."

"Well, don't all keep watching *me,*" Gloria said. "You make me nervous."

Mrs. Willow and Aunt Fanny moved back a little, eyeing one another.

"We'll just wait," Mrs. Willow said comfortably. "You let us know when you see something."

"I hate it when it starts to move," Gloria said. She stirred uneasily in her chair. "It's like being seasick — everything kind of churns around, and you think you can't last another minute, because you're sinking into this horrid moving whirling twirling curling — I see a country. It's clear. I see a country, a nice country."

"What country, dear?" Mrs. Willow was making notes, in a notebook she had bought for the purpose and into which she had copied all of her previous records of Aunt Fanny's statements.

"Just a countryside. Trees, and grass, and flowers. Blue sky. Nice birds."

"People?"

"No people. No houses. No fences or roads or television aerials or wires or billboards. No people. There's a hill, with trees on it, and … it's like a meadow. Soft." She hesitated. "There aren't any … separations in it, that's what I'm trying to say. Nothing like walls or fences, just soft green countryside going off in all directions. Perhaps that's a river over there."

"Presumably every prospect pleases," Essex said.

"Wait … I can see someone coming, over the hill; Essex, it looks like you, only you aren't dressed … you haven't got any …" Gloria turned scarlet and put her hands against her cheeks, but she did not sit back.

"Go ahead, dear," Mrs. Willow said. "We're not squeamish."

"You might try to get me into a lion skin or a pair of bathing trunks," Essex said. "I probably don't know there are peeping toms around."

"You are … could you be hunting?"

"Hunting for what, in God's name?" said Mrs. Halloran.

"Almost certainly for a pair of bathing trunks," Essex said. "Couldn't I please stand behind a bush?"

"Be quiet," Mrs. Willow said. "This is quite serious."

"It's so lovely," Gloria said.

Essex opened his mouth to speak, but Mrs. Willow gestured violently at him and he was quiet.

"It's such a *beautiful* country. Essex is gone; there are just soft hills and trees and that blue blue sky."

"Thank God I am out of sight," Essex said irrepressibly. "I was beginning to have that feeling of being stared at."

"Look," Gloria said, "oh, look," and she laughed. "It's changing," she said, "it's like a little painting of a landscape, and it's changing so I can see over the hill and through the trees and now there are people, very far away. They're … dancing, I think; the sun is so bright. Yes, dancing."

"Dressed?" asked Essex, who was enjoying himself enormously.

"I can't tell, it doesn't matter anyway. They're very far away, and so tiny, and the trees are so tall around them; I really think they *are* dancing. And I can see the flowers and grass moving a little, as though there were just the smallest breeze, and now I see a … is it a deer? And birds. And a rabbit."

"Our ark has landed," Mrs. Halloran said to Essex.

“Tell me, dear,” Mrs. Willow said, “if we ask you questions do you think you can see the answers?”

Gloria closed her eyes. “I’ll try,” she said, sitting back. “That was pretty.”

“It really gives me quite an odd feeling,” Essex said. “I shall probably never hunt again.”

“It seems to me,” Mrs. Willow said, “that Gloria really sees in the mirror what we want her to. Be quiet, Essex. What I mean is that before, when she saw all horrible things, it was because we were all frightened and confused. Now that we know pretty well what to expect, it seems to me that they are showing her more of what we want to see. Maybe I’m not making myself clear.” She looked over at Miss Ogilvie, who nodded mutely. Mrs. Willow sighed. “Gloria, dear,” she said, “we don’t want you to dwell on destruction and fear. We like your pretty pictures much much better. Now I have a good idea here; I’m going to ask you to look into the mirror and try to see the people in this house, just one month from today. That would be the end of June. Now think about the people in this house, and look into the window and see a picture of what we will be doing one month from today.” She turned to the others. “Trying to find out how much time we have left,” she explained. “Go along, Gloria.”

Gloria leaned forward, her elbows on the table and her chin between her hands. She looked steadily into the mirror, and her long hair fell on either side of her face, almost touching the table. “Roses,” she said at last. “Roses on the table in the dining room. Pink.”

“That would be the rambler,” Aunt Fanny said. “My mother’s favorite. They planted six bushes for her, and it’s true, they come into bloom about the last of June.”

"All of us are there," Gloria said, and giggled. "It's funny," she said, "I'm there, too. It's like a little picture, only the people are moving. We're tiny. We're having breakfast. Essex …"

"What am I wearing?" Essex asked prudently.

"A white shirt, I think. You're telling a story, and we're all laughing. I'm wearing my blue and white cotton dress; it must be very warm."

"Then I believe that we can assume that nothing will have happened before the end of June," Mrs. Willow said. "Gloria, think now. Try the end of July. Try to see all of us near the end of July. The end of July, Gloria."

"We're playing tennis," Gloria said almost at once. "We're all at the tennis courts. Julia and the captain are playing against Arabella and me."

"I might have known," Arabella said, with a cross look at her sister.

"All the rest of you are sitting out on white chairs and benches and there is a green and orange and yellow umbrella and a little table; you're drinking; it must be terribly hot because we're wearing light dresses and shorts. I'm wearing a pair of blue-striped shorts and it's funny, because I don't own such a thing."

"I'll lend you mine," Julia said helpfully.

"We use that same umbrella by the tennis courts every summer," Mrs. Halloran said, "but how does Gloria know about it, or its colors? It is packed away in the carriage house, and has been since long before she came here."

"I can see it," Gloria said.

"The important thing is that what she sees shows us that nothing has happened yet," Mrs. Willow said. "Naturally there will not be tennis courts or colored umbrellas *afterwards*." She leaned forward and put her hand again on Gloria's head. "Look again, dear. Look and see what we are doing at the end of another month. What are we doing, in the mirror, around the last of August?"

Gloria frowned, leaning closer to the mirror. "It's hard," she said, "because it's so dark. All the windows are closed. I don't know who's there, they're all like shadows. The sun is gone."

"What are they doing?"

"I think …" Gloria said hesitatingly, "I think they're trying to push something … maybe the big hall chest. Maybe a big sofa or something like that. They're going to push it against the door. The candles are lighted, but it's still very dark. They're in the big hall, I can see the tiles on the floor. They're …" she shivered "… barricading themselves in, I think. It's very dark."

"Can you see any faces?"

"I can see Fancy, I think. Maybe it only looks like Fancy because it's smaller … no, it *is* Fancy, she just came near a lighted candle. She's … laughing."

"Laughing? While we barricade the doors?"

Essex spoke softly to Mrs. Halloran. "Edna's True Believers said the end of August, you know."

"If that crackpot has the date right I will eat a Martian," Mrs. Halloran said.

"Try to move a little farther, Gloria," Mrs. Willow said. "Try to see the end of that night; try to see the next morning."

"I can't," Gloria said. "It's going away." She sat back and looked at the mirror, which showed the faulted reflections of the cupids on the ceiling. "It scares me," she said.

"Aunt Fanny proposes, Gloria disposes," Mrs. Halloran said. She touched the sundial gently. "We will not count many more hours *here,*" she said.

“It still does not surprise you to know how easily we all capitulated?” Essex asked.

“I am not wholly convinced yet, Essex.”

“You let the library go.”

Mrs. Halloran laughed. “Perhaps I am an instinctive book-burner.”

“I think you had a reason for encouraging Aunt Fanny to burn the books.”

“Surely, Essex, Aunt Fanny is not so young as she was; I can hardly refuse her these small pleasures. In any case, opposition to Aunt Fanny is not part of my general plan; in our better, cleaner world I will come to grips with Aunt Fanny.”

“The captain and Julia have been whispering together in corners,” Essex said. “Mrs. Willow is always watching them.”

“We cannot afford to lose the captain,” Mrs. Halloran said. “If Aunt Fanny is right, Essex, your own tasks would without the captain approach the superhuman.”

“You forget,” Essex said. “I am to be the huntsman.”

After a minute Mrs. Halloran said, “That did not please me. I am beginning to dislike that girl, Gloria. And I suspect her visions.”

“You can easily assure yourself of her truthfulness, however; I have a small scar on my left thigh.”

“Does the old lady keep much cash around the house?” The captain’s voice was soft, and Julia only nodded. They were sitting in the summer house, from which they could see into the secret garden behind and down the long lawn ahead of them; far away Mrs. Halloran and Essex bent over the sundial.

“I don’t know how much longer I can stand it,” the captain said.

“My mother keeps watching us,” Julia said.

The captain laughed. “I don’t mind your mother,” he said. “She’s not as bad as the rest; even the old party in the corner …”

“Miss Ogilvie.”

“Miss Ogilvie. She’s not too bad. But the crazy one … Aunt Fanny, I mean … she was around knocking on my door last night when everyone was asleep; ‘Captain,’ she says, ‘let me in, let me in, I’m only forty-eight years old.’ God.” He shivered. “I was going to shove all the furniture in the room against the door and lean on it.”

Julia laughed. “One of these nights you’ll forget to lock your door.”

“Not *me;* catch me taking a chance like that. How can we get away? The gates are locked, and she sent me and Essex to make sure no one could climb over the wall.”

“Worse than that, we’d have to have some kind of a car. We can’t walk all the way to the village and even if we get to the village there’s only two fool busses each day. They’d catch us in half an hour.”

“What makes you so sure they *want* to catch us?”

Julia grinned wickedly. “Not *me,*” she said. “It’s not *me* they want. They’d let me go and gladly, even my mother. *I* am not the father of future generations.”

“My God,” the captain said. “Can we try for it today?”

“We’re not in prison,” Julia said, “and I’m not going to be treated as though we were … you know, trying to sneak out in a delivery truck or something like that. I wonder if we could just *tell* her we want to leave?”

“Not *me,*” said the captain. “I personally wouldn’t be surprised if they had a dungeon in the cellar.”

“Mother?”

“What is it, Belle?”

"Julia's out in the summer house with the captain again."

"I know it."

"You know what I bet they're doing?"

"Yes, I know what you bet they're doing. But they're not. It's *my* guess they're planning to run for it."

"You mean Julia's going to leave this house? With the captain?"

"I think so."

"That's not *fair*. There are *only* two men in the house, after *all*, and the other one is Essex. You *can't* let him leave."

"I don't know how I could stop them."

"Well, it's not *fair*. You've *always* liked her better than me."

"Aunt Fanny, they're there again. Out in the summer house. Whispering in each other's faces."

Aunt Fanny smiled obscurely. Miss Ogilvie peered through the curtains of the little sitting room where she and Aunt Fanny spent their mornings sewing. "Sitting close together," Miss Ogilvie said.

"I hope they will not be too disappointed," Aunt Fanny murmured.

"Well, they certainly don't *look* like they might be disappointed. I think Mrs. Halloran ought to put a stop to it. It's not healthy for Fancy, having things like that going on right in public."

"I believe their paths will not always run side by side," Aunt Fanny said. "For the present, perhaps, but the briefest consideration of the future, Miss Ogilvie, should point out to you their differing roles."

"Well, of course I know what the captain is for," said Miss Ogilvie, and blushed. "That is," she explained, "I never really thought about it particularly, not for *myself,* that is. But I mean, why can't Julia …"

"Miss Ogilvie, in this finer world of ours you do not suppose that we, you and I, will work with our hands? Surely you appreciate the need for a

… what shall I call it? … a servant class? Who, after all, are to be the hewers of wood and the fetchers of water?"

"How nice," said Miss Ogilvie, and blushed again.

"My instructions from my father," said Aunt Fanny mysteriously, "have been far more detailed than many of you realize."

"Fancy, bring Mama her chocolates, will you?"

"I can't, I'm busy."

"Do you want your poor sick Mama to have to get up and get them herself?"

"I'll do it in a minute."

"You're a sweet baby, Fancy. Maybe in a little while you'll run and ask the captain to come and read to me."

"He's out in the summer house with that Julia, talking and talking."

"I'm sure he won't mind leaving *her* to comfort me a little when I'm not well."

"I'll ask him. But I bet he doesn't come."

"You better tell your granny about how the captain and Julia are always hanging together."

"'It happened one day about noon,'" the nurse read flatly, "'going towards my boat, I was exceedingly surprised with the print of a man's naked foot on the shore, which was very plain to be seen in the sand. I stood like one thunderstruck, or as if I had seen an apparition. I listened, I looked round me; I could hear nothing, nor see anything; I went up to a rising ground to look farther. I went up the shore, and down the shore, but it was all one, I could see no other impression but that one.'"

9

“MY DEAR JULIA,” said Mrs. Halloran, deeply shocked, “is it your impression that you are being kept here as a prisoner?”

“I just want to leave, is all,” Julia said sullenly. “The captain and I … we want to get the hell out of here.”

“By all means.” Mrs. Halloran shook her head. “I could hardly condemn you to stay. My own opinions would not, certainly, encourage *me* to leave, but I have no reason to suspect that you take your opinions from mine. That is, I feel that you are miserably mistaken, but since you do not share my belief, any attempt on my part to prevent you from leaving would be ridiculous, and, I suspect, wholly wasted.”

“I just want to get out of here,” Julia said. “*With* the captain.”

“Yes. *With* the captain. Since you have taken on the burden of announcing your joint intentions I conclude that the captain does not possess quite the dashing military bravado Aunt Fanny found in him; do not be alarmed, child … you may leave, and your captain may leave, any time you choose. I am only disturbed that there should have been any question in your mind … beyond, of course, the great final question which occupies the rest of us so entirely.”

Julia stared. “You’re not going to try to stop us?”

“Am I an ogre? Is this castle of mine guarded? Patrolled by dragons or leopards? Do we live under a spell, as in the City of Brass, or an evil enchantment, as madmen flung down upon their faces when they step outside their gates; can you believe that …”

“I’ll tell the captain,” Julia said. “And, Mrs. Halloran … thanks.”

“Not at all, child. Remember that you will require your mother’s consent as well as mine.”

“She won’t care if I go or stay.”

“Transportation to the city may be a difficulty for you. I regret that I have at present no one whom I can spare to drive you there, but I know of a fellow from the village who may be available. I will arrange it, of course. I suppose you are anxious to be on your way as quickly as possible?”

“We certainly are.”

“Then I will not trouble you to wait until tomorrow. The car will be waiting at the main gates, at nine this evening.”

“That will be fine,” Julia said, her eyes shining. “We can be in the city tonight.”

“Considering the short, the painfully short, amount of time left you to enjoy the pleasures of the world, I cannot criticize your haste.”

“Look,” Julia said, “one reason I’m leaving, and the captain too … we don’t believe that crap, any of it.”

“I said earlier that I did not ask you to believe anything. I am only wishing you godspeed, into the world and out of it.”

“Well,” Julia said uncertainly, “you’ve been nicer about it than I expected. I will say that for you. I never thought we’d be able to talk you into it. Anyway, thanks.”

“If you will now send the captain to me, I should like to say goodbye to him. I see the question on your face, Julia, and I will answer it: yes, I do intend to give him money, because I feel indebted to you both … not choosing to share our new world, you have been thoughtful enough to withdraw from it without attempting to jeopardize the chances of the rest of us. Now run along and pack all your prettiest clothes; it is already after seven, so I will have a dinner tray sent to your room, in order not to interrupt your preparations."

"Mrs. Halloran," Julia said, hesitating in the doorway, "look … thanks again."

"You are certainly welcome, child, for anything I may have done."

"Julia said you wanted me, Mrs. Halloran."

Mrs. Halloran turned from her desk, smiling. "Captain," she said, amused, "what are you so afraid of? I have invited you to come here to say goodbye."

"We thought, Julia and I, that you were going to be sore at us."

"Not at all. I explained to Julia that there was nothing in any of our plans which justified keeping people here against their wills. You *do* want to leave?"

"I sure do." The captain sat, awkwardly, and stared at his feet. "I wouldn't go, you know — you've been pretty nice to me, after all — if I really figured I was … well … leaving you in the lurch, as it was. I mean, in all this stuff about being the only people left in the world, and so on, what Julia thought was …" he stopped, red. "I mean," he went on in a rush, "if you need *men.*"

Mrs. Halloran laughed. "Any Utopian community has need of both sexes, surely," she agreed. "And I believe the Shakers, who live together as brother and sister only, are dying out with all the rapidity one would expect; a basic regard for reproduction of the species — and how could such a regard *not* be basic, I wonder? — cannot be excluded from any of our plans, even Aunt Fanny's. That does not mean, Captain, that we must capture our men, like a pack of lunatic priestesses feeding on their mates. I have every hope, in short, of replacing you amiably and very likely without even the use of force."

"Mrs. Halloran," the captain said, looking up earnestly and speaking with great care, "you *do* believe this, don't you? That is, you do honestly and in your heart believe that everything is going to go and you people here in the house will be the only ones left?"

"Worse still," Mrs. Halloran said gently, "I believe that you and Julia are going willfully out into a dying world and that you will have perhaps only a few weeks of life before you are … persuaded … that my beliefs are correct. I am sickened to think of your state of mind when you learn, at last, that you were mistaken."

"I don't get it." The captain shook his head. "I don't figure you're crazy or anything," he said, reassuringly, "I don't for a minute want you to think I'm criticizing you. But I just don't see how any person with any sense can *go* for that stuff. How can the *world* end? There's no *sense* to it. Besides," he went on ruefully, "one thing I know — nothing like that happens in *my* lifetime. I mean, why should I figure *I*'m so special, the world is going to end while I'm around?"

"I am sure you will be around," Mrs. Halloran said, "and certainly a number of amazing things have already happened during your lifetime, and not the least of them is that you should be alive at all. But this is a time-wasting debate. I know that you and Julia are eager to be off, and I feel poignantly that you have so little time that I am unwilling to diminish it by so much as an hour. I have arranged with Julia that a car from the village will be waiting by the main gate at nine tonight, and by eleven you should be in the city, drinking deeply, I hope, of its gaieties."

"Yes," the captain said. "The sooner the better."

Mrs. Halloran turned to her desk and her checkbook. "I will not stop to put this gracefully," she said. "I have explained to Julia that I am eager to smooth your remaining path; I suspect that you are both expensive people, and so I have made out a check for you." She tore the check from the checkbook and handed it to the captain, who hesitated, tried to seem indifferent, and then looked at the check.

"Listen," the captain said, pale, "this is a damn nasty joke."

"Not at all," Mrs. Halloran said. "I am not above spiteful gestures, surely, but at least this time my intentions are perfectly aboveboard. I spoke to the president of the bank in the city not half an hour ago; poor man, I took him away from a dinner party, and he will not enjoy dinner parties for long. The check will be freely honored."

"But—" said the captain. He waved the check helplessly. "You did make a mistake," he said at last.

"No mistake," Mrs. Halloran said gently. "That is the maximum sum I am able to command on short notice. The president of the bank was easily as astonished as yourself, but he is accustomed to doing what I tell him. That check — which, I agree with you, is enormous — will be honored upon your presentation of it."

"But *why?*"

"We are not going to need it," Mrs. Halloran said. "Please try to understand, Captain — we are not going to need it any more."

The captain sat down abruptly. "You *mean* this?" he demanded. "You are really going to sit there and nod at me and hand me more money than I ever dreamed of in all my life, just for nothing? Why, I've only been here three weeks — I couldn't *steal* this much." He waved his hands wildly. "This kind of money is something I never even *heard* of, they don't make that much, it isn't *real,* and you just sit there and *give* it to me — lady, maybe I was wrong about you not being crazy."

Mrs. Halloran laughed again. "Maybe you were," she said. "My own belief is that there will not be time for even you to spend it all."

"It'll take some spending, I admit," the captain said, looking at the check again. "Now look, I'm not aiming to quarrel with someone who just handed me a lousy fortune, but I'm *not* crazy, and I got to figure there's some string attached. Something's going to happen to me."

"Please believe that I am crazy, if you like, but not that I am dishonest."

"I ought to grab this thing and get up and run and not stop running till I get to that bank and I make sure it's true. But I don't like not understanding what goes on, and I like to make sure that young Harry — Harry's my real name," he explained.

"Indeed? I shall continue to call you Captain."

"Anyway, that young Harry doesn't get left out in the cold. You really believe — now let me get this absolutely straight one last time — you really believe that you can give me this money because it's not going to be any more good to you? Right now this check is worth exactly what it says but in a few weeks it's not going to matter what money I have because I won't be there and the bank won't be there and the money won't be there and there won't be any place to spend it anyway?"

"Exactly as I would have put it," Mrs. Halloran said.

"Then take it back," said the captain. He rose and set the check down softly on Mrs. Halloran's desk. "I never took odds like that in my life," the captain said. "I know a lot about you by now, and if you're ready to put that kind of money on the line, I figure Harry goes along with you. I stay."

"Think carefully, Captain. We have so little time; you may not have another opportunity of changing your mind."

"I don't have to think," the captain said. "I know when I'm beat."

"Then you had best get right down to dinner. I will see that Julia is notified, and will join you shortly at the table."

After dinner Mrs. Halloran hesitated at the table for a minute, after the others were gone, to speak to Mrs. Willow. "I imagine that Julia is well on her way," Mrs. Halloran said.

"I just hope she is," Mrs. Willow said viciously. "Damn selfish unnatural child."

"You will be more pleased with her, perhaps," Mrs. Halloran said, "when I tell you that before she left she took the liberty of helping herself to the money on my dressing table."

"How much?" said Mrs. Willow, and then: "I suppose you left it there accidentally?"

"Not at all. I hardly liked seeing Julia go off with no adequate financial resources."

"How much?"

"I am embarrassed," Mrs. Halloran said. "I feel like Aunt Norris. I could not put my hands onto more than about seventy dollars. Seventy-four dollars, to be exact, and eighty-nine cents. She took the silver, naturally."

"Julia is not above carrying small change," Mrs. Willow said.

"We will miss her," Mrs. Halloran said vaguely, and continued on into the drawing room, and her shawl, and her evening walk with Essex.

Julia, her suitcase on the ground beside her, stood in the warm dark evening by the main gates of the house. There was only a single light over the gates, and it showed more than anything else the elaborate scrolled H which centered each half of the gates; far away, beyond the long reaches of the drive, she could see an occasional dim flicker which must be the lights from the house, and she smiled. She felt almost pity for her mother and sister, trapped in the monumental lunatic asylum, and a growing excitement at the thought of being, tonight, in the city with the captain, with money and laughter and noise. She was pleased at having slipped soundlessly into Mrs.

Halloran's room, to take the money the careless old woman had left lying around, she was deeply amused at the thought of herself and the captain, wandering luxuriously — perhaps to the Orient, perhaps to Spain — while her mother and her sister waited cruelly in the big house for a magnificent destruction which never came about; she was even glad that she had said thank-you to Mrs. Halloran, since some day she might choose to come back here, furred and jewelled, to smile pityingly upon her older sister, grown weak and silly waiting for a new world.

When a car pulled up beside her she was startled for a minute, and then, looking more closely, annoyed. Mrs. Halloran had not been above a petty revenge: the car was old and shabby, and the driver looked like a ruffian.

"You the party going to the city?" he asked, leaning forward over the steering wheel to peer at her.

"I'm going to the city, yes. Did Mrs. Halloran send for you?"

"Right. Pick up a lady at the gates, nine o'clock."

"There's a gentleman coming, too."

"Not now, there ain't." The driver laughed richly. "No gentleman coming *this* trip, lessen you mean *me.*"

"You are mistaken. I am waiting for a gentleman who is going to the city with me."

"Not the way *I* hear it. Mrs. Halloran, she says to me on the telephone, you go at nine o'clock tonight to the main gates, you get a lady there, take her to the city. She will be going quite alone, Mrs. Halloran she says, quite *quite* alone."

"I am sure that Mrs. Halloran could not have said anything of the sort. We are going back to the house, right now, and make sure about this. And when Mrs. Halloran hears—"

"'We are going back to the house right now and make sure about this,'" he said in a high false voice. And then, "How?"

"Why …" Julia turned; the gates behind her were locked. One of the gardeners had met her at the gates, unlocked them for her, and seen her out, and she had supposed vaguely that the man was still around, prepared to unlock the gates again for the captain. When she called, however, and shook at the gates, there was silence, and no movement, beyond the faint reflection of the one light onto the scrolled H on either half of the gates.

"Whyn't you climb over?" said the driver, and snickered.

"I want you to take me directly into the village to a telephone. She can't treat me like this."

"Well, now, I guess I couldn't rightly do *that.* Mrs. Halloran, *she* said take you to the city."

"But *I* say—"

"Now, *you* know Mrs. Halloran," he said, in a horrid wheedling voice, "what you think happens to *me* if she says take you to the city and then I turn around and take you somewheres else? Dearie," he said, "it's the city or nothing, see? And it's going to rain, and the way *I* see it, if you was really to ask *my* opinion, either you get in the car with me and we go along to the city like she said, or *I* go home and you stay right here until Mrs. Halloran makes up her mind you should go somewheres else. And *if* you stay here," he went on, still in that disagreeable, almost triumphant voice, "and it's going to rain, and you're going to get wet, it'll be a mighty long time before morning when someone comes along to open these here gates. So now why don't you be a nice reasonable girl and come get in the car with me?"

Julia, who did not often cry, was only prevented now by a black determination to hide from this creature, and so from Mrs. Halloran, that she was frightened, and bewildered, and lonely. "I'll go to the city," she said. “I can telephone Mrs. Halloran from the hotel, anyway, and when I do,” she said, putting her hand on the doorhandle of the car, “do not suppose that I am going to praise the way you have behaved. I intend to tell her everything you have said.”

“What’d *I* say?” he demanded, whining. “All I said was I got to do what Mrs. Halloran *tells* me. Where’d I get if I didn’t do what Mrs. Halloran tells me? Now you get in like a good girl and we let bygones be bygones.”

There was only one place in the car for Julia to sit, and that was in front next to the driver. The back of the car, seatless, seemed to be filled with old bottles and pieces of chain, which rattled and clanked disturbingly as the car began a slow crawl away from the main gates of the house.

“Better tell you right off,” the driver said, “this is going to cost you twelve dollars.” He had clearly started to say “ten” and then changed his mind, and the sharp break in the word seemed to amuse him, as though he had no need for dissimulation. “Twelve,” he repeated enjoyably. “Don’t go into the city this time of night for *nothing,* you know.”

“Mrs. Halloran will pay you.”

The man sneaked a sideways look at her. “Mrs. Halloran, she said something funny about that. She said she had left money for you, and you would pick it up and be the one paying me.”

“Oh.” The car picked up speed reluctantly, shaking itself as though ready to balk and throw its riders, but the big man held it down firmly and after a moment they went more evenly along the road. Julia intended that there should be no further conversation between herself and the unattractive driver, but he spoke chattily, raising his big voice without effort over the clatter of the motor, “What you going to the city for?”

“Because I choose to,” Julia said childishly. She turned pointedly as though she were going to look out of the window, although there was no window on her side at all, and the wind came disagreeably in on to her face; she could feel the first stinging raindrops. She turned her jacket collar up and hunched her shoulders around her ears, in a feeble defense against the rain on one side and the conversation on the other. “Going to take the money I get from you,” the big man said placidly — he smelled musty, Julia thought, and foul— “and buy me some chickens. Got a little place for them out back of my house. I live in the village, of course.” He waited for some comment from Julia, and then went on, “Going to sell the eggs, maybe bring ’em up to the big house, sell ’em to old lady Halloran.” They were moving steadily upward, and Julia remembered the soft lines of hills visible from the windows of the big house; not long ago, while she was in her room packing, she had seen the hills from her window and told herself joyfully that beyond them lay the city; “Tonight I will be there myself,” she had thought, hugging herself ecstatically.

Peering through the rain, Julia thought she could distinguish a cleft in the line of the hills and although she did not want to speak she finally asked, “Is that where we’re going? Through that sort of pass?”

“That’s right,” said the driver. “City’s on the other side. Funny thing about that pass,” he continued affably, “always full of fog. Down here, rain or hot or sunshine, but up there it’s always fog. Something to do with the hills.”

“Is it far?”

“Another five miles, maybe. Then another seven, eight, miles to the city. They call it Fog Pass,” he added, as one explaining something uniquely reasonable. When Julia was silent again he went on. “Caught a rabbit up there once. It got so mixed up in the fog it didn’t even see me coming. Stood right there on the road watching me like it didn’t know what I was. Ran smack over it with the car.”

Julia turned slightly and let the wind drive the rain against her face. "Funny thing about rabbits," he said. "Most people think they're lucky. *That* one wasn't lucky," and he laughed. He had clearly reached a subject very dear to his heart, because he went on contentedly, "Killed some kittens once, my old lady had a cat always having kittens and this time I told her I'd get rid of the things for her. Cut off their heads with my pocket knife."

Julia, thinking: I will go to the biggest lightest hotel and telephone my mother, was silent.

"Got rid of some puppies by pouring kerosene on them and lighting—"

"Please don't," Julia said violently, and he laughed.

"Didn't know *you*'d be bothered," he said. "Folks do things like that all the time. Why, I knew an old man once lived up in these hills about a mile and *he* used to catch rats and—"

"Please," Julia said.

"I could tell you things I saw in the army," he said. "*Everybody* knows about *them,* pretty funny, too, sometimes. You just touchy or something?"

"I don't like to hear about it," Julia said.

"Well, if you don't have to *watch,* I wouldn't guess you'd mind." He seemed to be puzzled. "Why," he said, "my old lady was right there when I cut up them kittens. She didn't mind."

"How much further is it to the pass?"

"Mile or so. You're anxious to get to the city, I guess?"

"I certainly am."

"What you going there *for?*"

"I have an appointment," Julia said wantonly.

"Who with?"

"A friend."

"That so? What about that feller you thought was coming with you? The one Mrs. Halloran told me not to take? Where's *he* come in?"

"Look," Julia said, turning to look at him, "I'm sick and tired of answering your questions and listening to your dirty talk. You just leave me alone."

"Did I touch you?" he asked, indignant. "I'll leave you alone all right, dearie, Mrs. Halloran she didn't say nothing to me about *not* leaving you alone, I wouldn't touch you with a ten foot pole. Or maybe," he went on slyly, "you was asking? Because I got no *reason* to be coming back tonight. I kind of like the city." He thought, grinning to himself. "Oh, it wouldn't *cost* you any more," he assured her. "I might even buy you a beer or maybe two." Turning her back to him coldly, Julia put her face into the rain from the window. "Once I get that twenty bucks from you—" he said.

"You told me twelve," said Julia, startled into speech.

"Must of misunderstood me," he said calmly. "Happen to know it's a twenty dollar fare to the city. Might even be twenty-five before we get there," he said, and laughed. "You want to stop for a little while?"

"No," Julia said.

He laughed again. "You'd maybe rather walk?" he asked.

They turned a curve, still going uphill and came suddenly into fog; it was not fog like any Julia had ever seen, but rather an impenetrable, almost tangible, weight of darkness pressing down upon them. She could smell its faint smoky atmosphere, even over the odors of filth and decay coming from the man next to her, and he slowed the car down until it was barely moving. "Got to take it easy along here," he said. "Hills on one side, downhill on the other. Go off the road *that* way, you run into a hill, go off the road *that* way, you'll likely hit a tree or something, and just end up in the river way down below."

"Are you sure you know the road?"

"Do it blindfold." He chuckled. "*Doing* it blindfold," he said. "Right here's where I run over the rabbit. Fog lifted a minute and there he was." He laughed again. "Did you say you'd rather get out and walk?" he asked.

When Julia did not answer, he suddenly put his foot down and the car stopped. "Now," he said, and his voice was still friendly, "now you give me the money or we don't go no further. We maybe don't go no further *any*way," and he touched her on the back with his great dirty hand.

Julia caught her breath. "Don't be silly," she said sharply. "Do you think I'm going to let you get away with anything?"

"Fierce," he said approvingly. "Ever tell you what I done with a dog bit me once?"

"Mrs. Halloran—" Julia began.

"What she don't know won't hurt *her*. And anyway, *you* don't matter to *her*. She won't care, don't worry."

"When I tell Mrs. Halloran—"

"Now who's being silly?" He reached across her and opened the car door on her side. "You don't want to pay for your ride?" he asked, "you don't get no ride. And *I*'ll tell the old lady all about it."

Julia hesitated, looked at him, saw him grinning dimly in the fog, and, terror-stricken, slid out of the car on her side. When she turned back to look at him she thought that the look on his face was one of dismay that she had called his bluff, and, standing on the road, she said, "I'll just walk along the road until some other car comes by. You've just lost yourself some money, mister."

"You get back in the car," he said. "Pay me my money and there won't be no trouble."

“Find someone else to steal from,” Julia said. “Go home and tell Mrs. Halloran you didn’t get the money. Go home and torture your cats and dogs and leave decent people alone.” She slammed the car door and turned away from the car. For a minute she thought he was going to get out of the car and follow her, but he leaned forward and said anxiously, “Listen, miss, you better get back in the car.”

He’s frightened, Julia thought. She smiled and said, “I will give you exactly one dollar to drive me to the city.”

“Now you *know* you’re asking for trouble,” he said, and this time he opened the door of the car as though prepared to get out. Thoughts of the rabbit and the kittens were vivid in Julia’s mind, and she backed up and moved away from the car. Clinging to her pocketbook, stumbling a little, she ran, thinking as she did so that it was ludicrous for someone who had been not an hour ago in the big house to be so taken in, to be running in frantic terror down a lonely, foggy road. Behind her she heard him calling “Miss?” and she stood still, afraid to make another sound.

It came to her then with a pang of elementary fear that it was only necessary to step a few feet in any direction to disappear completely into the fog. She turned, almost ready to make a compromise somehow with the driver, and found that the road and the car had gone into the fog and that although she knew precisely in which direction she had moved, her faulty feet and blind eyes would not lead her back. She called carefully, “Mister?” and then thought, the fog muffling her voice and coming into her mouth, that perhaps he might yet find her by her voice, come silently up behind her in the fog and never give her a chance to tell him that he might have all her money if he wanted. She stood perfectly still, listening, and then turned to see if he was behind her. When she saw nothing she began to move cautiously. Better to take a chance on another car coming by, she thought, sooner or later someone will come along. She tripped over a rock and hurt her ankle and the noise held her motionless until she was sure that he had not heard her, was not moving softly through the silent fog.

A vague idea of her surroundings stayed with her; in back of her, approximately, was the road and on it the car; she was perhaps ten feet to the side of the road — too close, perhaps, to the sharp drop down to the river, but only just far enough from the driver for safety. There should be about fifteen feet on the side of the road before the slope down to the river became really steep, and on the other side — she hoped suddenly and fervently that it *was* the other side — there was a fairly wide space before the sharp rise of the hills.

Her shoes, which were destined for the soft levels of a dance floor in a nightclub in the city, twisted and turned and hurt her feet brutally over these unseen stones, and her silk skirt was fouled with burrs. Wait, she told herself with her teeth set, wait till I get somehow into the city and to a telephone; my mother will let Mrs. Halloran know what *we* think of this kind of treatment; what a rotten way to treat a guest. Wait until I wander into the city from the hills, bedraggled and tattered, telling of having been abandoned and robbed on the road; wait, she said over and over again through her teeth, wait till I can get even with all of them.

An abrupt sound startled her, the sound of wheels upon the road, and she turned toward it. The noise was bewilderingly loud for a minute, and then began to fade away. Although she had moved involuntarily away from the sound she realized in that minute that it had been *much* farther away than it should have been; had come, in fact, from the left of her instead of the right — or *should* it have been on the right? Was she then on the wrong side of the road and going perhaps steadily away from it? She turned and started sharply left, and almost immediately felt the ground begin to slope away under her feet; have I turned around in the fog? she wondered, and saw ahead of her a tree shape blurred in the fog. The trees, she thought, the trees were on our left as we came — toward the river? Moss grows on the north side of the trees, the drop down to the river is slow at first and then sharp, but, by the time she had thought, she had lost the tree and had no idea whether she was going toward it or not.

A small feeling of genuine apprehension came slowly upon her. This was not, could not possibly be, a small unimportant delay in her getting to the city; no matter how she stumbled and struggled along, she was lost; it was very possible that she would not get to the city tonight at all, would not reach a telephone, would not sleep in a hotel; she might even find herself, with embarrassment and relief, embracing the first of the search party to reach her; it might be that she would be sought for generally, over the hills, with men calling to one another and listening for her voice in reply, led by the intrepid driver of the car, perhaps even laughing when they found her, asking her if she'd ever do *that* again, telling their wives when they got home that yes, they'd found the fool woman, scared to death and half-crazy … if, indeed, it occurred to the driver to send anyone to look for her?

She shook her head violently to rid her mind of this cloudy nonsense, and caught her foot on a rock or a root and fell heavily. In the fog there was no one to see if there were tears in her eyes, and for a minute she lay on the ground saying "Oh, damn, damn *damn*" over and over again to herself, and almost aloud. No, she thought, it was really too much; she had not deserved this of anyone, it *was* too much. It occurred to her that she might just lie here without moving until someone found her and the thought brought her to her feet again hurriedly. For heaven's sake, she informed herself, imagine lying on the ground with a circle of men looking down with flashlights and dogs nosing at your shoes and probably they'd want to carry you back, and what would you look like *then?* It seemed that she had probably sprained her ankle and it hurt just enough for her to lose some perspective on her position. I shall *not* be lost, she said grimly, perhaps again aloud, and stamped on, putting her weight down firmly on her hurting ankle. If I hear one dog baying or one man shouting I will climb into a tree and hide, if I can find a tree, and she laughed wildly.

The sound of her own laughter in the fog startled her and for a minute she stood still. What on earth? she thought, and, is this possible? for *me?*

In order to find out more clearly where she was she brought both hands to her face and first rubbed her eyes and then bit sharply on her fingers, without knowing why. Then she said, still aloud, "*Now,* my girl, *now,* Julia, my fine creature, suppose you just get a goddam hold of yourself. What would they say if they saw you now? That bastard captain? Or even Arabella? They're all laughing at me now," she assured herself wisely, "Arabella's got the captain, and they're sitting in the light and laughing at me, but they can't, they *can't.*" Blaze a trail, she thought, pile rocks together in a signal of distress, write messages and set them afloat in bottles …

"Now listen here," she said. She was moving slowly, almost aimlessly; her hand brushed against a large rock and she did not lose her balance, but leaned peacefully against the rock and looked out blindly into the solid fog. "*Now* we're getting somewhere," she said to the rock, "*now* we're making some progress. Just got to be a little careful not to fall down the hillside into the river, *that's* all. Only thing we need to worry about — otherwise everything is fine, fine, fine, fine, fine, fine …" I got out of the car and turned right, she thought, or left, went uphill or down, and hurt my ankle and walked. "Close your eyes, my sweet baby," she said aloud, "you can see better with your eyes closed, close your eyes and take my hand and I will show you the way home."

She closed her eyes and with one hand resting against the rock began to walk; it was more than a rock, although she did not actually care, it was a wall, and she went awkwardly and clinging along beside it, following the line of the wall through weeds and rocks and falling through ditches. There now, she thought, as the ground under her feet seemed to be going a little uphill, there now, all I needed to do was sit down and think it out. I *do* hope that man is frightened because he lost me; see, I am thinking clearly because I can remember how I got here; I was not always walking in this fog, not at all.

She hit her foot against another rock and stumbled, and twisted against a tree; this is really too much, she thought, tears in her eyes, and stepped ahead and knew as she put her foot down that it was a mistake; she was over the edge into the river because her foot went down and down and never found the ground and she fell and rolled wildly downhill; this is really more than I can endure, she thought deliberately, and fell unendingly, wracked and bruised, lying against the great iron gates with the elaborate H worked into the scrollwork on either side.

"Good morning, Julia," said Mrs. Halloran at the breakfast table. "I heard that you had come back to us. I am only sorry that you had such miserable weather. We had a singularly clear, bright night."

"Go to hell," Julia said distinctly through her cut mouth.

"Julia, behave yourself," Mrs. Willow said.

"If I had been there," the captain said, helping himself to elderberry jelly, "I would have given that fellow a bad time."

"You're really *terribly* bruised," Arabella said. "After breakfast will you tell me what he *really* did to you?"

"All of you go to hell," Julia said.

“Odd that the gardeners should have been out so early,” Mrs. Halloran said. “Of course, you were there quite a while, as it was. But I would not have expected the gardeners to find you so early.” She nodded to the captain. “Coffee, Captain? When you go upstairs,” she continued to Julia, “be sure to put the money back on my dressing table, since you had no chance to spend it. Strange, is it not, how one can manage to cling to some unimportant trifle at a time of strain? Julia kept her pocketbook as someone, running from a burning house, might carry out a worthless vase, or an old newspaper.”

“Go, go, go to hell,” Julia said.

“My dear,” Mrs. Halloran said, “if you continue uncooperative I shall not let you go to the city again.”

10

ON THE MORNING of Sunday, June thirtieth, Gloria, in the middle of her breakfast, suddenly stood up, spilling Miss Ogilvie’s coffee, and stood, her hands over her face. “It’s true,” she said faintly, “it’s all true.”

“Gloria, you have upset Miss Ogilvie’s coffee,” Mrs. Halloran said.

“Look,” Gloria said. She took her hands down from her face and pointed. “The pink roses,” she said, “we’re having breakfast.”

“The pink roses are from the rambler,” Aunt Fanny said. “It was my mother’s favorite, and there were six bushes planted for her in the rose garden. Not one of them, I am pleased to say, has died; I have made a particular point of looking after them, and—”

“Don’t you see?” Gloria said. “There are the pink roses on the breakfast table, and I’m wearing my blue and white dress and a minute ago we were all laughing at something Essex said — don’t you see? It’s all exactly the way I saw it, before, when I was looking into the mirror.”

“Well, of course,” Mrs. Willow said comfortably, “it had to happen sometime, didn’t it?”

Twice during the month of June large trucks had delivered further shipments for Aunt Fanny, which had been stored in the library. Only one wall of books still stood and because the ashes of books — unlike the ashes of cloth, flesh, or even tea leaves and coffee grounds — are not healthy for growing things the gardeners had twice emptied the barbecue pit and taken the ashes to the village dump, which was just beyond the cemetery. Most of the property now stored in the library was in cartons, items purchased by Aunt Fanny in quantity and neatly packed. There was a carton of antihistamine preparations, in addition to the carton of first-aid kits. There were cartons of plastic overshoes and rubbers, in assorted sizes, of instant coffee, of cleansing tissue and sunglasses. Suntan lotion, salted nuts in cans, paper napkins, soap, both bar and flaked, toilet paper (four cartons). Two complete tool boxes, with a keg of nails, since the bags of nails which Robinson Crusoe brought from the ship had proved so comforting; mindful of Robinson Crusoe, Aunt Fanny had added a grindstone, and, with some embarrassment, several shotguns and an assortment of hunting knives. At Miss Ogilvie's suggestion the library stock also included a small portable cooking stove, with several cans of fuel, and an entire carton of folders of matches. Maryjane proposed the citronella for mosquitoes — there was a great roll of mosquito netting standing in a corner — and several remedies for bee stings, sunburn, and snake bite. Essex and Mrs. Halloran added as many cartons of cigarettes as Aunt Fanny would allow them room, and from the cellars of the house Mrs. Halloran brought up a representative selection of wines, although she confessed that she was puzzled by her own gesture. Foreseeing the day when their cigarettes would run out, Essex bought a pamphlet on the growing of tobacco, and thoughtfully laid in a gross of corncob pipes. Arabella suggested needles, thread, pins, hair curlers, deodorants, perfumes, bath salts, and lipsticks. Mrs. Willow, naming herself as the only really practical person in the house, insisted upon blankets, a wheelbarrow, reels of nylon rope, axes, shovels, rakes, and a barometer. It was Gloria's conceit to begin a file of daily newspapers, which she planned to continue until their last publication. The captain supervised the storage of eight bicycles in the cellar, but voted against the addition of a motor bike, since a motor bike would require gasoline and he felt that in anticipation of a general holocaust the storage of gasoline in the cellar would be unwise. Julia, who continued sullen, asked for and was granted the inclusion of a carton of knitting needles and several cartons of variously colored yarns. “So I will have something to do with my time,” she explained disagreeably.

The only books to be included were Aunt Fanny’s Boy Scout Handbook, the encyclopedia, Fancy’s French grammar — so that Miss Ogilvie could keep Fancy from forgetting the little she had gained — and a World Almanac. No writing materials of any kind were included, and gradually these books came to be called “unburnables” in order to differentiate them from the rest of the books in the library, which were absolutely burnable.

“In Tibet,” Essex remarked idly one morning, while moving over a carton of canned tunafish in order to make room for a carton of tennis balls, “in Tibet, arsenic is used in the preparation of paper pulp. In Tibet, the paper is highly poisonous, and lingering in a Tibetan library is consequently a matter of considerable danger. As a matter of fact, in Tibet curling up with a good book is frequently fatal.”

Early in July Miss Ogilvie found one of Mrs. Halloran’s handkerchiefs near the summer house. It had been tied around the neck of a dead garter snake, and the snake had been draped over a branch of a cypress tree. Miss Ogilvie, concerned, told the captain, who told Mrs. Halloran, who told him to dispose of it, and the captain dug a hole at the farther end of the rose garden and buried the snake and the handkerchief.

According to the notes carefully kept by Mrs. Willow, it was on July tenth that Gloria again looked into the mirror. She reported then that she saw fruit trees, heavy with fruit, small figures, at some distance, bathing along the edge of a stream, and a pack of horses running in a glorious wild freedom. When pressed, she saw that on August twenty-seventh the people in the big house were gathered in the dining room for dinner as usual. On August twenty-eighth they sat, talking, in the drawing room. On August twenty-ninth they were dancing, she thought, on the lawn. On August thirtieth there was nothing; the mirror was dark. Pressed further, for August thirty-first, for September first, for September second, Gloria caught again one glimpse of the soft untouched green world she had seen before, asked to return to August thirtieth, she first saw only darkness and then fell back, screaming that her eyes were burned, and had to be put to bed with a damp cloth over her face and one of Maryjane's sleeping pills.

"Thus it seems," Mrs. Willow wrote in her notes, "that August thirtieth is to be the day, the last this world will ever know." And then — quite out of character, actually, and in a shaken hand, she added, "God help us all."

"But I insist that the house *must* be barricaded," Aunt Fanny said, adding, with a kind of inspiration, "It is like a child hiding its head under a blanket. We have absolute faith in my father, of course, but even though his protection applies to the house and to everyone in it, I can see strong reasons for covering the windows and blocking the doors."

"As *I* see it," the captain said, "it sounds like we're hoping no one will notice us. With absolute faith in your father, of course," he told Aunt Fanny.

"I am not happy about barricading the house," Mrs. Willow said slowly. "Seems to me it sounds like *not* believing in Aunt Fanny's father, sort of. I mean, either he protects us or he doesn't."

"He *told* us to barricade the house," Aunt Fanny said, nettled. "I think of it as cooperating with him — showing him, as it were, that we are willing to go halfway to ensure our own survival, rather than wait passively for *him* to do it all."

"Well, a blanket over the window is really not much protection," Mrs. Willow said bluntly.

"Perhaps," Essex said, "it was planned to give us something to do while we are waiting."

“The human animal burrows instinctively in times of danger,” Mrs. Halloran said. “I find Aunt Fanny’s picture of the child under the blankets not an inept one.”

“We would *feel* safer, I’m sure,” Essex said.

“Perhaps,” Gloria said softly, “the blankets over the windows *are* just to keep us from looking out?”

“I am a rake,” Essex said. “I should have been born into a time when it was easier for a young man to borrow money. Or, of course, I should not have been born at all.”

“Silly,” Gloria said. “The sun is shining, and the sky is blue, and here we are, sitting quite close together on a bench all alone, and of all the things in the world to talk about you choose yourself.”

“We are more intelligent than Julia and the captain,” Essex said. “We could leave here. We could go into the village — I assume that having climbed over the gate once you could do so again — and walk, if need be, to the city. Or we could wait for the bus, sitting in the lobby of the Carriage Stop Inn. If we did not choose to stay in the city — and I do you the credit of assuming that you would want to get farther away than that — we could go on, as far as we could manage, and then settle down temporarily in another hotel, or inn, or rooming house; at any rate, some kind of a furnished room to live in. All the furnished rooms I have ever seen had wicker furniture, and a painting of the Bridge of Sighs on the wall. We would have to find money somehow. One of us, in short, would have to work.”

“That’s not hard,” Gloria said. “I can work.”

“I expect it would have to be you, anyway. I would sit in the furnished room and pretend I was a writer, perhaps. When you came home in the evening after a long day ushering in the movie theatre—”

" — selling jewelry in the five and ten—"

" — I would expect to be asked at once how the writing went today. I ought to get some paper and a pencil, so I would look authentic."

"And how did the writing go today, dear?"

"Very poorly, my love. One ballade, three villanelles, a kind of triolet thing, and an outline for a learned article on Freud. Gloria," Essex said, turning to look at her; "I have never loved anyone in my life until now."

"I know," Gloria said. "I know perfectly."

"I want to mate with you in a brave new world, all clean and shining, and yet I want to be your husband in this world, and live along in the kind of grimy squalor married people live in. I want a furnished room and jobs and dirty diapers in the corners and poor food — can you cook?"

"Admirably."

"You would have to cook poorly, to meet my ideal. I want the kind of dismal future only possible in *this* world. I could put up with your long hours at the five and ten—"

" — ushering at the movie theatre—"

"I could put up with your inferior cooking—"

"I am an excellent cook."

"And your poor housekeeping—"

"I keep a lovely house."

"And your squalling children—"

"They are lovely, clean children, and all in bed asleep."

" — but I would always be afraid. Or at least for as long as always lasted."

"Afraid of Aunt Fanny, you mean?"

"Afraid of Aunt Fanny."

Gloria was silent.

“If Aunt Fanny is right,” Essex went on after a minute, “and I ask your pardon for profaning this bright summer morning with Aunt Fanny’s name; if Aunt Fanny is right, we shall, putting it into the baldest of terms, find ourselves in a situation of strong comic possibilities. Imagine, if you can, Aunt Fanny’s new world.”

“I have been trying to imagine it for quite a while,” Gloria said.

“Fresh, untouched, green, lovely. Untrammeled, except by ourselves. A lifetime of warmth and beauty and fertility. The kind of life and world people have been dreaming about ever since they first began fouling this one. I can sometimes catch glimpses of what it will be like, and they are tantalizing—”

“I have seen it, you forget,” Gloria said. “In the mirror. It is more beautiful than you can believe.”

“I am afraid so. Aunt Fanny must *not* be wrong. That world *must* exist.” He sat forward, anxious, holding his hands tightly together and scowling with earnestness. “It *must*; we cannot be promised such a thing, like children, and see it withdrawn. Oh, Gloria,” he said, “I couldn’t *stand* not being there.”

“*I* could,” Gloria said, “and I have seen it.”

He sighed, and relaxed. “Put it, then,” he said, “that if I have one I cannot have the other. I want to live with you in a room furnished in wicker, with a picture of the Bridge of Sighs, and your bad cooking—”

“Superlative cooking.”

“ — and your job at the five and ten—”

“ — the movie theatre—”

“ — and the children, and the struggles and the cheapness and all the things we can get for ourselves in this world; I never *dreamed* of wanting these things. But I want the green and gold world more.”

"You haven't tried either one."

Essex shivered. "I have tried one," he said. "How do you suppose I have been captured by Aunt Fanny?"

"I wouldn't care, you see," Gloria said. "I can believe in either one, for myself. I would be happy enough if the end of the world caught me sitting in our wicker chair looking at the Bridge of Sighs. Unless, of course, I should happen to be still at work at the five and ten. A miserable way to go."

"But then we would lose everything," Essex said. He looked at her curiously. "You see," he went on, as one explaining glibly something better left unexplained, "you see, in Aunt Fanny's new world, we will at least be … alive … together. We could not possibly, of course, be … well, living in our own room with the wicker furniture; we would not be …"

"Dying romantically, in one another's arms?"

Essex shivered again. "I don't want to die," he said, and Gloria laughed. "But I *don't*," Essex said, and Gloria laughed again. "I should have *expected* you'd never understand," Essex said.

"But I'm afraid I do," Gloria said.

"*None* of you is serious about this," Essex said, and then added, making his voice light, "Poor Gloria — had we but world enough."

"Essex," she said, but he was standing.

"I must go and find Aunt Fanny," he said. "We are burning another ten shelves of books this afternoon."

Gloria sat on alone for a minute or so, thinking that the sun was warm and the sky blue, and wondering if the sky would be bluer if Aunt Fanny had never been born. The end of the world, Gloria thought concretely, the whole world, all of it, my father, our house, our friends, gone in one bad night, and here I am among strangers, and willing to dare it all for one more strange than the rest; but I wouldn't, she thought, I am intoxicated by the tradition of romantic love. Assume myself and Essex, with suitcases, endeavoring to climb over the gate secretly; *I* could only do it when I wanted to get *in*. When I came here, she thought, when I came here I would have laughed at such ideas as these. When I left home and came here I would have thought that these people were lunatic, and the gates locked to keep them from getting out; I wish I had a chance to say goodbye to my father.

"He's gone to tell my grandmother," Fancy said suddenly from behind her.

Gloria, startled, was annoyed. "You little sneak," she said.

"He's gone to tell every word both of you said. She makes him."

Fancy came around the end of the bench and sat down where Essex had been.

"Who told her he was here?" It occurred to Gloria that with Fancy everyone found themselves saying things they would rather not have said; perhaps it was because Fancy looked at one so directly, and spoke so clearly herself. "Did you tell?"

"The captain. She's had him following you two around. Like she had Essex following the captain and Julia."

"Why?"

"So she can make Essex tell her what you were saying. She likes to hear things like that."

"She's a terrible old woman."

Fancy laughed. "You sound like my mother. *I* like her."

"Spying on people."

"*She* doesn't spy, the *rest* of you spy, on each other," Fancy said flatly. "Did you make it up, what you saw on the mirror?"

"No."

"I think you did."

"I did not."

"You did."

"How can anyone know what they are really seeing?"

"*I* know. Essex wouldn't run away, anyway, because he's scared of my grandmother."

"She can't hurt him. He can't stand the thought that he might die."

"He talks more about dying than Aunt Fanny, even. The captain's been in danger of his life and reason a hundred times and more and *he* doesn't talk about dying. Only Essex and Aunt Fanny."

"I think the captain tells lies."

"So does Essex."

"He does not."

"He does so."

Gloria laughed again and after a minute Fancy laughed with her. "I like everything," Fancy said.

"And if Aunt Fanny—"

"I heard so much already about Aunt Fanny and her lousy dreams I think I'm going to throw up," Fancy said. "I wish she'd only shut up for a while. It used to be bad enough, Aunt Fanny snuffling all the time, but now that people listen to her it's awful."

"We can't afford *not* to listen."

"Well, I just don't get it myself." Fancy thought, and gestured at the garden which lay before them. "Look," she said, "don't any of you just plain *like* things? Always worrying about the world? Look. Aunt Fanny keeps saying that there is going to be a lovely world, all green and still and perfect and we are all going to live there and be peaceful and happy. That would be perfectly fine for me, except right here I live in a lovely world, all green and still and perfect, even though no one around here seems to be very peaceful or happy, but when I think about it this new world is going to have Aunt Fanny and my grandmother and you and Essex and the rest of these crazy people and my mother and what makes anyone think you're going to be more happy or peaceful just because you're the only ones left?"

"That's because you're not very grown up yet," Gloria said, sedately. "When you get older you'll understand."

"Will I?" asked Fancy innocently. "Right now I'm not allowed to play with the children in the village because my grandmother says we are too good a family for me to play with the children in the village and so later on I won't be allowed to play with the children in the village because there won't *be* any village, and we'll certainly be too good a family because we'll be the *only* family. And what will there be left for me to understand when I grow up?"

"You make it all sound foolish. Fancy, tell me. What *is* going to happen? Do you know?"

"Well," Fancy said slowly, "you all want the whole world to be changed so *you* will be different. But I don't suppose people get changed any by just a new world. And anyway that world isn't any more real than this one."

"It is, though. You forget that I saw it in the mirror."

"Maybe you'll get onto the other side of that mirror in the new clean world. Maybe you'll look through from the other side and see this world again and go around crying that you wish some big thing would happen and wipe out *that* one and send you back *here*. Like I keep trying to tell you, it doesn't matter which world you're in."

"Essex—"

“I’m sick and tired of Essex.” Fancy tumbled off the bench and rolled like a puppy in the grass. “You want to come and play with my doll house?”

11

AT FOUR-THIRTY ON the afternoon of July thirtieth, Julia and the captain defeated Gloria and Arabella at tennis, Gloria wearing blue-striped shorts borrowed from Julia, and Mrs. Halloran, Aunt Fanny, Miss Ogilvie, Mrs. Willow, and Essex watching from under the beach umbrella set up near the court. Maryjane, who thought the hot sun beneficial to her asthma, lay on a rug on the grass, and Fancy played at some random game, singing to herself and smiling.

In the shaded porch outside his room, where Richard Halloran spent the late afternoons when the sun was cooling, the nurse read levelly, "'I cannot express the confusion I was in, though the joy of seeing a ship, and one which I had reason to believe was manned by my own countrymen, and consequently friends, was such as I cannot describe; but yet I had some secret doubts hanging about me, I cannot tell from whence they came, bidding me to be on my guard.'"

After dinner Mrs. Halloran walked with Essex, going toward the sundial with her arm against his, relishing his even strength and sympathetic deference; "Tell me again," she said, standing over the sundial.

"'What is this world?'" Essex said obediently, "'What asketh man to have? Now with his love, now in his colde grave, Allone, with-outen any companye.'"

"I do not care for it," Mrs. Halloran said, caressing the W in WORLD.

"Orianna," Essex said. "Do you think that we will be happy there?"

"No," Mrs. Halloran said. "But then, we are not happy here."

"Aunt Fanny specifically promised us happiness."

“Aunt Fanny will promise anything to get her own way. How would she know what happiness is, say, to me?”

“How could anyone know?” asked Essex politely.

“Least of all my dearest and closest friends. Well,” Mrs. Halloran said, “we have not long to wait, and I think I will begin to plan my personal future.”

The fire in the drawing room was still lighted of an evening because Richard Halloran felt the chill of the drawing dark in his old bones. When Mrs. Halloran had come in with Essex and given him her shawl to put away, she went directly to stand by her husband’s wheel chair and face the room. Looking around at them, at Aunt Fanny and the captain, at Mrs. Willow and Julia and Arabella, at Miss Ogilvie and Essex and Maryjane, Mrs. Halloran said, “I want to speak to all of you. You will be astonished, I think: I want to ask your assistance. No, be still; do not reassure me — I think I know what I may count on from any of you. I require only your willing presence.”

“Certainly,” Aunt Fanny said softly, “what you require, *we*—”

“Be still, Aunt Fanny. I want to speak to *all* of you. The books burning away in the barbecue pit have put me in mind of it; it has come to me that we must — I say advisedly, we *must* — give a celebration for the village; you may call it a farewell party, if you like, Aunt Fanny; it will certainly be the last gesture they will ever see from the big house.”

“A farewell party is a pretty idea,” said Miss Ogilvie. “It becomes Mrs. Halloran to have thought of it.”

Mrs. Halloran lifted one hand and set it on the shoulder of her husband, who stirred. “It may be in order to choose some occasion for this party,” she said, “since clearly we cannot publicly announce it as a farewell; I thought of a golden wedding anniversary.”

“Who for?” Maryjane demanded, and Aunt Fanny echoed, “Not Richard’s?”

“The village,” Mrs. Halloran said, “will not care particularly how many years Richard and I have been married — beyond marvelling at my youthful appearance — and I am sure that my good friends will not quarrel with my desire to do honor, one last time, to the husband of my choice and …” she hesitated, “… the joy of my life. In other words, I choose to hold a celebration, and I do not care how it may be justified; the burning of the books in the barbecue pit has put me in mind of a public barbecue—”

“A witch-burning?” said Gloria, but no one heard her.

“And it is my pleasure that the populace be invited for the afternoon and early evening of August twenty-ninth, for a barbecue, dance, celebration, and farewell.”

“Well, now,” Mrs. Willow said, moving in heavily, “You’re two years older than I am, Orianna, and if you’ve been married to that Richard of yours any more than twenty-eight years I’ll be hogtied and thrown in the fishpond. Willow never lasted till our tenth year, but I guess *I* know how long I would have been married by now, as if I cared.”

Mrs. Halloran touched her husband’s shoulder caressingly, and said, “In any case, *I* have decided that August twenty-ninth will be the occasion of the celebration of our golden nuptials; let me be sentimental, Augusta, before I have no time left.”

“If Willow had lasted—”

“You would be as eager as I to celebrate any anniversary of your union.”

“Richard,” said Aunt Fanny darkly, “ought to celebrate in sackcloth and ashes. It was the blackest day of my life.”

“No doubt,” said Mrs. Halloran, “and I count on *you*, Aunt Fanny, to enhance the general joy on the occasion. I thought that — since there is really no purpose in trying to preserve the grounds of the house from the people of the village, when they are to be so wholly revised on the night of August thirtieth — we might throw all the grounds open to our visitors; let them wander in the secret garden and lose themselves in the maze; let them fall into the pool and pick fruit from the orchard. So long as not one of them comes into the house."

"It would be most unfortunate if anyone should stray into the library," Mrs. Willow agreed.

"We will set up a barbecue around by the kitchen garden, although, as I say, we will burn charcoal in it this once. Captain, I will ask you to take charge of the barbecue and supervise the cooking. Essex, you will arrange for a pavilion of some sort, where other refreshments will be served. Julia, Arabella, Maryjane, I have a particular fancy for japanese lanterns; will you see to them, please? Assorted colors, and I think in festoons. Miss Ogilvie, you will of course make the salad dressing, as always. Aunt Fanny and Mrs. Willow, you will oblige me by making a careful examination of the gardens and lawns, to determine what improvements or additions need be made by the gardeners; this is, after all, the last formal entertainment ever to be held here, and I should like to think that everything was looking its best."

"When is this … farewell party … to take place?" Mrs. Willow asked.

"Since we have only until August thirtieth, as I say, I believe that August twenty-ninth would be the most proper day. We will invite the entire village — subject, of course, to certain unavoidable omissions — to come at five. They will dine upon barbecued beef, and whatever else we plan to offer, and should leave us, I imagine, by eleven in the evening, after having properly admired the japanese lanterns. We will then be able to retire early, in anticipation of a busy day on August thirtieth, and very likely, I should think, a sleepless night. I have, by the way, promised the servants that they will have an unexpected holiday; after the labor and confusion of the garden party, I have told them, they will have the next afternoon and evening off. In the late afternoon of August thirtieth, two of the cars will take the entire staff into the city, planning to return here the next morning."

"As I supposed," said Miss Ogilvie, nodding. "I *thought* we should have to make our own breakfast that morning."

"Several more unimportant items," Mrs. Halloran continued. "Essex can hint to the villagers that a country dance of some kind, celebrating our fifty years of happy marriage, would be supremely appropriate."

"By the villagers," Essex said, "I assume you mean the twenty-odd assorted young ladies who attend Mrs. Otis's dancing classes? I daresay they could do a tap dance on the terrace."

"Suppose I leave that in *your* hands, Essex. I had also thought of some testimonial from the younger children — a pretty little girl, perhaps, tendering me an armful of flowers? You will see that flowers are provided, Essex, and perhaps a short, badly-scanned poem in honor of the occasion."

"Bad scansion I will *not* descend to," Essex said. "I will find some little girl to give you flowers, and see that her face is washed."

"We can ring the bells over the carriage house," Richard Halloran said, inspired.

"Richard," Aunt Fanny said, "you know that you have not been married to Orianna for fifty years."

"I have been married to Orianna for a very long time," Richard Halloran said to the fire.

"I have no objection to your mingling with the villagers, any of you; Miss Ogilvie, you may mingle freely with the villagers. I have also given some considerable thought to my own costume for the occasion; it is going to be in shocking bad taste, but of course it is for my last public appearance. I think to sit on the terrace under a gold canopy."

"Disgraceful," Aunt Fanny said.

"I want my people to have their last remembrance of me — if they have time to give me a thought at all — as truly regal, Aunt Fanny; I plan to wear a crown."

"Orianna, you old fool," Mrs. Willow said.

"A crown," Mrs. Halloran said firmly. "In shocking bad taste, as I said, and probably no more than a small tiara, but it will be in my mind a crown. I have always fancied myself wearing cloth of gold, and bowing."

"Seems to me," Arabella said suddenly, "you ought to be giving *us* pretty dresses, too. Not crowns if you don't want to, but some kind of pretty dress."

"Oddly enough, Arabella, I find the idea entirely suitable. I think we should all go, that last day, newly clothed and fresh."

"Well, not gold for *me,* please. I'm much better in blue, with my eyes. Julia wears the red tones."

"I do not." Julia scowled at her sister. "She wants me to look hideous," she said, "just because she thinks it makes *her* look prettier. I want green, *if* you don't mind."

"I like a flowered chiffon, myself," Mrs. Willow said. "Something bright; *my* size, it doesn't matter anyway. The gels should be in light colors, Orianna, a bevy of beauty around you, if I do say it myself. I can run into the city and if I can't find what I've got in mind I can buy the material and we can put them together here. At least my gels and I are handy with our needles, for so many years of making things do and patching things together."

“*I* wore the patches,” Julia said spitefully. “Arabella never had any trouble in just making do with any old thing so long as it was brand new and cost twice what we could afford.”

“You—” Arabella began, but Mrs. Willow interrupted smoothly. “No squabbling, girls; at least *this* time we don’t have to worry about what it costs; what about you, Miss Ogilvie?”

“I *always* worry about what things cost, thank you, Mrs. Willow; I formed an early habit—”

“No, no, dear; what will you wear to Orianna’s party?”

“Oh, dear.” Miss Ogilvie looked anxiously at Richard Halloran. “Pink?” she suggested hopefully.

“I should think a nice dove grey,” Maryjane said.

“I’d *like* pink,” Miss Ogilvie said.

“If anyone cares, I shall wear black,” Aunt Fanny said. “To mark my sense of the occasion.”

“It sounds like I shall have to do a *lot* of shopping,” Mrs. Willow said happily. “I’ll go into the city one day next week, and that will give us plenty of time to take things back if we don’t like them. What about you, Orianna — shall I look for your golden gown for you?”

“I have already ordered my dress, thank you. And my crown.”

“I can’t help feeling,” Mrs. Willow said, “that you will look like something of a fool, you know. Wearing a crown.”

“You have not perceived, then, Augusta, that I wear a crown on August twenty-ninth to emphasize my position after August thirtieth.” Mrs. Halloran smiled obscurely. “I shall probably never remove the crown,” she said, “until I hand it on to Fancy.”

12

ON THE THIRD floor of the big house, near the end of the right wing, was a great room which Mrs. Halloran had never visited, although she surely knew of its existence. It occupied almost all of the top floor of the right wing, sharing it only with the little room which the first Mr. Halloran had wanted to make into an observatory from which he could watch the stars. Because the big house was so extremely big the great room on the third floor was rarely remembered, and visited only by Aunt Fanny; in it were the worldly possessions of the first Mrs. Halloran — not the diamonds which Aunt Fanny wore, nor the satin sheets and tiny golden chairs from the bedroom where she died, but the solid, well-chosen, and real possessions which the first Mrs. Halloran had known she owned, and had meant when, dying, she whispered, “Take care of my things,” to her husband.

When the first Mr. Halloran brought his wife and his two small children to live in the big house he had built for them, he brought them from a bleak and uncomfortable top-floor apartment in a two-family house, and he made the change for them without a very adequate preparation. The first Mrs. Halloran died without ever seeing the greater part of the furnishings in the big house, and during the long days of her illness took great consolation from the knowledge that her real possessions were safely stored away in an attic room somewhere above her head.

Aunt Fanny, who loved the big house, had always known somehow that the core of it was in the big attic room. Over a period of years she had, quite by herself, reestablished the four-room apartment where she had been born; the attic room was easily large enough for the furniture to be set in order, and Aunt Fanny had been astonished at her own memories, which set furniture and even ornaments into a pattern almost agonizing in its growing familiarity.

The great ugly living room suite, patterned in dark red and blue brocade, which had been a source of such enormous pride to the first Mrs. Halloran, Aunt Fanny had set up first, the heavy couch facing the two deep armchairs. This furniture had been built to endure, and endure it would. Between the couch and the armchairs was crammed an imitation-mahogany bric-a-brac table, and on that — Aunt Fanny had gone into carefully packed cartons, dislodging mothballs — were a dark blue imitation velvet fringed tablecover, a small music box which had been a candy dish, and played the first phrases of "Barcarolle," a model of the Statue of Liberty, since the first Mrs. Halloran had come to New York on her honeymoon, and a photograph album bound in blue imitation leather. Aunt Fanny had turned the pages of the photograph album, looking in some bewilderment at the yellowed snapshots of the first Mrs. Halloran as a girl, somehow ludicrously innocent, in middy blouse and spreading tie; as a bride, looking up at an unrecognizable tall man; as a mother, holding a pig-faced creature which might have been either her son Richard or her daughter Frances; in company with friends who had by now very likely forgotten even her name. In these pictures Aunt Fanny could not find her mother, who was dead, but only a girl in a book, whose story was tragically swift, from girl to wife to mother, and dull, since nothing had ever happened to her from the day she had her picture taken laughing and long-haired in the middy blouse, to the day when, photographed for the last time before the high steps of the two-family house, she smiled uneasily into the camera, her face barely discernible under the odd hat. Aunt Fanny sometimes wondered, turning the pages of the photograph album, how much her mother had ever realized of that life which went by so quickly; had she known, standing for her picture in front of the house where she had lived with her husband, had she known that it was for the last time, that no furniture record of her would exist? Had she known earlier, then, in the middy blouse, that she was going to die? Equally, then, did the faces which looked out from the other pages of the album, the faces of small Franceses and Richards, hold also that sweet indefinable reassuring knowledge? Did the Richard in wide collar and velvet trousers know that *he* was going to die? — he knew it now. Could the truth be read in the tiny Frances who sat, toothless, on a blanket in the sun? "Some day I will be with my mother," Aunt Fanny would think, turning the pages, "I am with her in this book, no one can separate us *here*. Some day we will all be together again." The last pages of the book were empty, because the album had been packed carefully away years ago with everything else in the small apartment and had been stored in the attic of the big house; "Is my furniture all right?" the first Mrs. Halloran had asked the maids, "are you taking good care of my furniture? Are all my boxes of things in a safe place?" Nothing from the attic room had ever been permitted out into the big house; the four-room apartment was intact.

The living room of the apartment also held a small bookcase, in which the first Mr. Halloran had kept the books he used in his mail order education; Aunt Fanny had put them back. They had been in a carton labelled, in her mother's straight handwriting, "Michael's books." There was even among them a book on etiquette, with the passages on the uses of table silver underlined by her father, who memorized laboriously and slowly, and never forgot what he had once learned.

On top of the bookcase Aunt Fanny, with unerring, almost supernatural memory, had put the framed photographs of her grandparents. In those first proud years the Hallorans had bought themselves a victrola, paying for it month by month, and it had stood, polished and handsome, with an imitation mahogany finish, in one corner of their living room. Aunt Fanny had never played it in the big house, and had been too small to be trusted with it in the apartment; the records were carefully preserved in a compartment at the bottom of the machines, which opened to receive them in grooved individual sections. Aunt Fanny recognized the indefinable smell of the phonograph, of oil and mothballs and furniture polish, more clearly than she remembered the Caruso record, or Madame Schumann-Heink, or Chaliapin, singing “The Song of the Flea.”

The four rooms in the apartment, which Aunt Fanny had so carefully put back together, included the living room, the kitchen, the parental bedroom, and the bedroom which small Frances and Richard had shared. In the kitchen the stove was cold, the icebox warm, but Aunt Fanny scrubbed regularly the oilcloth on the kitchen table where she had sat for meals with her mother and father and brother — the high chair used by Richard and then Frances stood still in a corner, where Mrs. Halloran had kept it because she never threw anything away, and never let anything decay; there were four chairs around the kitchen table and Aunt Fanny had washed her mother’s everyday dishes and put them into the shelves of the dish cabinet and washed her mother’s company china and put it into the shelves of the glass-fronted imitation mahogany breakfront which had been meant to go into the living room but had been crowded back into the kitchen. There were two extra chairs in the kitchen, so solidly built that they still stood steady, there was a second cabinet, painted blue like the first, and matching the oilcloth table cover, which had once held food, in cans and boxes; it had a flour bin and a built-in sifter, and, below, a bin for potatoes and onions. Aunt Fanny had washed her mother’s silverware, which had been a wedding present, and put it into the drawers of the kitchen table, and in the cabinet where the food had been kept Aunt Fanny had unpacked and stored away the neat piles of dish towels, dish cloths, pot holders, and table napkins.

The beds were set up in the bedrooms, and Aunt Fanny had made them — the big mahogany double bed in her parents' bedroom had a neat, intricately crocheted spread which her mother had made when she was not much older than the girl in the middy blouse and long hair, and had stored in her cedar hope chest; there was her father's dresser, plain and stiff, matching the imitation mahogany bed and the dressing table, which had always seemed unlike her mother to Aunt Fanny, but of course it had come with the bedroom set and had to be used. Aunt Fanny had placed a picture of her father, stern and uncomfortable, on her mother's dressing table, and a picture of her mother, cloudy-haired and idealized, on her father's dresser. The upholstery of the little bench before the dressing table was rose brocade, and Aunt Fanny had found the carton which held the little pink pebbled-glass pin tray, and the matching powder jar, and her mother's ivory-backed brush and comb and mirror, and had set these things, in correct order, on the dressing table. Her father's twin silver hairbrushes were on the dresser. The two pink hooked rugs were on the floor on either side of the bed. In the cedar hope chest were spare sheets and blankets; in the drawers of the dressing table and the dresser were the contents of three cartons, one labelled "My clothes," one "Michael's clothes," and one, "Michael's work clothes."

In the other bedroom — there had once been a door between the two bedrooms, left open in case a child cried in the night — were the small bed on which Richard had slept, and the crib in which Frances had slept until she was five; the first Mrs. Halloran had been planning and saving to re-furnish the children's bedroom when her husband cancelled all her plans by deciding on the big house. Aunt Fanny could remember the wallpaper in here — it had had a design of dancing bears — and the rest of the room was intact. She and Richard could have moved back here if they would. The little pink dresser had belonged to Frances, and in it Aunt Fanny had put the contents of the carton labelled "Frances, baby clothes." The little blue dresser had belonged to Richard, and it held "Richard, baby clothes," and "Richard, clothes," since Richard had been older when they left. There was a little bookcase, and from it Aunt Fanny had read "Alice in Wonderland," with an odd sense of distortion, since she could only remember her mother's voice reading it to her. There were two toyboxes, one labelled "RICHARD" and one "FRANCES," and in them Aunt Fanny had put, dividing with scrupulous fairness, the contents of the cartons labelled "Richard, toys," and "Frances, toys," and "Children, blocks, chalk, etc." Some day, Aunt Fanny thought foolishly, I must bring Richard up here and see if he wants to play.

There were two cartons Aunt Fanny had not unpacked. One, labelled "Wedding presents" she had not unpacked because it had never been unpacked. Inside it were the silver tea service, the silver cake servers, the handsome clock, which her mother and father had received as wedding presents and put away safely, planning to take them out to use some day when they had a nicer apartment, with more space for cake servers and handsome mantel clocks, but when Mr. Halloran brought his wife and children to the big house the carton was put away in the attic room with the other furniture because Mr. Halloran had insisted arrogantly that the big house be complete down to every slightest detail before he brought his wife there. In the big house there was no need for any further cake servers; the silver tea service was inferior to the graceful modern set Mr. Halloran put into the big house, and the handsome clock would only have looked vulgar on the mantel of Mrs. Halloran's bedroom, where she wanted it, next to the dainty porcelain clock Mr. Halloran had put there.

If Aunt Fanny had cared to, she might have lived entirely in the apartment inside the house, cooking her meals on her mother's stove, sleeping in her parents' bed, putting records on the victrola.

The second carton Aunt Fanny never unpacked she had set away in a corner of her parents' bedroom. It was labelled "Souvenirs," and Aunt Fanny, knowing that it held a curl — wrapped in a linen handkerchief — from her head, and one from Richard's, and the ill-colored, straggling cards they had given her mother on Mother's Day and Christmas, and perhaps letters from Michael Halloran, was afraid of what further she might find, what autograph albums, valentines, dance programs that might have belonged to the strange girl with the long hair among the photographs.

If Aunt Fanny had cared to, she might have dropped from sight altogether into this apartment in the big house, might have left the others behind and gone into the apartment and closed the door, and stayed.

"Come along," Aunt Fanny said to Fancy; she had been looking for Fancy and had finally called her from the gardens to come upstairs; Aunt Fanny met her on the great staircase and took her hand. "I want to show you something," Aunt Fanny said. "Just so you will know how well Aunt Fanny loves you, I want to show you something no one has seen for many years."

"Where?" said Fancy, but came obediently with Aunt Fanny along the hall and to the stairway which led to the third floor, "Where, Aunt Fanny?"

"I'll show you," Aunt Fanny said mysteriously; she had no idea of why she was suddenly so anxious to show Fancy the big room upstairs, but told herself vaguely that it was a kind of continuity, a way of establishing one strong direct line from the first Mrs. Halloran to Fancy; "It's my doll house," Aunt Fanny said happily, and opened the door with a flourish, as though she were her mother welcoming a guest.

"What *is* it?" Fancy asked, peering from the doorway.

"My mother's house," Aunt Fanny said. "Where your grandfather and I were born."

"It's funny," Fancy said.

"Funny?"

"Strange," Fancy said hastily. "A big doll house, but no dolls."

"The dolls are here," Aunt Fanny said. "I remember them. My mother sat here," she said, sitting down on the blue upholstered chair. "Sit on the footstool, Fancy; that other big chair was my father's. I am the mother, wearing a yellow dress. You must be me, little Frances. We will pretend that little Richard is in the other room, studying his lessons."

"Can I touch anything?" Fancy asked, turning uncomfortably on the footstool.

"Little Frances is not allowed to touch things in this room. When Richard has finished his lessons you may go into the other room and play with your toys. My father is sitting there in his chair and he is studying too, one of his important books. He has a pencil to underline anything that he thinks might be useful for him to remember. I am my mother and I am always thinking about my darling children. The dinner dishes have been washed and perhaps later your father will put a record on the victrola."

"I want to play with the toys now."

"Later, dear. We are a very happy family and we love each other dearly. Don't we?"

"I guess so," Fancy said uncertainly.

"We love each other very *very* dearly. We are always thinking of ways to make each other happy, aren't we? Right now your father is working hard because he is dreaming of someday taking his family to live in a lovely house he will build for them, and I am your mother and I am thinking of how strong and happy and handsome my children are. Aren't I always thinking of you?"

"I guess so."

"My darling little Frances will grow up to be a lovely woman, tall and fair, and someday she will find a man who is as good as her father, and she will marry him and they will have strong and happy and handsome children of their own. But my son Richard will never marry; he will stay with his mother always, standing by his father, so I will always have a strong wise man on either side of me—"

Fancy stood up. "I think I hear my mother calling me," she said, moving toward the door.

Aunt Fanny looked at her mournfully. "Do you know that they are dead now?" she asked. "They were your great grandparents."

"Yes, Aunt Fanny. May I go now?"

"Run along, Frances," Aunt Fanny said remotely. When the door closed behind Fancy she sat quietly in her mother's chair, wondering at the quiet in her mother's rooms. When she closed the door behind her at last, and locked it, she thought: someday someone will come again, and wonder who lived here.

"Here comes Aunt Fanny now," said Mrs. Willow as Aunt Fanny came down the great stairway, "Aunt Fanny, come and decide something for us. We can't make up our minds about breakfast that first morning — would you think ham and eggs?"

"No," Fancy said, as though continuing a conversation begun long before, "I'm the one with the worst problems. You've been lucky."

"So have you." Gloria took up a little doll from the doll house and examined him curiously. "You've always lived *here*, for one thing."

"People growing up …" Fancy's voice faded; she seemed to be trying very hard to phrase something only very imperfectly perceived; she laughed timidly, and reached out to touch Gloria's arm. "It's *easier*, being young and growing up," she said haltingly, "when there are other people around doing it *with* you. *You* know, when you can think that all over the world there are children your age, growing up, and all of them somehow *feeling* the same. But suppose … suppose you were the *only* child growing up." She shook her head. "You were lucky," she said.

"I haven't altogether grown up yet."

"Gloria, won't you miss things like dancing, and boys, and going to parties, and pretty dresses, and movies, and football games? I've been waiting a long time for all the things like that, and now …"

"I can only think we'll have other things as good. Anyway, we'll be safe."

"Who wants to be *safe*, for heaven's sakes?" Fancy was scornful. "I'd rather live in a world full of other people, even dangerous people. I've been *safe* all my life. I've never even played with anyone, except my dolls." Once again she was thoughtful, moving her hand along the corner of the doll house in a gesture oddly reminiscent of her grandmother. "If I could," she said at last, "I would make it stop, all of this."

"Maybe they all feel the same way, really," Gloria said; she too, speaking of something not quite understood, spoke awkwardly. "I think they want the same things you do, only you would … inherit them, so to speak, just by growing up. Things like excitement, and new experiences, and all kinds of strange and wonderful things happening; you get them anyway, just by the process of growing older, but for them … they've already outgrown all they know and they want to try it all over again. Even at *my* age, you keep thinking you've missed so much, and you get older all the time."

"But what is there left that people like Aunt Fanny and Mrs. Willow are waiting for? What do they think can possibly happen nice to them *now?*"

"I can't answer *all* your questions, silly. I don't know myself. All I know is that being safe is more important than anything else."

"No," Fancy said. "No, it can't be."

"I'm only seventeen years old," Gloria said, "and I know this much — the world out there, Fancy, that world which is all around on the other side of the wall, it isn't real. It's real inside here, *we*'re real, but what is outside is like it's made of cardboard, or plastic, or something. *Nothing* out there is real. Everything is made out of something else, and everything is made to look like something else, and it all comes apart in your hands. The people aren't real, they're nothing but endless copies of each other, all looking just alike, like paper dolls, and they live in houses full of artificial things and eat imitation food—"

"My doll house," Fancy said, amused.

"Your dolls have little cakes and roasts made of wood and painted. Well, the people out there have cakes and bread and cookies made out of pretend flour, with all kinds of things taken out of it to make it prettier for them to eat, and all kinds of things put in to make it easier for them to eat, and they eat meat which has been cooked for them already so they won't have to bother to do anything except heat it up and they read newspapers full of nonsense and lies and one day they hear that some truth is being kept from them for their own good and the next day they hear that the truth is being kept from them because it was really a lie and the next day they hear—"

Fancy laughed. "You sound like you hate everything."

"I wouldn't like being a doll in a doll house, I can tell you. I'm only seventeen years old, but I've learned a lot. All those people out there know about things like love and tenderness is what they hear in songs or read in books — that's one reason I'm glad we burned all the books *here*. People shouldn't be able to read them and remember nothing but lies. And you talk about dances and parties — I can tell you there's no heart to anything any more; when you dance with a boy he's only looking over your shoulder at some other boy, and the only real people left any more are the shadows on the television screens."

"If I believed you," Fancy said, "I would still mind never trying things for myself. But I won't ever believe you until I've gone out there and seen it."

"There's nothing there," Gloria said with finality. "It's a make-believe world, with nothing in it but cardboard and trouble." She thought for a minute, and then said, "If you were a liar, or a pervert, or a thief, or even just sick, there wouldn't be anything out there you couldn't have."

Fancy bent over the doll house. "Anyway," she said, "I don't care how shabby it is. I'm not afraid of bad people, and of not being safe."

"But there aren't any *good* people," Gloria said helplessly. "No one is *any*thing but tired and ugly and mean. I *know*."

The first Mr. Halloran had been accustomed to chart and direct his busy life with suitable maxims; "The more haste, the less speed," he was fond of remarking, "There's always room at the top; you can't take it with you." His battery of architects and landscape technicians had declined, as one man, to adorn Mr. Halloran's home with elaborately painted and carved and engraved statements that Mr. Halloran could not take it with him, but had in many cases compromised with Mr. Halloran's passion for the reassuring presence of a line of good advice. Mr. Halloran — who kept on his desk a framed copy of Kipling’s “If” — felt that every human soul was the better for the nudging presence of sound words, and it was only the tactful intervention of a young man — the nephew of the principal architect, in fact — who had taken a master’s degree in English literature at Columbia University, that prevented a final rupture between Mr. Halloran and the principal architect, the one declaring that he would go to his death rather than see a wall of his creation scribbled over with things like “A man is always the better for a friend,” and the other, with a tenaciousness basic to his personality, stubbornly leafing through a volume of familiar quotations and asking whose money was paying for this house? The young fellow, who had taken a master’s degree in English literature at Columbia University, had suggested that Mr. Halloran could have his maxims without doing extreme violence to the feelings of the architect, by favoring a more learned and poetic use of words; in any case, the student pointed out, the difference of meaning and intention between one maxim and another was almost non-existent, and there was no more vital change in conduct suggested by “You can’t take it with you” than “When shall we live if not now?”

Thus the gilded and elegantly presented suggestions on many of the walls of Mr. Halloran’s house; ineffectual, certainly — in spite of the framed copy of Kipling’s “If,” Mr. Halloran continued all his days to accumulate nothing except money — but to the people living in the big house it had become a matter of indifference that they dined, exhorted to “Let none save good companions grace this festive board” or slept, assured “Get up, get up for shame, the blooming morn Upon her wings presents the god unshorn,” or even “Hated by fools, and fools to hate, Be that my motto and my fate,” or mounted the stairs reading, “When shall we live if not now?”

When the student, carried away in a kind of Strawberry Hill intoxication, suggested that Mr. Halloran cause a grotto to be constructed on the grounds of the big house, Mr. Halloran's first anxiety — before even making any definite attempt to determine what a grotto might be, or might be for, or might require in the way of furnishings, since if it existed he meant to have it — was to ensure that proper and suitable mottos would be charmingly placed upon its walls. Mr. Halloran's dim notion of a grotto held that a grotto was enticingly cool in the oppressive warm weather, and his determination upon a grotto-motto followed eagerly; "Fear no more the heat of the sun," the grotto was to say in some manner, and upon this Mr. Halloran was firm.

The student maintained, maligning Horry Walpole mercilessly, that a grotto was no grotto at all unless it overlooked a lake, and Mr. Halloran, who had already an ornamental pool on the garden front of his house, set his builders doggedly to work to construct a lake at the far end of the grounds; at two points, in fact, it touched the wall. The grotto was built of rock near the lake, earth heaped over it, and grass and flowers trained to grow on top in sweet wild profusion, and on the rock wall of the grotto inside was written, in letters of blue touched with gilt, "Fear no more the heat of the sun." The entire air of the grotto was faintly that of a Strawberry Hill confection, and it would have been vastly improved by the presence of a party of ladies, resting there after their saunter through the shrubbery ("La, what a love of a wilderness we have covered," the air just breathed; "hark; are the gentlemen back from their riding?"); or at the very least a dainty repast of fruits and ices, with vine leaves for plates and the entire chorus from the King's Theatre to float, fairylike and singing, in pleasure boats over the small waves.

Perhaps not all of this was apparent to Mr. Halloran. He did not care for his grotto, after all, because it was damp, and the lake was an irritation to him, reminding him always of how messy it had been to construct, and he had never been able to bring his wife there and write her name among the rocks. Worst of all, after the swans which originally swam in the ornamental pool had bitten young Richard and two housemaids they were sent to endure a lonely disgrace on the grotto-lake, where they bred and quarrelled, and were an unending annoyance and menace to the gardeners.

As a child, Aunt Fanny, who had wandered unceasingly and with deep incoherent love over every part of the grounds enclosed by the wall, had spent some amount of time in the grotto, watching the water of the lake move under the soft wind, hiding from the swans, and catching any number of head-colds. Now, older and more susceptible to influenzas and grippes, she came to the grotto less often, and yet every now and then she was irresistibly moved to walk in that direction. During the later days of July, in fact, Aunt Fanny made a kind of pilgrimage to all of her favorite haunts, to admire once more her father’s handiwork and hope, somehow, to engrave upon her memory the well-loved spots which were so soon to dissolve utterly.

It should perhaps be recorded that the young master from Columbia University, who had hoped for so much from Mr. Halloran’s grotto and had even led himself to believe that Mr. Halloran would be of some use to him in return, in furthering his chosen career, the writing of plays in blank verse, did succeed in reading half of one scene of one play to Mr. Halloran and was rewarded by the offer of a position as file clerk in Mr. Halloran’s organization, from which he subsequently rose to the position of chief clerk, and got married.

Aunt Fanny came to the grotto in late July; it had been perhaps six months since she had last seen it, and she was struck at once with its air of mournful neglect; the roses still grew on its head, and the lake still moved gently under the soft wind, but the walls inside, which had been painted blue and green and gold, were faded, and the paint had chipped. A rock had cracked away from the entrance; "Fear no more the heat of the sun," had almost gone. The little rustic benches and tables which had been in the grotto were broken and rotted. Far out over the lake the swans, wholly wild now, moved in distant patterns and Aunt Fanny, hoping that they would not notice her moving, ducked quietly into the grotto and — as had been her custom long ago — set two or three of the rustic chairs and tables across the entrance so that the swans, if they pursued her, could not get in.

Aunt Fanny was really quite angry, angrier than she had ever been before in her life. She was angry at her sister-in-law for planning to wear a crown, and angry at her brother for not preventing it and for letting his wife look like a fool before the villagers. She was angry at Miss Ogilvie and Maryjane and Essex for their passivity and their humble subjection to Mrs. Halloran's every whim. She was most particularly angry, far and beyond any anger she had ever known before, at Mrs. Halloran, for having that morning given Aunt Fanny a carbon — and a carbon, Aunt Fanny thought furiously, not even the *first* copy — of a typewritten page headed INSTRUCTIONS and composed by Mrs. Halloran herself, with no reference to Aunt Fanny.

Sitting in the grotto, Aunt Fanny took out the paper and read it again.

Instructions

We all know what is going to happen on the night of August thirtieth. Certain measures must be taken for the general good, and each of us must preserve carefully this page of instructions as a constant reference. ANY

DEVIATION FROM THESE RULES WILL BE SUBJECT TO PUNISHMENT.

1. No person is to leave the big house, *for any reason whatsoever*, after four o’clock in the afternoon on August thirtieth.

2. Under no circumstances is any person from outside to *enter* the house after that time.

3. Since the servants and staff will be leaving the house by noontime, it is expected that no special demands will be made for their services, after midnight on August twenty-ninth.

4. Due to the unusual conditions which will be existing outside the house on the night of August thirtieth, it has been decided that precautions must be taken to protect windows, etc. All persons remaining in the house will begin work immediately after the departure of the servants at noon to board up, cover with blankets, and in all possible fashions barricade all windows and doors. Mrs. Halloran will make herself responsible for explaining this action to Mr. Halloran.

5. The entire assembly will gather in the drawing room at four o’clock on the afternoon of August thirtieth, for a light meal, and last-minute instructions from Mrs. Halloran.

6. No one is to leave the drawing room during the night of August thirtieth.

7. It is expected that all persons remaining in the big house will so attire themselves as to greet the morning suitably, although a certain consideration of the probable fluctuations in temperature, etc. must be observed. No one except Mrs. Halloran may wear a crown.

8. When the morning arrives, Mrs. Halloran will lead the way to the door, everyone following in sober procession. Mrs. Halloran will be the first to step outside.

9. Since, for all practical purposes, the present calendar will lose all significance after the night of August thirtieth, the following morning will be referred to, from this time on, as The First Day.

10. On The First Day, depending entirely upon circumstances at present only imperfectly understood (the state of vegetation, for instance, or the availability of water) tasks will be assigned by Mrs. Halloran as necessary.

11. No one is to leave the general vicinity of the house on The First Day, and no one is to alter, pick, eat, or in any way deface existing conditions, until the various prohibitions have been determined.

12. Mates will be assigned by Mrs. Halloran. Indiscriminate coupling will be subject to severe punishment.

13. On The First Day, and thereafter, wanton running, racing, swimming, play of various kinds, and such manifestations of irresponsibility will of course not be permitted. It is expected that all members of the party will keep in mind their positions as inheritors of the world, and conduct themselves accordingly. A proud dignity is recommended, and extreme care lest offense be given to supernatural overseers who may perhaps be endeavoring to determine the fitness of their choice of survivors.

“Father,” Aunt Fanny said into the cool dim underwater light of the grotto, “Father, what have you done to me?”

FRANCES, FRANCES HALLORAN.

Aunt Fanny, moving in fear, pressed herself back against the painted wall of the grotto; the blue and green and gold swam and curled around her, and she knew at once who was standing in the doorway.

13

"But I don't *want* to see anything," Gloria insisted crossly. "You can just get someone else to try, that's all. I'm simply not interested in gawking into that silly mirror any more."

"Dear," Mrs. Willow said soothingly, "try to be calm. Naturally you can't see anything anyway when you're so excited; try to relax and think of the rest of us."

"Perhaps the lovely countries of the future have lost their savor for Gloria," Mrs. Halloran said. "Perhaps Gloria is dreaming still of a world of wicker furniture and a job ushering in a movie theatre; perhaps Gloria longs to repudiate all of us."

Gloria turned, astonished, to stare at Essex, and he smiled a little, and shrugged.

"That *was* nasty," Fancy said to Gloria, "but I *told* you he would."

"Essex is primarily a politician," Mrs. Halloran said smoothly, smiling at Gloria. "His interest is thus in the good of the community as a whole; individual whims cannot be allowed to interfere, I think, with our general future."

"Essex is a pig," Fancy said, and put her hand into Gloria's. "Didn't I tell you, Gloria?"

"Essex," Mrs. Halloran said, "tell Gloria that she must look into the mirror, or risk my displeasure."

"Gloria?" said Essex, looking aside.

"There's nothing in there," Gloria said sullenly. "It's just a dirty old mirror covered with oil."

"Orianna, we will all see this country soon enough," Aunt Fanny put in. "It is not necessary to force Gloria to look again."

"I insist," Mrs. Halloran said, "that Gloria look into the mirror. I will not abide childish temperament, and I can hardly be expected to plan for all of us without adequate information. Gloria *must* see."

"I'm sick and tired of hearing you bully everybody," Fancy said flatly to her grandmother, and there was a long, waiting moment of silence. Then Maryjane spoke, weakly but stubbornly, "Fancy's right," she said. "You can just stop bossing *me* around, for one."

"Always so difficult to know what to do," Aunt Fanny murmured.

"Family quarrels," Miss Ogilvie agreed.

"Well, the way *I* see it," Mrs. Willow swept nobly into the fray, "everyone's gotten kind of on everyone else's nerves, and pretty soon if we don't look out we're *all* going to be sniping at each other — what I used to say to my gels, when they were young things pulling hair over some toy — what *I* used to say, birds in their little nests agree, and what *I*'d like to know — are we or are we not a pack of goddamned little birds stuck in the fanciest nest in town?"

"Such a gift for the apt phrase," Mrs. Halloran said. "I personally deplore this evidence of frayed nerves; we do not have much longer to wait, after all, and perhaps if we cannot contain ourselves we had better remain decently apart." She looked at Gloria. "I will only point out once more that I have undertaken a tremendous responsibility in arranging to lead you all into this new world, and I expect complete cooperation; Maryjane, I do not think you can rightly call it bossing you around when I ask that you exert your dubious talents to the utmost to ensure our mutual safety?"

"Just don't try *always* bossing me, is all," Maryjane said sullenly.

“Well, I guess we all know where we stand now,” the captain said heartily. “Mrs. Halloran, we all know the little lady didn’t mean to disobey you by not looking into the mirror for you; got to make allowances for a little female jealousy,” and he winked at Arabella, who giggled and said *“Honestly!”*

“I am satisfied,” Mrs. Halloran said. “In consideration of the captain’s sensible explanation of your motives, Gloria, we will excuse you for tonight.”

Gloria stood up and crossed the room to face Essex, who leaned against the back of Mrs. Halloran’s chair. “Essex,” she said, “I want to ask you once more, in front of everybody. There’s still time. They couldn’t stop us if we really wanted to go. We would have two weeks at least.”

“Don’t be silly, Gloria.” Essex stared down at his hands on the back of Mrs. Halloran’s chair. “I wouldn’t leave for anything in the world,” he said.

“I think you have been fairly answered, Gloria,” Mrs. Halloran said amiably. “Goodnight.”

“I think you must be really *crazy*,” Fancy said. She was sitting on the foot of Gloria’s bed, looking like a small demon in red pajamas. “I never saw my grandmother so close to *really* mad.”

“She’s a terrible old woman. But you were nice to speak up for me, Fancy.”

“And what do you think of Essex now?” Fancy giggled. “He’s a kind of a poor fish,” she said. “And I *told* you so.”

“Poor Essex,” said Gloria unreasonably.

“What I can’t figure,” Fancy said, pulling at a tuft in the blanket, “is why you tell me it’s so terrible outside and then make such a fool out of yourself asking Essex to come away with you, right in front of everybody.”

"Maybe I didn't really want him to leave. Maybe I only wanted him to *say* he would."

"Well, you know now," Fancy said unsympathetically. "She wouldn't let him go any more than she let the captain go."

"I've been wondering." Gloria sat up in bed and leaned forward to speak to Fancy earnestly. "All the time your grandmother keeps telling us how hard and how serious and how tremendous it is, our waiting here till it all happens, and how careful we've got to be, and how much responsibility she's got for seeing that we don't get ourselves into trouble and how we only have her to direct us and we have to do what she says and how we can't run and play and be happy in that nice country—"

"Well? We don't any of us know what it's going to be like, do we?"

"I do," Gloria said. "I've seen it in the mirror. And in the mirror it wasn't like that at all. In the mirror, your grandmother hasn't ever even *been* there."

Essex spoke boldly. "I believe, Orianna," he said, "that you have made a very grave mistake. I would never have believed that you could be so much in error."

"Are you positive that I am in error? Might you not have mistaken my motives?"

"I doubt it," Essex said with some irony. "You have seriously compromised your authority."

"By suppressing that girl's insolence? You had your choice, Essex; you had only to agree to accompany her."

"You tried to turn me out of the house once, I recall. Perhaps, having stayed then, I lost the ability to go."

Mrs. Halloran smiled, almost wistfully in the dusk of the garden. "It has already begun," she said. "Some months ago I told you that, once committed to the belief in Aunt Fanny's bright world, I was committed absolutely, but I would not go second to Aunt Fanny or to anyone else."

"Where will you be when you can no longer turn us out of your house?"

"It is my house now, and it will be my house then. I will not relinquish one stone of it in this world or any other. Everyone must be made to remember that, and to remember that I will not relinquish, either, one fraction of my authority. Perhaps," she added drily, "just as you have lost the ability to leave, I have lost the ability to serve."

"I assume then, that you have no real faith in the fondness any of the rest of us may feel for you?"

"None," said Mrs. Halloran.

Mrs. Halloran breakfasted with her husband the next morning, in order to explain to him the plans for the last day and night. When Gloria came into the breakfast room where the others were sitting, she was flushed, and bright-eyed, and almost running. "Listen," she began, as she came through the door, "I've got to *tell* you right away; I never expected anything *like* it. I was combing my hair just now — and I never even finished — look," and, laughing a little, she pushed her hands through her tangled hair, "I was combing my hair and looking in the mirror, naturally, and looking at myself and then without any kind of warning my own reflection just vanished from the glass and I was looking through again, and this time I was walking. I was right *inside*, you see; I was at the top of a little hill and down below I could see great fields of flowers, the red flowers I saw before, I think, and bluebells, and what must have been the same little stream, sparkling and bright and clean—"

"Any people?" It was Mrs. Willow, softly.

"No, only me. I started to run down through the grass and when I came to the foot of the hill I jumped right across the little stream and on the other side I ran into a little forest and I was barefoot, because I can still feel how the moss felt under my feet.” She stopped for breath, and they all sat quietly, listening. “And there were birds singing, and — oh, I wish I could remember, and make you all see how lovely it was! — and flowers, and everything was so gentle and warm and light; it is going to be so beautiful,” and she looked around at all of them with tears in her eyes. “I don’t think I ever really believed it, *completely*, before.” She turned, half-laughing, to Essex. “I don’t even hate *you*,” she said.

Essex rose gravely and took her hand to lead her to the table. “Your shrine,” he said, “will be set in a forest of ash trees. The oracle will manifest itself through the great movement of the leaves and the flights of clouds of starlings. I will cause to be constructed an image of yourself as a young goddess; offerings favorably received will be grapes and other sweet fruit, colored pebbles, and sweet grasses; acceptable sacrifices will include the otter and the young of soft-footed animals, such as the leopard.”

Gloria smiled at Essex. “I will help you build it,” she said. “I will show you the place where you can run down the hill and jump across the stream and go into the trees, and we will find an ash grove for our shrine.”

“Are there reeds in the stream?” the captain asked. “We will make young Fancy here a flute, and she can pipe for us.”

Fancy giggled. “You will all have to follow me and dance,” and Maryjane added shyly, “We can put flowers in our hair, those red ones, and dance under the trees.”

“Pagan abandon,” said Mrs. Willow indulgently.

“Pagan abandon, indeed,” said Mrs. Halloran dangerously from the doorway. “Can you not realize that you are *already* breaking my laws?”

14

TOWARD THE END of August the weather turned strange; various and unusual phenomena were reported from one end of the country to the other: freak snow storms, hurricanes, hail from a clear sky. Around the big house there were thunderstorms every afternoon, coming with heavy regularity, the clouds beginning to mass blackly on the horizon shortly after four o'clock, and moving with speed until in an hour the sky was black, and, by six, clear again. If the first Mr. Halloran had been alive he might have pointed out that although everyone talked about the weather, no one did anything about it; there were cases of death from heat and death from drowning and death from wind in each morning's newspaper, along with statements that the earth's surface was being lowered into the oceans at the rate of two inches a century; a volcano which had been dormant for five hundred years erupted, blasted its surrounding countryside, and fell asleep again forever.

A woman in Chicago was arrested for leading a polar bear clipped like a French poodle into a large downtown department store. A man in Texas won a divorce from his wife because she tore out the last chapter of every mystery story he borrowed from the library. A television set in Florida refused to let itself be turned off; until its owners took an axe to it, it continued, on or off, presenting inferior music and stale movies and endless, maddening advertising, and even under the axe, with its last sigh, it died with the praises of a hair tonic on its lips.

Mrs. Halloran's crown arrived, and she wore it to dinner. "I expect you will soon be accustomed to seeing me wear a crown," she said amiably down the dinner table. “After all, it is not the least of the adjustments we will be called upon to make.”

“It is less regal than I had anticipated,” Essex said politely.

“My sister-in-law,” Aunt Fanny told Essex, “has never been remarkable for her good taste or — what shall I call it? — family background; I think that tonight, however, she has surpassed herself.”

“I kind of like it,” Maryjane said. “I wish I’d thought of it first.”

“Like calls to like,” Aunt Fanny said darkly.

“Well, I don’t understand *this* at all,” Mrs. Willow said, looking in perplexity from one to another, “I just don’t understand all this carping and good taste talk; stands to reason, far as *I* can see, that Orianna here is going to be the boss from now on, the way she’s always been up to now, so why can’t she wear what she pleases? Well?” She stared at Aunt Fanny. “Been taking a little too much on yourself, haven’t you?” she demanded. “Maybe you thought *you* ought to be the queen and wear a crown?” and Mrs. Willow laughed shortly.

“My father—”

“*Your* father — I just guess we’ve heard about all we can take of your father — we don’t even know it *was* your father.”

“Mrs. Willow.” Aunt Fanny rose in white-faced indignation. “Are you suggesting that I am illegitimate?”

Mrs. Halloran put in smoothly, “Aunt Fanny, sit down, please. Augusta, do not speak again without my permission; your warm support makes me doubtful of my own cause. Essex — Maryjane — Miss Ogilvie — if my lunacy takes the form of desiring to wear a crown, will you deny me? May I not look foolish in tolerant peace? Gloria — may I continue to wear my crown?”

"Since you *do* ask me, Mrs. Halloran," Gloria said, "I think you look like a damned fool."

"Indeed. Thank you, Gloria, for not troubling to spare my feelings; I wonder if it is not too late for you to join your father?"

"And tell him you're a crazy old lady who sits at her dinner table with a crown on her head?"

"I *wish* you all found my wearing a crown less annoying." Mrs. Halloran touched the crown tenderly; it was not, after all, of any great magnificence; if she had not persisted in calling it a crown Mrs. Halloran might very well have been suspected of wearing only a plain gold band around her hair. "Gloria," she said, "you are not to call me a crazy old lady. I am no older than Mrs. Willow, I am certain that I am not crazy, and Aunt Fanny will remove any doubts you have as to my being a lady. In any case, you were discourteous."

"I apologize," Gloria said sincerely. "I *am* your guest, Mrs. Halloran, and it was not right of me to call you names. I certainly don't like your crown, but I do not think that I have any right to stop you from wearing it."

"Are we going to go on worrying about Mrs. Halloran's crown all night?" the captain demanded. "I thought we were supposed to be making plans for the party." He nudged Arabella. "The last orgy," he said.

"Wicked." Arabella giggled.

15

Miss Inverness was wearing grey taffeta, and Miss Deborah Inverness was dressed in pink chiffon. Both had wide hats, flowered, because they had been invited for a garden party. They arrived early, anxious to admire any preparations which had been made for the party, and got out of the village taxi before the entrance front of the house, were met by Gloria and Mrs. Willow, and escorted along the garden path, past the barbecue pit where coals were already heating, to the terrace where Mrs. Halloran sat in a great chair. Mrs. Halloran's golden canopy had been extended a little, to make it more of a general shelter and less a personal tribute to Mrs. Halloran, but she was wearing her golden dress and her crown. The Misses Inverness approached, hands out, and greeted Mrs. Halloran, Aunt Fanny, Maryjane, and Essex, in scrupulous order.

"It is nice to see you again," Miss Deborah said to Aunt Fanny, timidly, because Aunt Fanny had been so very distressing the last time they met; Miss Deborah and, to a lesser extent, her sister, were anxious to make Aunt Fanny understand that they bore no grudge; did not, indeed, believe in letting the sun go down on their wrath; "So *very* nice to see you again," Miss Deborah said, and then, perceiving Miss Ogilvie in the background, "Miss Ogilvie; this *is* nice."

"Do you like my crown?" Mrs. Halloran asked directly.

"A crown?" said Miss Inverness, bewildered. "I confess I had not thought of it as a crown, Mrs. Halloran. It looked to me like a substitute for a hat."

"It is a crown," Mrs. Halloran said complacently.

“Well, I am sure it is very becoming. Although, of course, for general wear …”

“*I* certainly intend to wear it generally,” Mrs. Halloran said.

“Perhaps not suitable for everybody … But very handsome, nevertheless. An heirloom?” Miss Inverness was puzzled for compliments.

“It will be.”

“Of considerable value, I imagine. I am of course not inquiring the price.”

“Of inestimable value,” Mrs. Halloran said.

“Yes. You carry it well, Mrs. Halloran. My sister and I,” Miss Inverness went on to Aunt Fanny, “were brought up to believe in nobility of character, and to disdain baubles of rank. But we would certainly not impose our opinions upon others.”

“Not, at least,” Aunt Fanny said, “on my brother’s wife. Who was clearly brought up to value baubles of rank and let nobility of character alone.”

“Are you still talking about my crown?” Mrs. Halloran asked.

“About your regal bearing, Mrs. Halloran.”

“And what it covers,” Aunt Fanny put in maliciously.

Mrs. Halloran laughed. “It covers a regal position,” she said. “Had you ever thought of wearing a crown, Miss Inverness?”

Miss Inverness stiffened. “In Paradise … a princely diadem …” she said. “Although my father was an agnostic.”

“It comforts me,” Mrs. Halloran said, “to reflect upon the Misses Inverness inheriting their angelic crowns, but I must spare a moment’s pity for the late Mr. Inverness. I remember him.”

“Religious discussion is not for the drawing room, Mrs. Halloran. My father determined his own afterlife.”

“You chide me, Miss Inverness. But I am still sorry for your father.”

“*My* father,” Aunt Fanny said, anxious to avert what seemed to her a rising crisis, “was a splendid man. I recall that he mentioned your father, Miss Inverness, most affectionately.”

“In any case,” Miss Deborah said gently, “it does not look so *very* much like a crown, sister. A simple gold band—”

Miss Inverness glanced at her sister, and then said firmly, “How perfectly beautiful the grounds look, Mrs. Halloran. You must be very proud of them,” but Mrs. Halloran had turned to greet the schoolteacher and Mr. Armstrong the postmaster.

At first the lawn looked pleasingly empty under the japanese lanterns, with the Misses Inverness strolling with Miss Ogilvie, admiring the bushes, and then Mr. Armstrong and the schoolteacher, greeting the Misses Inverness and wandering aside to look briefly on the sundial, and then a group of the villagers who had arrived together in one car, and straggled out onto the lawn. Mrs. Willow turned over her position at the entrance front to Arabella, and joined the captain in the large tent on the lawn from which champagne was to be served. The beef roasts sizzled and splattered over the barbecue pit, and Julia was sent to supervise the setting out of additional food in the second tent, near the barbecue pit. Mrs. Halloran remained in her chair on the terrace, and each guest was brought to greet her individually. Aunt Fanny and Miss Ogilvie began gradually to steer the guests toward the champagne tent, where Mrs. Willow reassured doubters about the intoxicating properties of champagne, which, although largely unknown to the villagers, was, Mrs. Halloran had thought, the only appropriate beverage to serve. The captain, in contrivance with Essex and without Mrs. Halloran’s knowledge, had laid in a great stock of beer and this combination, of beer with champagne, may have been responsible for the general feeling of well-being which was spreading swiftly along the lawn.

Essex and Gloria had seemingly determined to avoid one another. Gloria remained at the entrance and Essex hovered over Mrs. Halloran, running small errands and supervising, like a general from a point of vantage, the small skirmishes which made the great movements of the battle on the lawn. When Gloria brought guests to greet Mrs. Halloran she moved silently past Essex, and Mrs. Halloran, amused, noticed each small gesture of mutual indifference, but did not comment.

The general movement on the lawn was clockwise, guests coming down from the terrace after greeting Mrs. Halloran, entering into the circular turn of the crowd, going past the sundial, admiring the view and the japanese lanterns from midway down the great lawn, which was as far as the party had strayed so far, then on into the champagne tent and out again, to continue the same vague round. The Misses Inverness, each having touched a glass of champagne, sat to one side of the general group on chairs provided for them by Essex, and old Mrs. Peabody, mother to the Mr. Peabody who kept the Carriage Stop Inn, had been seated nearby; little groups of people paused to speak to them and moved on.

The villagers, who knew one another intimately at home, now behaved toward one another more formally, under Mrs. Halloran’s eye. Mrs. Peabody, who knew to the day which funeral had last brought to public view the blue serge suit of Mr. Straus, the butcher, and why the younger Watkins boy had come after all, and how much Mrs. Halloran had been overcharged for the champagne, was highly amused by the whole party and had been heard to observe that the first Mr. Halloran had always had too much sense to invite the villagers to his house. “And,” she added to the captain, who was bringing her a glass of champagne, “in his time, *we* would have had too much sense to *come*.”

“Baubles of rank,” Miss Inverness observed to a little group. “Baubles of rank and pride of place.”

“My father always took such an interest in all of you.” Aunt Fanny beamed tenderly upon Mr. Straus, the butcher, and Mrs. Otis, who gave dancing lessons. “He thought of you as … personal *friends*, I really believe. He was a fine man.”

“A fine man,” Mrs. Otis said obediently, and Mr. Straus nodded heavily.

“I remember,” Aunt Fanny said, “when he first spoke of building the big house, he thought at once of you villagers. ‘We must take care of them always,’ he said. ‘They will look to us for guidance and security.’”

“Of course we do,” said Mrs. Otis, and Mr. Straus nodded.

“I think you will have to concede,” Aunt Fanny went on, “that we in the big house have always treated you well. Even now — our only thought in having this expensive lawn party was for *your* pleasure. My father, I think, would be pleased.”

“I am sure he would,” Mrs. Otis said, and Mr. Straus nodded.

“Of course,” Aunt Fanny said, “and believe me, I am most reluctant to bring it up, but of course, you will see at once that, no matter how fond we have grown of all of you, we can hardly, *now*, persuade my father to include you. I am sure he will regret it as much as any of us; I am sure that losing you grieves him bitterly.”

“He was a fine man,” Mrs. Otis said, bewildered, and Mr. Straus nodded. “He was a man who liked a good roast of beef,” Mr. Straus said.

“Miss Ogilvie?” said Essex politely, “Miss Ogilvie as a child was violated by a band of Comanche Indians in a lonely farmhouse on Little Wicked Bend River. It has left her taciturn.”

"Good heavens!" Miss Deborah turned her head slightly to give Miss Ogilvie a quick, fleeting look; "I've known Miss Ogilvie for years," Miss Deborah said, "and she never breathed a word."

"It's not the sort of thing one mentions, you know," Essex said. "*I* only learned it quite by accident."

"Poor Miss Ogilvie; if we had only known, my sister and I, perhaps we could have done something. Ah … comforted her, perhaps. Do you think I might mention it to her?"

"Under no circumstances," said Essex with some haste. "I believe it would be extremely harmful, *extremely*. After all, the memory has been successfully buried for so long …"

"But bringing these things out into the open air — sister!" Miss Deborah called, "I really *must* tell you; Mr. Essex has just given me the most *alarming* information. Poor Miss Ogilvie! And we never knew!"

"I am doing all I can to make your party a success," Essex said, coming up to Mrs. Halloran on the terrace.

"All it lacks, actually," Mrs. Halloran said, "is the head of the Cheshire Cat looking down on us from the sky." She looked from the terrace onto the sizable crowd now moving more freely on the lawn. The sundial stood out clearly, since no one went really close to it, and it stood by itself, a small island, in the moving people. From the terrace the sound of voices was a little distant, murmuring, with now and then the clear round bellow of Mrs. Willow, saying, "The little bubbles tickle your nose," or, "The drink of angels, I promise you; fit for any king."

"If we had a Cheshire Cat," Essex said, pleased, "Mrs. Willow could be the Duchess."

"As I recall, the Duchess was under sentence of execution for boxing the Queen's ears." Mrs. Halloran laughed. "Off with their heads!" she said.

Gloria came up behind Mrs. Halloran and said, not looking at Essex, "They sent me to tell you that the barbecue was ready, and everything is ready to be served in the barbecue tent."

"Essex," Mrs. Halloran said, "can you communicate with these people?"

Essex came from the terrace down into the crowd. "The food is ready," he said to Mr. Straus. "Follow the path around to the left."

"Righto," Mr. Straus said. "Happen to know the quality of the meat." He took Aunt Fanny on one arm and Mrs. Otis on the other arm and made purposefully for the barbecue; Essex moved on, urging the Misses Inverness into action, turning people toward the right path, nudging, stirring, like a sheep dog turning a flock of sheep toward the fold: "The barbecue is ready," he said over and over, "follow the path to the left," and obediently, the people standing with champagne cups in their hands listened, nodded, and moved slowly and talking toward the barbecue pit and the second tent. "The old lady has done herself proud," Mr. Atkins from the hardware store said to the schoolteacher, and the schoolteacher, who had never tasted champagne before, nodded hazily and giggled.

"Now come on everybody," came the great voice of Mrs. Willow, who had tasted champagne before, "fill up your cups, and then eat hearty — it may be the last meal you ever get." People laughed, and asked one another what was in the salad dressing, and handed around plates; someone gave the schoolteacher a full plate of meat and salad and rolls and two little chocolate cupcakes and the schoolteacher, giggling and swaying, held it precariously for a minute or so and then set it down on a chair and went after more champagne.

"That's a good piece of meat," Mr. Straus said to Mrs. Willow, and Mrs. Willow slapped him on the shoulder and said richly, "You'll never eat better again, so go at it, my boy."

“Delicious,” said Miss Inverness, tasting delicately of her potato salad. She and her sister held identical plates, with tiny servings at which they were nibbling with tiny bites. “Everything always tastes so much better out of doors,” said Miss Deborah. She sighed, changing her plate from one hand to the other, and glanced longingly at the lighted windows of the big house.

It was growing darker; faces which had a few minutes ago been clearly visible were fading, so that only in the light of the great barbecue fire was an occasional countenance familiar, reddened and in many cases dirty. Mr. Straus hung lovingly over the man who, white-jacketed and sober, went on endlessly carving thin curling slices of meat onto a huge wooden platter; beyond him the fires flared and spattered when the barbecue sauce went onto the coals, and beyond the fires the silent darkness of the rose garden and the farther trees descended, hiding successfully the youngest Watkins boy and Julia Willow, who had taken a bottle of champagne and decided to skip dinner.

“Cuts like butter,” Mr. Straus said, watching the carver with splendid approval.

On the terrace Mrs. Halloran stirred wearily, eyeing her untouched plate. “I have no appetite,” she said. “Being a queen is a very public penance.”

“Perhaps I could get you a little something from the kitchen?” Miss Ogilvie, hovering solicitously, made little futile dabs at her own plate, clearly unwilling to seem to be enjoying her food.

Mrs. Halloran sighed. “Run along and get yourself some champagne,” she said. “Dream of pressing your own grapes.”

When Miss Ogilvie had gone scurrying down toward the champagne tent, where some few revellers still lingered, Mrs. Halloran rose. She looked once down the long fine sweep of the lawn, where the sundial was still faintly visible, white against the dark grass, and glanced at the pale shape of the tent, where faint laughter persisted. From the barbecue pit she could hear voices raised, the sounds of fire, and the touching of forks against plates; over it all Mrs. Willow urging, “Eat hearty, friends, you’ll never see as good again.” Mrs. Halloran set down her plate and opened the great door; she had set her chair against it as though guarding the house. She went into the black and white tiled entrance hall; “When shall we live if not now?” she read over the staircase, and it seemed all at once an echo of Mrs. Willow. Moving quickly, Mrs. Halloran went into the right wing where Mr. Halloran sat before his fire. His dinner tray was on the small table near him, untouched; “Nurse?” Mr. Halloran said, not turning around, “Nurse, I have not had my dinner yet.”

“Good evening, Richard,” Mrs. Halloran said.

“Orianna?” said Mr. Halloran, peering uncertainly around the wing of his chair. “Orianna, I have not been given my dinner yet. Nurse has not given me my dinner.”

“She has probably been tempted by the party outside,” Mrs. Halloran said, “but do not distress yourself, Richard; I am perfectly able to give you your dinner, and we will let Nurse celebrate while she can.”

“I don’t want oatmeal,” Mr. Halloran said pettishly. “If it’s oatmeal you must send it back and have them make me something else.”

Mrs. Halloran lifted the silver cover from a bowl; “It’s two splendid soft-cooked eggs,” she said. “And I believe a nice hot broth, and a pretty little pudding.”

“But Nurse is not here to feed me,” Mr. Halloran said crossly.

“Then you will see how well *I* can do it.” Mrs. Halloran tied the napkin under his chin, and opened the eggs carefully. Then she moved the nurse’s low stool beside him, and sat down with the tray beside her. “Eggs first?” she asked.

“I want the broth,” Mr. Halloran said.

“I think the broth may be too warm, Richard.” Mrs. Halloran took up a little of the broth and blew on it to cool it. “Now,” she said, and put the spoon to her husband’s mouth. He accepted it obediently, and swallowed, and Mrs. Halloran took another spoonful and held it ready.

“It’s too hot,” Mr. Halloran said. “Nurse *always* gives me my eggs first.”

“Then we’ll try the eggs,” Mrs. Halloran said.

“I want the pudding,” Mr. Halloran said at once.

“Then we’ll try the pudding.”

“Why was I not sent oatmeal? They *knew* I wanted oatmeal tonight.”

“They sent up a very pleasant dinner, Richard. Eggs, and broth, and pudding.”

“Then *feed* it to me,” Mr. Halloran said. “Nurse is *never* this slow.”

“Open your mouth, then.”

“Are they having a party?” Mr. Halloran said, when he had finished his mouthful.

“A big party,” Mrs. Halloran said. “Ready with another spoonful.”

“Why am I not going to the party?”

“If you eat every bite of your dinner, Richard, I will tell you about it, what everyone is doing.”

“Are they going to ring the bells? Over the carriage house?”

“A splendid idea. Open your mouth, Richard. I think we must really ring the bells.”

“Who has come to this party?”

“All the people from the village. The party is for them, a treat. Right now they are around the barbecue pit, having their dinners just as you are having your dinner, and they are drinking champagne; later, after you finish all your dinner, I will bring you a glass of champagne as a treat for you, too."

"No more egg," Mr. Halloran said. "I want pudding."

"Pudding, then. We have strung lanterns back and forth across the long lawn, little colored lights along the lawn. There is a corner of the terrace where we are going to put musicians, musicians I brought all the way from the city, and all the people will be dancing out on the grass under the lanterns."

"And drinking champagne."

"And drinking champagne. Since the night air is far too cool for you, I thought I would bring you into the drawing room and you may sit by the big window and watch. There, now, the pudding is gone; you ate your pudding very nicely, Richard."

"It reminds me of when Lionel died, and we rang the bells all night."

"More egg now? You will hear the bells, I promise you. And you will sit in the drawing room and drink a glass of champagne and watch the villagers dancing under the colored lights."

"I think not." Mr. Halloran sighed tiredly. "I would rather stay here. I can hear the bells, you know, and I think colored lights would be too bright for my eyes." He hit his hand irritably against the arm of his chair. "I *wish* Nurse would come back," he said. "Do you know, I have not had my dinner yet? Nurse went off without giving me my dinner, and I do not think that is in any way proper. You must find Nurse at once and tell her I want my dinner."

"Mr. Essex." Miss Inverness bore down heavily, glass in hand. "Mr. Essex, I must really ask an explanation from you. This distressing story which my sister has repeated to me—"

"Distressing indeed, Miss Inverness. I cannot tell you how we all deplore it."

"I think it most thoughtless and — yes, even *tasteless* — of Mrs. Halloran. One does not expect to meet, in nice houses, people of unsuitable background; I have permitted my sister to become intimate with Miss Ogilvie, even help her with small purchases in our little emporium. I think it very hard that we were not told of Miss Ogilvie's character."

"Surely not a story for general circulation," Essex murmured.

"Certainly not. I assure you that I will be the last to repeat it. But, Mr. Essex, *ladies* should know. One assumes, all too frequently, that the mere presence of a woman in a respectable family is enough to ensure that her reputation is above reproach. It will be very difficult, now, to know how to speak to Mrs. Halloran."

"It has *always* been difficult," Essex said, "to know how to speak to Mrs. Halloran."

"All I can say, Mr. Essex, is that Mrs. Halloran Senior would never have allowed a person of questionable character to enter her house. This is all very hard on her memory, and I shall tell Mrs. Halloran so when I say goodnight; naturally, my sister and I cannot remain at this delightful party. We stayed only long enough to take a little refreshment, in courtesy to our hosts."

"I hope you will not find it necessary to say anything to Miss Ogilvie."

"We were brought up ladies, Mr. Essex. My mother was not one to reproach an erring sister for her misfortunes. But further association will be, of course, out of the question."

"I believe, on the whole, that it will," Essex said.

"Good night, Mr. Essex."

“Before you leave,” Essex said, lowering his voice, “there is something more I really *must* tell you. Since your association with this house is to be so irrevocably severed, you will want, I think, to hear the unsavory truth about Aunt Fanny? As you know, like Miss Ogilvie, she has never married.”

Miss Inverness gasped. “Not Miss Halloran *too?*”

“Similar, although the circumstances were different,” Essex said gravely. “I myself find Aunt Fanny’s story the more pitiable. Do you recall the year that Aunt Fanny spent abroad? It was given out that she was in Switzerland.”

“I remember,” said Miss Inverness faintly.

“In actuality,” Essex said, “she had been captured by pirates off the Mediterranean coast. It was upwards of seven months before a British man of war tracked them down and wrested Aunt Fanny from their clutches. A most horrible fate.”

Miss Inverness sipped from her glass, her hand shaking. “Horrible, indeed,” she said weakly; in the darkness she peered at Essex, leaning forward and almost whispering. “The worst,” she said. “I suppose it *happened?*”

“Alas,” Essex said. “May I bring you more champagne?”

Miss Inverness drained her glass. “I think yes,” she said. “We *must* leave, my sister and I, but at the moment I think I am slightly ill.”

“Aunt Fanny,” Essex said, coming up beside her where she stood in the darkness outside the champagne tent, “Aunt Fanny, will you do me a favor?”

“Essex? Yes, certainly, my dear.”

“If Miss Inverness asks you whether you were ever captured and held prisoner by pirates off the Mediterranean coast, I want you to say yes.”

"To say what? Yes? All right, surely, Essex. I think that will be splendid. Has anyone seen my brother tonight?"

"He was to have been moved into the drawing room, so he could watch the party."

"I daresay his wife forgot. I must really go and see to it."

"A known murderer," Essex said happily to Miss Deborah. "Mrs. Halloran has been sheltering him from the law, or, worse, the outraged relatives of his victims. 'Captain' is of course an assumed name."

"Who—" gasped Miss Deborah.

"Whom did he kill? Old women, mostly. Mutilated them in a most shocking fashion."

"A … a sex murderer?"

Essex shrugged. "One can hardly *ask*," he said.

"Now the proper carving of meat is an art," Mr. Straus said heavily. "It takes a love of flesh. I've seen a man carve a roast of beef as though he hated every inch of it, and you can't tell me *that* meat made fair eating."

"Drink, brother?" asked Mrs. Willow.

"I have done too well already, ma'am. But yes, another small drop. If you see a man take up a piece of meat with care and fondness like he was lifting a baby, now, *that* man can carve meat. I remember a fellow — married man, of course — we used to have in the shop many years ago—"

Hidden in the rose garden, Julia began to cry drunkenly. "I just don't know why it's got to end," she said.

"What's got to end?" The youngest Watkins boy handed her a lighted cigarette and laughed. "I never been in here before," he said. "*Look* at those roses; I bet it costs plenty to keep this place going. But now I know the way," he said to Julia, "I figure I could get back here sometimes. Nights, sometimes. And you can always sneak off and get down to the village. So what's got to end?"

Lying in the grass under the roses, Julia laughed, and cried, and laughed.

"Captain," said the schoolteacher, moving up to him with a wavering intensity, "I hope you won't think me bold?"

"Not at all," said the captain. He glanced over his shoulder to the entrance of the champagne tent, clearly decided that it was too far to make in one leap, and submitted to the schoolteacher's firm clutch on his sleeve.

"I want to hear about your adventures."

"Adventures?" said the captain.

The schoolteacher laughed giddily. "For someone like *me*, little me," she said, fumbling, "*you* know, reading nothing but *books?* It really *means* something to man a meet who's had *real* adventures. Real real real real real real real *real* adventures," and she sighed.

"But I am afraid that I—"

"Like carrying struggling maidens across your saddle — across your *horse*'s saddle, I mean, across your saddle across your horse across some desert. Screaming and struggling and begging to get away because she *knows* what's going to happen, and screaming fruitlessly for help and struggling and begging and scratching at you with her fingernails and pleading—"

"Rarely," said the captain. "Most of my ladies come willingly. I have little use for any other kind."

" — and keeping her prisoner for long moonlight nights in a satin tent, with cushions." The schoolteacher sighed. "Turkish delight," she said. "Shishkebab. Ropes of pearls."

"Yes," the captain said, edging sideways. "Always ropes of pearls."

"The desert moon," the schoolteacher said, but he had gotten away.

“I was *what?*” Miss Ogilvie demanded, her mouth open.

Miss Deborah leaned over, and whispered.

“What?” said Miss Ogilvie.

“I’m *sure* you won’t mind my mentioning it, dear. I only hoped—”

“Why,” said Miss Ogilvie, her eyes shining, “how perfectly *marvelous!*”

“Well, of course, *I* didn’t know who he was,” Maryjane said earnestly. She and Arabella were sitting in a quiet corner of the terrace, not far from the spot prepared for the musicians, who were having their dinner. Maryjane and Arabella had set their empty dinner plates down on the stone floor and occasionally they stopped Mrs. Willow, who was by now travelling luxuriously among the guests with a bottle of champagne under each arm, and asked her to fill their glasses; “Here,” Mrs. Willow was shouting, “Cupbearer of the gods!”

“And he didn’t *say* anything?” Arabella asked.

“Well, what *could* he say? It was just like a movie, honestly. He came into the library one day and of course I was there at the desk and I thought the *minute* I saw him that he looked kind of unusual and sort of … well, not the least bit like the kind of fellows who used to be pestering me all the time for dates and things.”

“*I* saw a movie where—”

“And I said to myself,” Maryjane went on overwhelmingly, “that this was certainly the most *gentlemanly* fellow I had seen for a long time even though his name kind of put me off at first — Lionel, *you* know, and when he said Lionel I honestly thought at first I would have died, because after all how many men are called Lionel? But of course when it turned out he only wanted to use the reference books I was *sure* because who else would be looking things up? You see a lot of people in a library and if I do say so myself you get kind of particular, because *naturally* they were always around asking me for dates and things."

"But if it was love at first—"

"Well, of course no, dear. When *you* get married you'll know more about these things, I always think. We just kind of got to talking, because it turned out they were binding the volume he wanted — and remind me someday to tell you about the cute fellow from the bindery, because *he* was one you had to see to believe, honestly — and *I* said why didn't he come back in a day or so, never thinking he *would*, of course. He wanted to be a poet then, you know, but of course we came right back here when we were married, because of course I wouldn't *dream* of alienating his family; after all, I always think, what are families *for?* So of course he *did* come back the next day and the first thing I knew he was asking me to go roller-skating with him and *I* said—"

Mr. Atkins of the hardware store, and Mr. Peabody who kept the Carriage Stop Inn, and Mr. Armstrong the postmaster, sat on folding chairs in a little group somewhat aside from the general crowd. They still held plates on their knees, and they ate slowly and methodically.

"That was when my father had the shop." Mr. Atkins said. He waved generously with his fork. "Nothing here *then*," he said.

Mr. Peabody nodded. "The Inn was a real carriage stop those days," he agreed.

"I remember them digging the foundations," Mr. Atkins said, "me, just a little kid. I used to hang around up here watching."

"There was a fellow got killed, wasn't there?" asked Mr. Peabody.

"Got run over by a wagon. I was here — just a little kid. I remember the old man come over and looked down at this fellow lying there and he said

— I swear I can hear him now — *he* said, ‘Get him out of the way,’ he said, ‘this is where the terrace has got to go.’ I can hear him now.”

“He wasn’t one who cared a lot about other people getting in his way,” Mr. Peabody said.

“I remember,” Mr. Atkins said, “there was a little carnival came to town, two or three little wagons and a pony ride, maybe it was, and a fortune teller and what not; well, they set up their kind of little camp right down there where that rose affair is now, and folks were coming around, buying tickets and looking at the fortune teller — come to think of it, there was a tattooed man along with them — and they were giving the kids a pony ride, and *he* comes raging out with his gang of bullies and chased the whole pack right off down the road. ‘Let ’em stay off *my* land,’ he says, ‘let ’em stay off *my* land.’”

“And then he built the wall,” Mr. Peabody said.

“There was some around here didn’t care much for *that* wall,” Mr. Atkins said, grinning, and Mr. Armstrong, the postmaster, shook his head with a tired old anger.

“Once,” he said, “I could walk you all around there where my father’s fences used to be. My father’s farm, and then one morning my father turned around and there was his farm, *inside* the old man’s wall, and here my father always supposed it was going to be *outside*. ‘Oh, no,’ says the old man, ‘it’s *my* land now — leastways, it’s inside *my* wall, and try and get it back.’ My father thought he ought to take it to the law, and my mother thought so too, but come to find out, there wasn’t a lawyer anywhere around wasn’t working for the old man, and so all my father could do was sneak in sometimes and walk around what used to be his farm, checking away on his fences, and then the old man, he had to have a lake, and there’s my father’s farm now, under ten feet of water. ‘Take it back, for all I care,’ the old man says once to my father, '*I* don't want it any more. Just go take it back. Course, it'll take some *draining*.' Then he figured to make it all up by sending me to high school in the city." Carefully Mr. Armstrong speared a piece of meat on his fork and put it into his mouth.

"Mr. Armstrong," said Aunt Fanny, coming up with quick little steps, "Mr. Peabody, Mr. Atkins — do you all have everything you want? You mustn't hesitate to ask for anything — we would be very much offended if you went away hungry, you know. My father always hated to see anyone leave his table with an appetite, and, after all, this party *is* in your honor; my father would be the first to say that you deserved a good treat."

"He was a fine man," said Mr. Armstrong tiredly.

"A fine man," Mr. Peabody agreed.

"Oh, yes," said Mr. Atkins. "A very fine man."

Fancy slipped softly through the great doorway and sat herself quietly down on the step beside her grandmother. "Is it nearly over?" she asked.

"About half," said Mrs. Halloran.

"They look like pigs and weasels and rats," Fancy said.

"They will be soon gone."

"Why do you bother to give them all that good food and stuff to drink?"

"One last indulgence. Now we can remember them as being happy and carefree."

"How much longer is there?"

"An hour or so, I expect."

"*Not* the party," Fancy said.

"Oh, I see. About twenty hours, I imagine. Perhaps a little less."

"Do you think they will know what is happening?"

"I doubt it. For a minute, perhaps, no longer."

"Will it hurt them?"

“I trust not.”

“Will they be frightened?”

“I suppose they will, for a minute or so; there will not really be very much time, I hope, for being frightened. In any case, people are not really frightened until they know what is happening to them, and I hope all of this will be quick enough for them not to know.”

“*Does* it happen quickly?”

“I can hardly say; it has never happened before, to my knowledge. I can only believe, in mercy, that it will not take very long.”

“Do they know now?”

“I hardly think so.”

“What would they do if they *did* know?”

“From what I have seen of them, I suspect nothing. They would stand with their jaws hanging, looking at each other and grinning in a foolish fashion.”

“I wish we could watch it when it happens.”

“I think, on the whole, that it is not the kind of sight fit for our eyes, or any others. I cannot imagine living on, with that picture before me.”

“When can I have your crown?”

Mrs. Halloran turned slowly and looked at Fancy. From down among the crowd, over the beginning sound of the music, came Mrs. Willow’s voice, no longer shouting anything intelligible; on the outskirts of the crowd a small group was singing, unrecognizably; there were still sounds of activity around the barbecue pit, and from the champagne tent great bursts of laughter.

“When I am dead,” Mrs. Halloran said.

Miss Inverness was crying miserably in a corner of the champagne tent onto the shoulder of Mr. Straus, the butcher. She had been brought up a lady, Miss Inverness was wailing, and taught the right way of doing things and how to comport herself in a ladylike fashion, and where was her mother now? “She was the finest woman who ever lived,” said Miss Inverness, sobbing, and Mr. Straus nodded sympathetically and patted her gently on the back. “*You*’re fine, too,” Miss Inverness said, “I can always tell, always tell. You’re the finest woman who ever lived.”

Miss Deborah had the captain by one arm and the schoolteacher, somehow still navigating, had him by the other.

“You’re a wicked wicked man,” Miss Deborah screamed joyfully, “you’re a pirate and I have been taken prisoner and I bet you won’t *ever* let me go!”

“Screaming and begging and pleading in a silken tent,” the schoolteacher said, rolling out the words gloriously. “Screaming and pleading to be saved from a fate worse than death!”

“Ladies—” said the captain.

“*Is* it worse than death?” asked Miss Deborah, conversationally, leaning around the captain to look at the schoolteacher. “I always wondered.”

“Ladies,” said the captain helplessly, and they swung him between them out onto the lawn and around in great circles, beginning a dance which caught up the others, moving and cavorting and shouting behind them; Mrs. Otis, who taught dancing, attempted a complicated step with Mr. Atkins, and both of them fell, laughing and struggling, onto the grass, and Miss Ogilvie, dancing along behind in a lonely complex waltz, fell over them; in the champagne tent Mr. Straus stirred to the sound of the music and laughter, and Miss Inverness, her face buried in his shoulder, hiccuped. “I never knew how fine she was,” Miss Inverness said. “Now, I could kill myself.”

Under the colored lights they moved in a great circle, leaping, howling, hurling glasses, embracing. Essex slipped down into the darkness of the crowd and joined hands with Gloria; silently they followed the pulls of other hands against theirs, turning in a great unending circle. “Dance, brothers, dance,” Mrs. Willow shouted, and Aunt Fanny, her hair down over her eyes, took hands with the youngest Watkins boy. Maryjane and Arabella ran down from the terrace, laughing, and fell into the crowd; Julia was doing a cakewalk with Mr. Peabody. “Drink, sisters, drink,” Mrs. Willow yelled, and they went around and around, trampling the grass and shattering cups and glasses under their feet; “Repent, children, repent,” Mrs. Willow howled, and the dance caught her up and she whirled and kicked, holding a champagne bottle under each arm.

On the terrace Mrs. Halloran in her great chair, and Fancy on the step below her, watched in indulgent silence.

Suddenly Miss Ogilvie broke from the dance, and threw herself up the terrace steps. “I don’t *want* them to go,” she said wildly, “they’re kind and nice and they’re happy and you *can’t* let them go.” She held out her arms to Mrs. Halloran, and Mrs. Halloran laughed and shrugged. “*Please* let them come with us,” Miss Ogilvie begged, and Mrs. Halloran laughed. “You can’t, you can’t, you *can’t*,” Miss Ogilvie said, her voice breaking, and then, turning suddenly, she held up her arms; the music was silenced and the dancers hesitated and then, seeing Miss Ogilvie, turned their faces to her and waited.

“My dear dear dear friends,” Miss Ogilvie said, “*please* listen to me, please *please* listen. You are going away from here tonight to a dreadful and terrible catastrophe and none of you will live unless you stay here with us, you will *die*; please *please* stay. Believe me, I beg of you — how can I make you believe me? It is too late now to repent or change your ways or find another place to hide; *we* have let things go most miserably — can any of you *believe* me?” Briefly, there was a little scatter of applause. “No,” Miss Ogilvie said, more softly, “will you just *trust* me? I don’t want to see you die, not any of you, and you just simply will *not* understand and how can I tell you? It was even hard for *me* to believe at first, and how can I begin to tell you?”

Below, on the lawn, people stirred restlessly, and spoke among themselves, and then Julia, calling from the crowd, said, “Come on, everyone, *we* want to dance.”

“Please, *please* listen,” Miss Ogilvie said, but Mrs. Halloran said “Music,” to the little orchestra, and the music began again.

“But you must not *go*,” Miss Ogilvie cried, and Mrs. Halloran, laughing, said to Fancy, “I have known hostesses like this, who could not bear to see the end of their parties.”

“Dance, brothers,” Mrs. Willow called. “Tomorrow we’ll be sober!” The circle went round and round, hands joined, voices raised in what might have been song, feet tangling and slipping, and Mrs. Willow was drinking champagne out of the bottles she carried. On the terrace Mrs. Halloran sat silently. Then, without warning, it was finished. The dancers stopped, wondering at one another, pushing back their hair, gasping now for breath. People began to look for one another, and speak of going home; around the circle went a whisper about the time. Someone found Miss Inverness asleep in a corner of the champagne tent, her pocketbook beside her and her wide hat thrown over her, and carried her charitably to a car to drive her home. Miss Deborah, giggling wildly and clinging to the captain, was pried away and taken with her sister. Julia and the schoolteacher, saying goodnight tearfully to one another, were parted. The guests departed swiftly, melting around the corner of the terrace to the entrance front where their cars were parked, moving in the darkness with a sudden shocking recollection of where they were. Not one of the villagers said goodbye to Mrs. Halloran.

16

THE SUNDIAL SHOWED no hours at night. Thanks to the champagne, Mrs. Willow slept soundly, her dreams untroubled save for a certain buried nagging anticipation of illness in the morning. Julia cried herself to sleep, railing at the cruelty which afflicted her young life. Arabella and Maryjane put their hair up together, took each a sleeping pill, and dreamed jointly of tall dark handsome men. Fancy slept with the exquisite sleep of a child; Miss Ogilvie, determined to meet the new world clean, washed out her underwear and stockings, inefficiently because of the champagne, and finally fell into bed fully dressed. Aunt Fanny sat by her window, wearing her mother's diamonds, and looked with grief and longing at the garden by night. Essex and the captain sat very late in the library, telling lies about themselves and confessing long-forgotten sins. Mrs. Halloran, her crown set in its case on her dressing table, was unable to compose herself for sleep. She went once around the house, nodding to Essex and the captain in the library, opening the door upon Mr. Halloran sleeping fitfully and calling on his nurse. Finally, she sat down at her desk to straighten out her last few accounts, looking over bills she would never pay, adding debts she would never collect.

During the night the wind rose, although it was still very hot. There was a strong sense of thunder in the air, and the wind, increasing toward dawn, swept freely down the great lawn of the house and tangled the wires on which the japanese lanterns swung wildly. By a quarter to seven the rose garden was swept bare, and the hot wind carried with it a freight of bruised and torn rose petals. Far off, by the lake, the water was whipped into waves which beat restlessly against the shore, and even washed the floor of the grotto where the swans cowered.

In the secret garden a statue swayed, and fell, crashing through the flowers and cracking in half as it hit the ground. One of the empty arms of Anna-in-the-maze caught a flying branch, and comforted and rocked it. At seven Mrs. Halloran dressed herself and came downstairs, to meet Aunt Fanny in the breakfast room. Because Mrs. Halloran had been anxious for the servants to make an early start on their holiday, the house was already awake, and in the breakfast room the sound of the wind was lessened by the indoor sounds of activity. What had been left overnight of the party was now cleared, although the japanese lanterns were hopelessly tangled and the tents had been turned by the wind into live flying monsters; the barbecue pit had been cleaned, the dishes used by the villagers had been washed and sterilized in the electric dishwashers, and the breakfast coffee awaited Mrs. Halloran and Aunt Fanny at the table.

"Good morning, Aunt Fanny."

"Good morning, Orianna. Did you notice the wind?"

"Certainly. I confess it frightens me a little."

Aunt Fanny contemplated her grapefruit. "Strange," she said, "How one's mind insists upon noticing only small things; I daresay it will be long enough before I see another grapefruit, tamed and cut."

"Do you think to tear fruit from the trees and sink your teeth into it?"

"Probably. We never know how pagan we may be. The wind does not frighten me, exactly; I only know that I cannot bring myself to think of how it will be later."

"Yes," Mrs. Halloran said. "I thought of it a good deal during the night, hearing the wind rising and trying to understand that this time it would not die down. It is an ominous, almost unbearable thought, this realization that a state of weather we would ordinarily regard without unusual fear will this time not subside as it always has before, but will increase and finally—"

"Be still, Orianna. The servants are still here. And in any case the prospect sickens me."

Mrs. Halloran and Aunt Fanny took toast, and eggs, and bacon, and coffee; with small glances at one another and both thinking, without saying, that a last quiet breakfast, prepared for them and served daintily in colored porcelain and silver, was something to be dwelt on and cherished; they both sat longer over their food than usual, and certainly longer than they would before have spent in one another's presence. Once, looking at her heavy silver fork, Mrs. Halloran found tears in her eyes; what use will this be to me tomorrow? she was thinking, and she made no attempt to hide her tears from Aunt Fanny.

"My father will be here," Aunt Fanny said softly. "I have perfect faith in him."

While Mrs. Halloran and Aunt Fanny lingered, Arabella came downstairs, in curlers and housecoat, to say that Mrs. Willow was ill, and might she have, please, a tray with only coffee, tomato juice, and a bottle of aspirin. Mrs. Halloran instructed that the tomato juice be fortified with raw egg and worcestershire sauce; "It would not suit us to have your mother ill today," she told Arabella. Arabella carried up her mother's tray, and returned shortly, dressed, with her hair combed; by then Fancy had come to breakfast, and Gloria, and shortly afterward, Maryjane and the captain. Mrs. Halloran and Aunt Fanny sat on at the breakfast table, drinking coffee, and no one spoke. Miss Ogilvie, looking most unwell, came to breakfast, and refused with unusual vehemence Mrs. Halloran's offer of tomato juice with raw egg and worcestershire sauce; "It's the wind," Miss Ogilvie said, whimpering, "I think the wind will drive me out of my mind."

"It's hideous," the captain said.

Essex and Julia, the last to reach the breakfast table, found the others sitting in subdued silence, listening to the distant sounds of the wind. "Our own little coven, waiting together," said Essex in a tone of some strain, and Julia said, her voice only barely controlled, "I wish it would stop, I wish it would stop."

"Well," the captain said, "it won't."

The breakfast room was meant to be delightfully bright and lit with early morning sun, so it had tall glass doors opening out over the garden; even though the noise of the wind was muffled here, they sat at the table and could see the darkening of the sky. Slowly, over the farthest trees in the garden, the clouds moved, and the room grew dim, and the reflections on the silver coffeepot were greyed and dull.

"It's going to storm," said Julia, and began to giggle hysterically.

By noon Mrs. Halloran, oppressed now by the driving wind into an urgent sense of haste, had seen the servants off in the two station wagons; Mr. Halloran's nurse was reluctant to leave, believing that she ought to give up her holiday in case the oppressive weather should trouble Mr. Halloran unduly, but Mrs. Halloran insisted, almost raising her voice, and the nurse went with the others. When the two station wagons had gone down the driveway Mrs. Halloran took a deep breath.

"Now," she said, "we must search the house carefully to make sure that there is *no one* left; I assure you that I checked the servants carefully, but I should not like to find a drunken villager asleep in some corner. On Miss Ogilvie's invitation." Her eyes turned briefly on Miss Ogilvie, who winced, and made a repudiating gesture.

Fancy was sent to sit with her grandfather while the rest searched the house, and she told him "Peter Rabbit" and "The Three Bears," which he enjoyed hugely.

“The house is so empty,” Essex said to Maryjane, meeting her in an upstairs hallway. “Somehow you never realize how many people there actually were in it, before.”

“I don’t mind *this* part so much,” Maryjane said, and shivered. “This is like a game, hide and seek, or murder, or something. It’s what is coming later that I think I am going to mind.”

“At least, up here you can’t hear the wind,” Essex said.

When they reassembled in the drawing room Mrs. Halloran, assured that they were now alone in the house, said, speaking loudly over the rising noise of the wind, “I urge you all, most earnestly, to take a glass of sherry before lunch; we have a great deal still to do, and, I need hardly tell you, we need all the courage we can muster.”

“We must have complete faith,” Aunt Fanny said. “My father has given me his word. Anyway,” she added vaguely, “it’s too late now.”

“I don’t think I will be able to stand it,” Julia said; her lips were trembling and she had trouble speaking.

“This is final.” Mrs. Halloran’s voice seemed to echo, now, in the big drawing room; although the weather outside was hotter than it had been for months, perhaps years, there was a chill and a kind of dampness over everything in the big room, and the people in it gathered closer together before the empty fireplace. “This is final,” Mrs. Halloran said. “We have no time now, and certainly no patience, for hysteria or panic. We have all known about this coming day and night for many weeks, and we know, too, what we shall see tomorrow morning. Any one of you — and I mean you, Julia, particularly — who provokes or indulges in any emotional outburst, will be shut in a closet and kept there by force, if I find it necessary. You are my people," she went on more gently, "and I must bring you safely through this unbelievable experience; trust me."

"My father—"

"I want to go outside," said Julia, barely articulate. "I don't want to stay in here any more."

"We must try to think of ourselves," Mrs. Halloran went on, "as absolutely isolated. We are on a tiny island in a raging sea; we are a point of safety in a world of ruin. Think," she said urgingly, "today, right now, out there in the world, people are beginning to wonder. They notice the weather, of course, and perhaps even feel the first apprehensions already; there must be some people, even this early, who are beginning to fear for their homes and their property, and perhaps into one or two minds the thought of death has already entered. But it is the people out *there* who have to be afraid; *we*, inside here, are safe. Julia, at the risk of sounding like Miss Ogilvie, I beg you to listen to me. *This* is safety. During all the rest of this day and this night, in the face of all your fears — and I believe that we will be called upon to steel ourselves beyond belief; one does not survive a cataclysm easily; I think we none of us know how deep our fears will be before morning — but, I insist, in the face of all your fears, remind yourselves, say it over and over again: the peril is for others: we are safe."

"My father—"

"It's too soon," Julia said helplessly. "There's so much I wanted to see again, and do again …"

"I never wrote to my father," Gloria said. "I wish now I had said goodbye to him."

"Well, it's a world well lost, if you ask *me*," said Mrs. Willow bluntly. "I've seen all of it I can take, and *that*'s no lie."

“I wish we’d managed to get some roses from the garden, to wear in our hair,” Arabella said to Maryjane, and Maryjane said resentfully, “If she hadn’t sent the servants off in such a hurry … do you know,” she went on to Arabella, “no one made my bed this morning?”

“It seems to me,” Mrs. Halloran said, “that we would be wise to barricade the house as soon as we can. There does not seem to be any immediate danger, and as you all know we do not anticipate the full fury of the elements until tonight, but on the one hand it will spare us work we may not be able to find time for later, and on the other hand it will serve in some manner to muffle the noise of that wind. It seems to drive right through the house. After the house is as secure as we can make it—”

“And we know it will stand,” Aunt Fanny said.

“ — we will gather for lunch, and then retire to dress, to reassemble here at four o’clock. You will recall, of course, that we are to be together in the drawing room from four o’clock on.”

“Action,” said the captain. “Everyone get moving — *that*’s the secret; no panic if you’re busy.”

“Blankets over the windows, and particularly the glass doors,” Mrs. Halloran said. “The furniture is to be pushed as well as possible against outer doors, to prevent their blowing open in the wind. Save a few blankets, of course, for our own use during the night; we have no conception of the extremes of temperature we may be called upon to endure.”

“Candles,” said Essex, moving close to her. “The electricity may go soon.”

“Look at the chandelier,” Julia said, and giggled crazily. “You will never see an electric light again.”

“Now *there*’s a thought,” the captain said. “While we work, let’s have on every light in the house — no need to worry about bills *now*,” and he laughed. “And a couple of you ladies better use our last few kilowatts to brew up some coffee and hot soup to put in thermos bottles, and anything else you can think of; it’s going to be cold eating for the rest of the night.”

“And radios,” Arabella said. “Turn on all the radios.”

“No,” Julia said violently. “Not radios, *please*. There will be announcements and warnings and descriptions …” She shivered.

“True,” Mrs. Halloran said. “We don’t want to see any of it, and we don’t want to hear about it, either.”

“Containers of water,” the captain said. “Best get plenty of water; the mains will be going, you know, and I can tell all of you right now that I, for one, am not going to be particularly anxious to stand outside and catch raindrops in a pail.”

“I will oversee the coffee and the water, then,” Mrs. Halloran said. “I suppose,” she said, hesitating in the doorway, “that the blankets will have to be nailed over the windows?”

“I’m afraid so,” Essex said. “Tight.”

“The woodwork?” said Mrs. Halloran wonderingly. “The lovely window frames? They were carved especially for the house.”

“The house is not so important today, Orianna.”

“The house is always important, Essex. But I must reconcile myself, I see, to nail holes in the window frames. I suppose they will be repaired later?”

“At least,” the captain said unsympathetically, “if you’re making the coffee you won’t have to watch. Belle, you get out the candles. This room is our headquarters, so put plenty of candlesticks in here. I suppose a fire would be a mistake?” he said to Essex.

“Most unwise, I should think,” Essex said. “We can be sure the chimneys will go.”

"And we can't call the fire department." Julia's voice was high, and she giggled when she spoke.

The captain glanced to be sure that Mrs. Halloran had left the room. "It seems to *me*," he said, dropping his voice, "that we haven't either the manpower or the equipment to make any try at covering the top floors — I'd be prepared to let those windows go, even it it means a chance of losing the furniture and what not up there. We just *can't* barricade the whole house, and after all, everything we need is stored away in the library."

"If we're going to keep everyone in the drawing room, I agree with you," Essex said. "*I* want the windows covered, not so much for protection as invisibility; I mean, we don't want to have to look outside. It's not anything any of us ought to be watching. Besides," he added, "we *know* the house will stand."

"That big window in the drawing room is going to take a lot of covering. But I don't want to see it any more than you do."

They started together up the great curving staircase, which was already shivering slightly under the impact of the wind, and the captain grinned up at WHEN SHALL WE LIVE IF NOT NOW. "You know," the captain said, "if the old boy had known what this house was going to go through, he might have built it some different."

"He built it solid, anyway," Essex said. "We can be thankful for that."

By three o'clock that afternoon the great windows downstairs, sparkling clean and shining, were covered entirely. Essex and the captain, with help from Gloria and Maryjane, had used blankets, bedspreads, tablecloths, sheets, and finally the huge canvas cover from the barbecue pit, which it cost them a struggle to bring in through the roaring wind. During all this time Julia had sat huddled in a big chair in one corner of the drawing room, crying a little and watching the big chandelier feverishly. The lights were still on, and several of them had remarked that it was no darker now, with the windows covered, than it had been before, with the sky black and furious outside. Fancy and her grandfather were playing checkers in his room. Mrs. Halloran had brought out a second bottle of sherry to accompany their cold lunch, but the captain, Essex, and a somewhat recovered Mrs. Willow were drinking whisky. Every available container in the house had been filled with water, and on the long drawing room table there was a line of thermos bottles, brought from the supplies in the library, each filled and labelled “Coffee” “Soup” or “Tea.” Blankets were piled neatly on a corner table in the drawing room, candles were in all the candlesticks, and extra boxes of candles on the mantel, with packages of matches. Mrs. Halloran, with half-hearted assistance from Mrs. Willow, had made plates of sandwiches and covered them with wax paper; they sat on the drawing room table with the row of thermos bottles. Under advice from Essex, who liked his whisky with ice, Mrs. Halloran had also filled two insulated ice buckets and, amused, informed Essex that so long as the refrigerator kept running, he need not drink his whisky warm. “I plan to drink a lot of it tonight,” said Essex. “And I am with you,” Mrs. Willow said.

Except for Julia, most of their original apprehension had faded into a kind of grim humor. They had done all they could; they were almost used to the crash of the wind against the sides of the house; they were excited and festive, with a kind of picnic air.

“My hangover is gone,” Mrs. Willow announced once with deep pleasure.

Maryjane laughed. “I am never going to have any more asthma,” she said. “Do you know,” she told Aunt Fanny, “I have been better today than any time since Lionel passed on.”

"That," said Aunt Fanny sternly, "is because you got up and did a little hard work for a change. And I promise you, you will be active enough from now on."

"I am going to dress," Mrs. Halloran said. "I do not know how much longer the lights will stay on, and I am sure I would detest dressing by candlelight."

"Better take a candle with you anyway," the captain said.

Mrs. Halloran rose and stood in the center of the room. "Before I go," she said, "we must be sure that all instructions are clearly understood. I have already told you that I expect all of you to be here, in this room, suitably dressed, by four o'clock, and that no one is to leave this room after that time. I recommend that you dress yourselves as well as possible, with, of course, due attention to warmth and safety, but with an eye to our appearance tomorrow morning and the good impression we must create. When I step out of this house tomorrow morning, I want to know that I am bringing with me into that clean world a family neat, prepossessing, and well-groomed. Remember," and for a minute Mrs. Halloran hesitated, because her voice shook; she put one hand against her lips, and said, "Remember, this — this is the end we have waited for so long."

"*Very* true," Aunt Fanny said, bustling. "We must all look our very best."

"And hurry, too," Arabella said. "Julia, stop moping and *hurry*."

"The light is dimmer," Julia said.

"More reason to hurry," Aunt Fanny said, and Julia rose wearily.

"Fancy?" Maryjane called down the corridor. "Fancy? Come and put on your party dress; it's time."

"My father always liked to see his daughter sweet and clean, although a pinafore until the party actually starts—"

"It irks me," Essex said to the captain, "to be required to greet our free bright world in a jacket and a tie."

"Feel a little out of place?" the captain asked.

"Like a businessman from the city walking into a summer camp," Essex said.

"I suppose we'll be allowed to dress informally now and then," the captain said. "Anyway, from what *I* heard, your hunting costume was *most* informal."

"Come along, my gels," Mrs. Willow said, shepherding Julia and Arabella, "you'll be the belles of the ball, and *this* is going to be a party, *this* is; Julia, you'll be more cheerful in your fine clothes; Belle, a lady must not linger on her way to her toilette; Aunt Fanny, take my candle, since I see you are without, and I shall use Belle's; *do* come, my beauties."

"Oh, dear," Miss Ogilvie said, wavering, "ought *I* to dress, too, Mrs. Willow? Am I to have a candle? Perhaps *I* am only expected to wait here? Or Mr. Halloran — I could perhaps go to Mr. Halloran?"

"Miss Ogilvie," Mrs. Willow said sternly, "you are to inherit with the rest of us, and you must not be remiss in your dress. Mr. Halloran will be well enough for half an hour, and Mrs. Halloran would be very much displeased if you were not here at four o'clock in your better clothes. It is like going to church, Miss Ogilvie, precisely like going to church — one dresses decently, you know. Although, sadly, unlike going to church to be married, Miss Ogilvie, although I expect *you* will not perceive the fine difference in degrees of felicity; Miss Ogilvie, I must stress our very great need for haste."

"If you would just step out of the doorway," Miss Ogilvie said with dignity, "perhaps *I* could get through."

The lights went out at last while they were dressing, and there was so much noise of laughter and running from one room to another and remarks shouted down the dark hallways that it was difficult to hear even the wind, much less the sound of Mrs. Halloran going down the staircase. At any rate, they all appeared considerably surprised when, gathering with their candles upon the wide landing, festively dressed, eager and excited beneath WHEN SHALL WE LIVE IF NOT NOW? they saw, all at once, Mrs. Halloran lying in her golden gown, crumpled at the foot of the great staircase. In the weak light of the candles the stuff of the golden gown shimmered richly; "Mrs. Halloran?" Miss Ogilvie called down anxiously, but Mrs. Halloran did not answer and, further, did not move.

"Good heavens," Miss Ogilvie said to the rest of them, and then called again, "Mrs. Halloran? Are you all right?"

"I expect somebody pushed her down the stairs," Mrs. Willow said. She nodded profoundly and added, "Live by the sword, die by the sword."

"I wonder how it could have happened," Aunt Fanny said. "Poor Orianna was always so careful of her footing."

"Somebody pushed her, of course," Mrs. Willow said.

"I was certainly *wondering* about all those instructions and rules of hers," Arabella said. "I kept *thinking* maybe she was going to a different place than ours. And so of course I *was* right, wasn't I?"

"My crown!" Fancy said suddenly, and bolted down the stairs.

"Fancy dear, be careful — you'll trip and fall," Maryjane called, but Fancy leaped down the last two steps, avoiding Mrs. Halloran, and tugged at the crown. "It's stuck," she said.

"One minute there." The captain came heavily down the stairs and bent over Mrs. Halloran. For a minute he looked at her carefully, taking her wrist to feel her pulse, and then he stood up, shaking his head. "Poor old lady," he said. And then, to Fancy, “I guess it’s your crown all right.” Gently he moved Mrs. Halloran’s head and took off the crown to set on Fancy’s head.

“*My* crown, now,” Fancy said, pleased.

The rest were coming down the stairs, going carefully from one step to the next, with a certain tendency to eye with suspicion whoever was walking in back of them. “Live by the sword, die by the sword,” Mrs. Willow kept saying. They gathered around Mrs. Halloran, looking down in silence for a minute, and then Gloria said, “I can’t believe it. I am so sorry that I was rude to her.”

Aunt Fanny smoothed the hair which had been disarranged when the captain took off the crown. “I am going to miss her,” she said with some surprise.

“Well, *some*body pushed her down the stairs,” Mrs. Willow said. “She never fell by herself.”

“*That* hardly matters, does it?” Aunt Fanny said. “Poor Orianna.”

“She wouldn’t like having all of us standing around staring at her,” Gloria said, and they all moved back a little, looking away.

Essex sat on the bottom step of the staircase and said, looking at Mrs. Halloran, “She said she would either come with us as a ruler, or not at all. I wish,” he said, looking helplessly at the others, “that she had been able to change her mind.”

“She was always a very firm woman,” Aunt Fanny said. She sighed. “I *am* going to miss her.”

“Perhaps,” the captain suggested, with the air of one looking on the bright side, “perhaps she wouldn’t have liked it anyway. Tomorrow, I mean.”

“She might have felt *very* out of place,” Arabella added.

Essex leaned down and touched Mrs. Halloran's cheek gently. Then he stood up and turned away. "Look at my *crown*," Fancy said insistently, capering up to him, "Essex, look at my crown!"

"It looks very nice on you, Fancy," Maryjane said.

"But vanity is out of place in a young girl," Aunt Fanny said. "Try to remember, Fancy, that earthly possessions do not make a noble soul; just because you have a crown you are not any better than other girls your age."

"Live by the sword, die by the sword," Mrs. Willow said again, standing over Mrs. Halloran. "I wonder who could have pushed her down the stairs? *Any*way, though, we can't leave her *here*."

"I don't like the idea of going up and down the stairs past her, and *that*'s the truth," the captain said.

"Well, she ought to be outside," Aunt Fanny said.

"True," the captain said. He frowned thoughtfully. "Door's barricaded," he pointed out.

Fancy, who was dancing a slow child's dance around the hall, carrying a candle and wearing her crown, called "But she didn't want to see what was happening outside."

"She won't be watching," the captain said. "No fear of *that*. The way *I* look at it, we just can't figure to keep her along with us, and plan to bury her or something tomorrow morning. Aside from everything else, it would put a damper on the whole first day."

"No," Aunt Fanny said, "outside is right; put her outside."

"But the door is barricaded," Mrs. Willow said.

"The upstairs windows—" the captain suggested, but Aunt Fanny shook her head emphatically.

"She was my brother's wife," Aunt Fanny said, "and as such, must leave the house with dignity. I cannot, for my part, consent to ejecting Mrs.

Halloran from an upstairs window. Although, as I remember," she added thoughtfully, "the great door is not the one she first came in by; I think originally she used the servant's entrance. At any rate, she must go out the great door."

"Well." The captain sighed, and looked at Essex. "You game?" he asked.

Essex had been looking down at Mrs. Halloran. "Anything you say," he said slowly. "I rather liked her," he said.

"Why, Essex." Aunt Fanny came up and put a consoling hand on Essex' arm. "We all loved her *very* dearly, Essex. But we must look forward, and think of the morning; consider the others who will go tonight — consider her as only one of millions."

"Of course," Mrs. Willow put in, "somebody *did* push her down the stairs."

"Well, that is all water under the bridge now," Aunt Fanny said soothingly, "and you are not to grieve, Essex. Try to remember that we all share in this loss. And get her outside."

"I do dislike taking all that stuff down from the door," the captain said. "It was a hell of a job getting it up."

"Well, it must be done," Aunt Fanny said.

"I suppose so," said the captain grumpily, and he began to push at one end of the great chest with which they had barricaded the door. The others came to help him, working now with speed in the flickering light of the candles, while Fancy moved in graceful circles over the black and white marble floor, trying to catch reflections of her crown in the tall mirrors. The captain got onto a stepladder and pried loose the nails with which they had fastened the blankets securely to the top of the door frame and the blankets came loose and fell, and Mrs. Willow and Aunt Fanny caught them and heaped them onto the great chest, to be ready to put back up again after Mrs. Halloran was outside.

“Now, the wind is pretty strong,” the captain said warningly. “Essex and I will take her out, but all you women stand by the door here, so you can get it closed after we go through. And be sure to be ready to open it again when we come back. You carry her,” he said to Essex. “You liked her better. I’ll stand by to help if you drop her or something.”

Essex lifted Mrs. Halloran, who seemed to him oddly bulkier than when she was standing erect, and moved toward the great door. “Now,” the captain said, and the door was opened and the wind rushed in and up and down the great staircase. Essex and the captain slipped out, and the door was slammed shut behind them. “Where?” the captain shouted, and Essex, not hesitating, said, “Sundial — where else?”

Although the wind was strong, they moved with reasonable accuracy down the terrace and down the steps on the sundial side, skirting the edge of the ornamental pool and going across the grass, wet now with the waves the wind was pushing from the pool. When they came to the sundial, which said WHAT IS THIS WORLD? Essex stopped, still holding Mrs. Halloran.

“Well, put her down,” the captain said, and Essex said, “you know, I don’t know why we brought her here — she never liked the inscription. Allone,” Essex said, “with-outen any companye.”

At last, with the captain hurrying him, he sat Mrs. Halloran on the grass beside the sundial, facing out over the long lovely lawn, and arranged her feet together and her hands on her lap. The captain carefully spread the long golden skirt around her, and for a minute the two of them stood, admiring the way Mrs. Halloran sat by the sundial with her hands folded, quite as though it were still all her property she surveyed. The captain turned, Essex stayed to look once more, and then, with the wind behind them and almost rushing them back to the house, they came along beside the ornamental pool, up the marble steps, and across the terrace to the door. “All done, let us in,” the captain yelled, pounding, and the door swung open and the wind rushed in and up and down the great staircase, and all of them leaned against the door and got it shut again.

“Well, *that*’s taken care of,” the captain said, sinking down on the great chest and wiping his forehead. “Pretty rough out there.”

“Barricade the door again right away,” Mrs. Willow said.

“Let us catch our breath,” Essex said. “We went all the way to the sundial.”

Aunt Fanny nodded. “Splendid,” she said. “It was the only thing around here that really *looked* like her, if you know what I mean.”

With less difficulty, now, since they had done it before, they put the blankets back over the door, stretched them tight, and nailed them firmly. Then, all together, they pushed the great chest across the doorway, laughing together because it was their last chore. When it was done they crowded into the drawing room and settled down comfortably. Aunt Fanny went into the right wing and brought back Richard Halloran in his wheel chair; Mr. Halloran was puzzled, but pleased at being brought into company, and inquired at once about a fire in the fireplace.

“You will have a fire tomorrow morning, Richard,” Mrs. Willow said, “if you really want one then.”

“I daresay I shall. I like a fire even in the mornings.”

“You realize that you must stay in this room all night, Richard?” Aunt Fanny asked.

“I was told, I believe. I forget what is going to happen, but someone told me that I should be expected to be very strong, and sit up all night in the drawing room.”

“We will all be right here with you.”

“If I get very tired,” Mr. Halloran explained, “I shall nap in my chair.”

“Well.” Mrs. Willow stretched her legs and yawned. “Too early for dinner,” she said, “and a long night ahead. Anyone care for bridge?”

“Not I, thank you,” Aunt Fanny said. “I believe we play in different styles, Mrs. Willow.”

“But I think we are only five bridge players here, Aunt Fanny, so if we are to play at all in the future we must compromise our different styles.”

“I’m too restless,” Arabella said. “I keep feeling something is going to happen,” and she laughed.

“I can still hear the wind,” Julia said.

“Now, Julia,” Mrs. Willow said, “there’s no sense in getting yourself all nervous and agitated. You’ll just be a wet blanket on the rest of us. Have yourself a drink.”

“Good idea,” Essex said. “We have plenty of ice, at least.” He went over to the portable bar they had moved into the drawing room.

“I wonder if we ought to have clear heads for the morning?” Aunt Fanny asked, worried.

“Aunt Fanny, the time for clearing our heads is long past. Mrs. Willow — scotch?”

“I thank you, Essex.”

“I thought I heard a crash,” Julia said, turning her hands nervously.

“Probably one of the trees going down,” Aunt Fanny said. “The best thing for you, dear, is to try not to notice. Try to think of something else.”

“Mr. Halloran,” Miss Ogilvie said, coming to the wheel chair, “are you quite warm enough?”

“Splendidly warm, thank you, Miss Ogilvie. And yourself? Should you not put on a shawl?”

“I am quite warm, thank you. I was only concerned about *you*.”

“That was kind, Miss Ogilvie. You know, I expect, that I am to stay in my chair all night?”

“Yes. Mrs. Halloran—”

“Who?” said Mr. Halloran.

“May I wear your crown sometimes?” Gloria asked Fancy.

“No,” Fancy said, and giggled. “But you can have my doll house,” she said.

“Fancy is going to find that she is getting headaches from that crown, I believe,” Mrs. Willow said. “I expect we shall soon find her taking it off.”

“I like dancing in it,” Fancy said.

“It wasn’t the plot so much, you know,” Maryjane was saying to Arabella, “it was the *acting*. I mean, it was so real you really got to thinking they were real people. Just *wonderful* acting. Of course, they used real natives, and most of the photography was done right there in the Oturi Forest, with the animals — you know? But I actually cried when they tortured—”

“My.” Mrs. Willow stretched, and sighed. “It’s going to be a long wait,” she said.

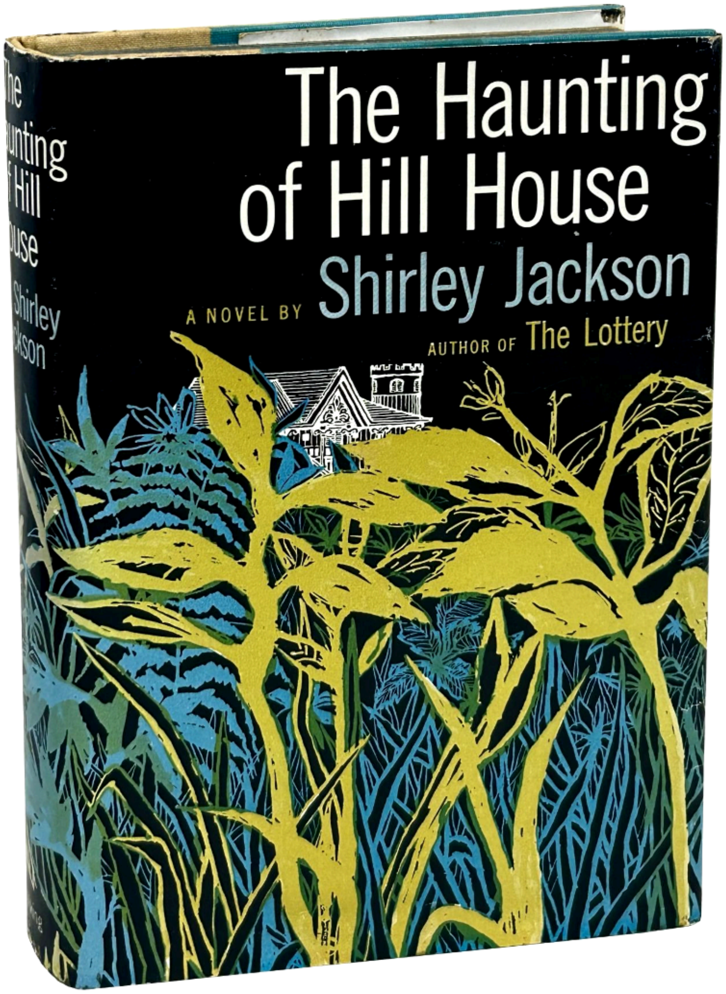
“The first thing I will do,” Essex said to Gloria, “is make *you* a crown of flowers.”

The Haunting of Hill House (1959)

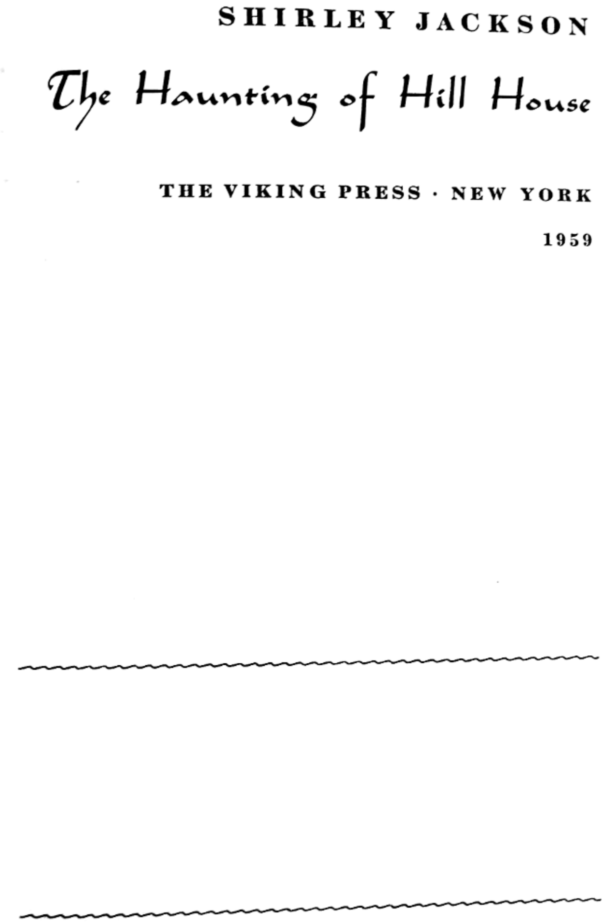
Jackson's most successful and well-known novel, *The Haunting of Hill House* was first published by Viking Press in 1959. One of the most prominent horror writers of the twentieth century, Stephen King, stated that his work, particularly *The Shining*, was strongly influenced by it. In the lecture, 'Experience and Fiction' Jackson states that she began researching the novel after reading a book about a group of nineteenth century 'psychic researchers' who rented a haunted building to record what happened there. She then recalls seeing a strange house in New York City that was so unnerving that she had nightmares about it. The image and ominous feeling evoked by that building remained with her and when that sense of unease was further compounded by other eerie occurrences, she determined that she must write a haunted house novel.

The Haunting of Hill House is a gothic horror story centred on four characters that travel to 'Hill House', a secluded mansion, to record their experiences with the paranormal. The group is led by Doctor John Montague, an anthropologist fascinated with the supernatural, who wishes to recruit some 'assistants' to help him with his stay. One of the houseguests selected by Montague is a young, shy woman, Eleanor Vance, who is bitter after having spent years being forced to take care of her unkind mother. Once inside the mansion, she becomes the focal point of the disturbing and unnerving events that begin to unfold.

The novel has been adapted for film in 1963 and 1999 and in 2018 a television mini-series based on the book was released on Netflix.


The Haunting of Hill House
Shirley Jackson
A NOVEL BY
AUTHOR OF The Lottery
The Haunting of Hill House
Shirley Jackson

The first edition



SHIRLEY JACKSON

The Haunting of Hill House

THE VIKING PRESS · NEW YORK

1959

The first edition’s title page

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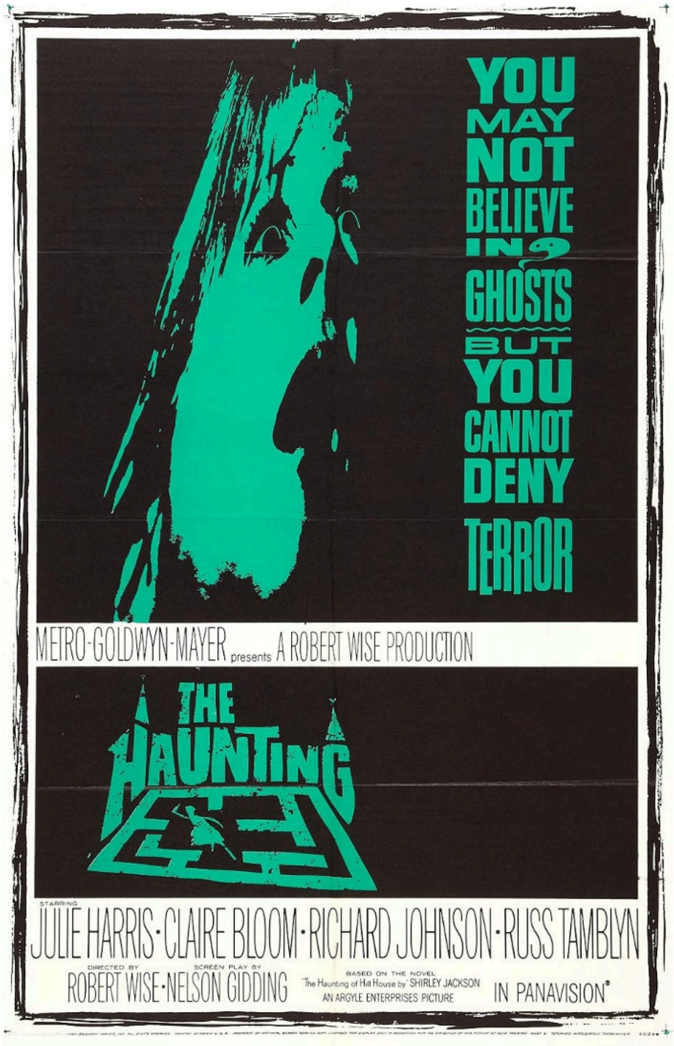
YOU MAY NOT BELIEVE IN GHOSTS BUT YOU CANNOT DENY TERROR
METRO-GOLDWYN-MAYER presents A ROBERT WISE PRODUCTION
THE HAUNTING
STARRING
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ROBERT WISE
SCREEN PLAY BY
NELSON GIDDING
BASED ON THE NOVEL
"The Haunting of Hill House" by SHIRLEY JACKSON
AN ARGYLE ENTERPRISES PICTURE
IN PANAVISION®

The 1963 film adaptation

Jackson, close to the time of publication

For

Leonard Brown

ONE

NO LIVE ORGANISM can continue for long to exist sanely under conditions of absolute reality; even larks and katydids are supposed, by some, to dream. Hill House, not sane, stood by itself against its hills, holding darkness within; it had stood so for eighty years and might stand for eighty more. Within, walls continued upright, bricks met neatly, floors were firm, and doors were sensibly shut; silence lay steadily against the wood and stone of Hill House, and whatever walked there, walked alone.

Dr John Montague was a doctor of philosophy; he had taken his degree in anthropology, feeling obscurely that in this field he might come closest to his true vocation, the analysis of supernatural manifestations. He was scrupulous about the use of his title because, his investigations being so utterly unscientific, he hoped to borrow an air of respectability, even scholarly authority, from his education. It had cost him a good deal, in money and pride, since he was not a begging man, to rent Hill House for three months, but he expected absolutely to be compensated for his pains by the sensation following upon the publication of his definitive work on the causes and effects of psychic disturbances in a house commonly known as ‘haunted.’ He had been looking for an honestly haunted house all his life. When he heard of Hill House he had been at first doubtful, then hopeful, then indefatigable; he was not the man to let go of Hill House once he had found it.

Dr Montague’s intentions with regard to Hill House derived from the methods of the intrepid nineteenth-century ghost hunters; he was going to go and live in Hill House and see what happened there. It was his intention, at first, to follow the example of the anonymous Lady who went to stay at Ballechin House and ran a summer-long house party for sceptics and believers, with croquet and ghost-watching as the outstanding attractions, but sceptics, believers, and good croquet players are harder to come by today; Dr Montague was forced to engage assistants. Perhaps the leisurely ways of Victorian life lent themselves more agreeably to the devices of psychic investigation, or perhaps the painstaking documentation of phenomena has largely gone out as a means of determining actuality; at any rate, Dr Montague had not only to engage assistants but to search for them.

Because he thought of himself as careful and conscientious, he spent considerable time looking for his assistants. He combed the records of the psychic societies, the back files of sensational newspapers, the reports of parapsychologists, and assembled a list of names of people who had, in one way or another, at one time or another, no matter how briefly or dubiously, been involved in abnormal events. From his list he first eliminated the names of people who were dead. When he had then crossed off the names of those who seemed to him publicity-seekers, of subnormal intelligence, or unsuitable because of a clear tendency to take the centre of the stage, he had a list of perhaps a dozen names. Each of these people, then, received a letter from Dr Montague extending an invitation to spend all or part of a summer at a comfortable country house, old, but perfectly equipped with plumbing, electricity, central heating, and clean mattresses. The purpose of their stay, the letters stated clearly, was to observe and explore the various unsavoury stories which had been circulated about the house for most of its eighty years of existence. Dr Montague's letters did not say openly that Hill House was haunted, because Dr Montague was a man of science and until he had actually experienced a psychic manifestation in Hill House he would not trust his luck too far. Consequently his letters had a certain ambiguous dignity calculated to catch at the imagination of a very special sort of reader. To his dozen letters, Dr Montague had four replies, the other eight or so candidates having presumably moved and left no forwarding address, or possibly having lost interest in the supernormal, or even, perhaps, never having existed at all. To the four who replied, Dr Montague wrote again, naming a specific day when the house would be officially regarded as ready for occupancy, and enclosing detailed directions for reaching it, since, as he was forced to explain, information about finding the house was extremely difficult to get, particularly from the rural community which surrounded it. On the day before he was to leave for Hill House, Dr Montague was persuaded to take into his select company a representative of the family who owned the house, and a telegram arrived from one of his candidates, backing out with a clearly manufactured excuse. Another never came or wrote, perhaps because of some pressing personal problem which had intervened. The other two came.

2

Eleanor Vance was thirty-two years old when she came to Hill House. The only person in the world she genuinely hated, now that her mother was dead, was her sister. She disliked her brother-in-law and her five-year-old niece, and she had no friends. This was owing largely to the eleven years she had spent caring for her invalid mother, which had left her with some proficiency as a nurse and an inability to face strong sunlight without blinking. She could not remember ever being truly happy in her adult life; her years with her mother had been built up devotedly around small guilts and small reproaches, constant weariness, and unending despair. Without ever wanting to become reserved and shy, she had spent so long alone, with no one to love, that it was difficult for her to talk, even casually, to another person without self-consciousness and an awkward inability to find words. Her name had turned up on Dr Montague's list because one day, when she was twelve years old and her sister was eighteen, and their father had been dead for not quite a month, showers of stones had fallen on their house, without any warning or any indication of purpose or reason, dropping from the ceilings, rolling loudly down the walls, breaking windows and pattering maddeningly on the roof. The stones continued intermittently for three days, during which time Eleanor and her sister were less unnerved by the stones than by the neighbours and sightseers who gathered daily outside the front door, and by their mother's blind, hysterical insistence that all of this was due to malicious, backbiting people on the block who had had it in for her ever since she came. After three days Eleanor and her sister were removed to the house of a friend, and the stones stopped falling, nor did they ever return, although Eleanor and her sister and her mother went back to living in the house, and the feud with the entire neighbourhood was never ended. The story had been forgotten by everyone except the people Dr Montague consulted; it had certainly been forgotten by Eleanor and her sister, each of whom had supposed at the time that the other was responsible.

During the whole underside of her life, ever since her first memory, Eleanor had been waiting for something like Hill House. Caring for her mother, lifting a cross old lady from her chair to her bed, setting out endless little trays of soup and oatmeal, steeling herself to the filthy laundry, Eleanor had held fast to the belief that some day something would happen. She had accepted the invitation to Hill House by return mail, although her brother-in-law had insisted upon calling a couple of people to make sure that this doctor fellow was not aiming to introduce Eleanor to savage rites not unconnected with matters Eleanor's sister deemed it improper for an unmarried young woman to know. Perhaps, Eleanor's sister whispered in the privacy of the marital bedroom, perhaps Dr Montague — if that really *was* his name, after all — perhaps this Dr Montague *used* these women for some — well — *experiments*. *You* know — *experiments*, the way they do. Eleanor's sister dwelt richly upon experiments she had heard these doctors did. Eleanor had no such ideas, or, having them, was not afraid. Eleanor, in short, would have gone anywhere.

Theodora — that was as much name as she used; her sketches were signed 'Theo' and on her apartment's door and the window of her shop and her telephone listing and her pale stationery and the bottom of the lovely photograph of her which stood on the mantel, the name was always only Theodora — Theodora was not at all like Eleanor. Duty and conscience were, for Theodora, attributes which belonged properly to Girl Scouts. Theodora's world was one of delight and soft colours; she had come on to Dr Montague's list because — going laughing into the laboratory, bringing with her a rush of floral perfume — she had somehow been able, amused and excited over her own incredible skill, to identify correctly eighteen cards out of twenty, fifteen cards out of twenty, nineteen cards out of twenty, held up by an assistant out of sight and hearing. The name of Theodora shone in the records of the laboratory and so came inevitably to Dr Montague's attention. Theodora had been entertained by Dr Montague's first letter and answered it out of curiosity (perhaps the wakened knowledge in Theodora which told her the names of symbols on cards held out of sight urged her on her way towards Hill House), and yet fully intended to decline the invitation. Yet — perhaps the stirring, urgent sense again — when Dr Montague's confirming letter arrived, Theodora had been tempted and had somehow plunged blindly, wantonly, into a violent quarrel with the friend with whom she shared an apartment. Things were said on both sides which only time could eradicate; Theodora had deliberately and heartlessly smashed the lovely little figurine her friend had carved of her, and her friend had cruelly ripped to shreds the volume of Alfred de Musset which had been a birthday present from Theodora, taking particular pains with the page which bore Theodora's loving, teasing inscription. These acts were of course unforgettable, and before they could laugh over them together time would have to go by; Theodora had written that night, accepting Dr Montague's invitation, and departed in cold silence the next day.

Luke Sanderson was a liar. He was also a thief. His aunt, who was the owner of Hill House, was fond of pointing out that her nephew had the best education, the best clothes, the best taste, and the worst companions of anyone she had ever known; she would have leaped at any chance to put him safely away for a few weeks. The family lawyer was prevailed upon to persuade Dr Montague that the house could on no account be rented to him for his purposes without the confining presence of a member of the family during his stay, and perhaps at their first meeting the doctor perceived in Luke a kind of strength, or catlike instinct for self-preservation, which made him almost as anxious as Mrs Sanderson to have Luke with him in the house. At any rate, Luke was amused, his aunt grateful, and Dr Montague more than satisfied. Mrs Sanderson told the family lawyer that at any rate there was really nothing in the house Luke could steal. The old silver there was of some value, she told the lawyer, but it represented an almost insuperable difficulty for Luke: it required energy to steal it and transform it into money. Mrs Sanderson did Luke an injustice. Luke was not at all likely to make off with the family silver, or Dr Montague's watch, or Theodora's bracelet; his dishonesty was largely confined to taking petty cash from his aunt's pocketbook and cheating at cards. He was also apt to sell the watches and cigarette cases given him, fondly and with pretty blushes, by his aunt's friends. Some day Luke would inherit Hill House, but he had never thought to find himself living in it.

3

'I just don't think she should take the car, is all,' Eleanor's brother-in-law said stubbornly.

'It's half my car,' Eleanor said. 'I helped pay for it.'

'I just don't think she should take it, is all,' her brother-in-law said. He appealed to his wife. 'It isn't fair she should have the use of it for the whole summer, and us have to do without.'

'Carrie drives it all the time, and I never even take it out of the garage,' Eleanor said. 'Besides, you'll be in the mountains all summer, and you can't use it *there*. Carrie, you know you won't use the car in the mountains.'

'But suppose poor little Linnie got sick or something? And we needed a car to get her to a doctor?'

'It's half my car,' Eleanor said. 'I mean to take it.'

'Suppose even *Carrie* got sick? Suppose we couldn't get a doctor and needed to go to a hospital?'

'I want it. I mean to take it.'

'I don't think so.' Carrie spoke slowly, deliberately. 'We don't know where you're going, do we? You haven't seen fit to tell us very much about all this, have you? I don't think I can see my way clear to letting you borrow my car.'

'It's half my car.'

'No,' Carrie said. 'You may not.'

'Right.' Eleanor's brother-in-law nodded. 'We need it, like Carrie says.'

Carrie smiled slightly. 'I'd never forgive myself, Eleanor, if I lent you the car and something happened. How do we know we can trust this doctor fellow? You've still a young woman, after all, and the car is worth a good deal of money.'

'Well, now, Carrie, I *did* call Homer in the credit office, and he said this fellow was in good standing at some college or other — —'

Carrie said, still smiling, 'Of course, there is *every* reason to suppose that he is a decent man. But Eleanor does not choose to tell us where she is going, or how to reach her if we want the car back; something could happen, and we might never know. Even if Eleanor,' she went on delicately, addressing her teacup, 'even if *Eleanor* is prepared to run off to the ends of the earth at the invitation of any man, there is *still* no reason why she should be permitted to take my car with her.'

'It's half my car.'

'Suppose poor little Linnie got sick, up there in the mountains, with nobody around? No doctor?'

'In any case, Eleanor, I am sure that I am doing what Mother would have thought best. Mother had confidence in me and would certainly never have approved my letting you run wild, going off heaven knows where, in my car.'

'Or suppose even *I* got sick, up there in — —'

'I am sure Mother would have agreed with me, Eleanor.'

'Besides,' Eleanor's brother-in-law said, struck by a sudden idea, 'how do we know she'd bring it back in good condition?'

There has to be a first time for everything, Eleanor told herself. She got out of the taxi, very early in the morning, trembling because by now, perhaps, her sister and her brother-in-law might be stirring with the first faint proddings of suspicion; she took her suitcase quickly out of the taxi while the driver lifted out the cardboard carton which had been on the front seat. Eleanor overtipped him, wondering if her sister and brother-in-law were following, were perhaps even now turning into the street and telling each other, ‘There she is, just as we thought, the thief, there she is’; she turned in haste to go into the huge city garage where their car was kept, glancing nervously towards the ends of the street. She crashed into a very little lady, sending packages in all directions, and saw with dismay a bag upset and break on the sidewalk, spilling out a broken piece of cheesecake, tomato slices, a hard roll. ‘Damn you damn you!’ the little lady screamed, her face pushed up close to Eleanor’s. ‘I was taking it home, damn you damn you!’

‘I’m so sorry,’ Eleanor said; she bent down, but it did not seem possible to scoop up the fragments of tomato and cheesecake and shove them somehow back into the broken bag. The old lady was scowling down and snatching up her other packages before Eleanor could reach them, and at last Eleanor rose, smiling in convulsive apology. ‘I’m really so sorry,’ she said.

‘Damn you,’ the little old lady said, but more quietly. ‘I was taking it home for my little lunch. And now, thanks to *you* — —’

‘Perhaps I could pay?’ Eleanor took hold of her pocketbook, and the little lady stood very still and thought.

‘I couldn’t take money, just like that,’ she said at last. ‘I didn’t buy the things, you see. They were left over.’ She snapped her lips angrily. ‘You should have seen the ham they had,’ she said, ‘but someone *else* got *that*. And the little candies in the little paper dishes. I was too late on *every*thing. And now...’ She and Eleanor both glanced down at the mess on the sidewalk, and the little lady said, ‘So you see, I couldn’t just take money, not money just from your hand, not for something that was left over.’

‘May I buy you something to replace this, then? I’m in a terrible hurry, but if we could find some place that’s open — —’

The little old lady smiled wickedly. ‘I’ve still got *this*, anyway,’ she said, and she hugged one package tight. ‘You may pay my taxi fare home,’ she said. ‘Then no one *else* will be likely to knock me down.’

‘Gladly,’ Eleanor said and turned to the taxi driver, who had been waiting, interested. ‘Can you take this lady home?’ she asked.

‘A couple of dollars will do it,’ the little lady said, ‘not including the tip for this gentleman, of course. Being as small as *I* am,’ she explained daintily, ‘it’s quite a hazard, quite a hazard indeed, people knocking you down. Still, it’s a genuine pleasure to find one as willing as you to make up for it. Sometimes the people who knock you down never turn once to look.’ With Eleanor’s help she climbed into the taxi with her packages, and Eleanor took two dollars and a fifty-cent piece from her pocketbook and handed them to the little lady, who clutched them tight in her tiny hand.

‘All right, sweetheart,’ the taxi driver said, ‘where do we go?’

The little lady chuckled. ‘I’ll tell you after we start,’ she said, and then, to Eleanor, ‘Good luck to you, dearie. Watch out from now on how you go knocking people down.’

‘Good-bye,’ Eleanor said, ‘and I’m really very sorry.’

‘That’s fine, then,’ the little lady said, waving at her as the taxi pulled away from the kerb. ‘I’ll be praying for you, dearie.’

Well, Eleanor thought, staring after the taxi, there’s one person, anyway, who will be praying for me. One person anyway.

4

It was the first genuinely shining day of summer, a time of year which brought Eleanor always to aching memories of her early childhood, when it had seemed to be summer all the time; she could not remember a winter before her father’s death on a cold wet day. She had taken to wondering lately, during these swift-counted years, what had been done with all those wasted summer days; how could she have spent them so wantonly? I am foolish, she told herself early every summer, I am very foolish; I am grown up now and know the values of things. Nothing is ever really wasted, she believed sensibly, even one's childhood, and then each year, one summer morning, the warm wind would come down the city street where she walked and she would be touched with the little cold thought: I have let more time go by. Yet this morning, driving the little car which she and her sister owned together, apprehensive lest they might still realise that she had come after all and just taken it away, going docilely along the street, following the lines of traffic, stopping when she was bidden and turning when she could, she smiled out at the sunlight slanting along the street and thought, I am going, I am going, I have finally taken a step.

Always before, when she had her sister's permission to drive the little car, she had gone cautiously, moving with extreme care to avoid even the slightest scratch or mar which might irritate her sister, but today, with her carton on the back seat and her suitcase on the floor, her gloves and pocketbook and light coat on the seat beside her, the car belonged entirely to her, a little self-contained world all her own; I am really going, she thought.

At the last traffic light in the city, before she turned to go on to the great highway out of town, she stopped, waiting, and slid Dr Montague's letter out of her pocketbook. I will not even need a map, she thought; he must be a very careful man. '... Route 39 to Ashton,' the letter said, 'and then turn left on to Route 5 going west. Follow this for a little less than thirty miles, and you will come to the small village of Hillsdale. Go through Hillsdale to the corner with a gas station on the left and a church on the right, and turn left here on to what seems to be a narrow country road; you will be going up into the hills and the road is very poor. Follow this road to the end — about six miles — and you will come to the gates of Hill House. I am making these directions so detailed because it is inadvisable to stop in Hillsdale to ask your way. The people there are rude to strangers and openly hostile to anyone inquiring about Hill House.

'I am very happy that you will be joining us in Hill House, and will take great pleasure in making your acquaintance on Thursday the twenty-first of June....'

The light changed; she turned on to the highway and was free of the city. No one, she thought, can catch me now; they don't even know which way I'm going.

She had never driven far alone before. The notion of dividing her lovely journey into miles and hours was silly; she saw it, bringing her car with precision between the line on the road and the line of trees beside the road, as a passage of moments, each one new, carrying her along with them, taking her down a path of incredible novelty to a new place. The journey itself was her positive action, her destination vague, unimagined, perhaps non-existent. She meant to savour each turn of her travelling, loving the road and the trees and the houses and the small ugly towns, teasing herself with the notion that she might take it into her head to stop just anywhere and never leave again. She might pull her car to the side of the highway — although that was not allowed, she told herself; she would be punished if she really did — and leave it behind while she wandered off past the trees into the soft, welcoming country beyond. She might wander till she was exhausted, chasing butterflies or following a stream, and then come at nightfall to the hut of some poor woodcutter who would offer her shelter; she might make her home for ever in East Barrington or Desmond or the incorporated village of Berk; she might never leave the road at all, but just hurry on and on until the wheels of the car were worn to nothing and she had come to the end of the world.

And, she thought, I might just go along to Hill House, where I am expected and where I am being given shelter and room and board and a small token salary in consideration of forsaking my commitments and involvements in the city and running away to see the world. I wonder what Dr Montague is like. I wonder what Hill House is like. I wonder who else will be there.

She was well away from the city now, watching for the turning on to Route 39, that magic thread of road Dr Montague had chosen for her, out of all the roads in the world, to bring her safely to him and to Hill House; no other road could lead her from where she was to where she wanted to be. Dr Montague was confirmed, made infallible; under the sign which pointed the way to Route 39 was another sign saying: ASHTON, 121 MILES.

The road, her intimate friend now, turned and dipped, going around turns where surprises waited — once a cow, regarding her over a fence, once an incurious dog — down into hollows where small towns lay, past fields and orchards. On the main street of one village she passed a vast house, pillared and walled, with shutters over the windows and a pair of stone lions guarding the steps, and she thought that perhaps she might live there, dusting the lions each morning and patting their heads good night. Time is beginning this morning in June, she assured herself, but it is a time that is strangely new and of itself; in these few seconds I have lived a lifetime in a house with two lions in front. Every morning I swept the porch and dusted the lions, and every evening I patted their heads good night, and once a week I washed their faces and manes and paws with warm water and soda and cleaned between their teeth with a swab. Inside the house the rooms were tall and clear with shining floors and polished windows. A little dainty old lady took care of me, moving starchily with a silver tea service on a tray and bringing me a glass of elderberry wine each evening for my health's sake. I took my dinner alone in the long, quiet dining-room at the gleaming table, and between the tall windows the white panelling of the walls shone in the candlelight; I dined upon a bird, and radishes from the garden, and home-made plum jam. When I slept it was under a canopy of white organdie, and a nightlight guarded me from the hall. People bowed to me on the streets of the town because everyone was very proud of my lions. When I died...

She had left the town far behind by now, and was going past dirty, closed lunch stands and torn signs. There had been a fair somewhere near here once, long ago, with motorcycle races; the signs still carried fragments of words. Dare, one of them read, and another, EVIL, and she laughed at herself, perceiving how she sought out omens everywhere; the word is DAREDEVIL, Eleanor, daredevil drivers, and she slowed her car because she was driving too fast and might reach Hill House too soon.

At one spot she stopped altogether beside the road to stare in disbelief and wonder. Along the road for perhaps a quarter of a mile she had been passing and admiring a row of splendid tended oleanders, blooming pink and white in a steady row. Now she had come to the gateway they protected, and past the gateway the trees continued. The gateway was no more than a pair of ruined stone pillars, with a road leading away between them into empty fields. She could see that the oleander trees cut away from the road and ran up each side of a great square, and she could see all the way to the farther side of the square, which was a line of oleander trees seemingly going along a little river. Inside the oleander square there was nothing, no house, no building, nothing but the straight road going across and ending at the stream. Now what was here, she wondered, what was here and is gone, or what was going to be here and never came? Was it going to be a house or a garden or an orchard; were they driven away for ever or are they coming back? Oleanders are poisonous, she remembered; could they be here guarding something? Will I, she thought, will I get out of my car and go between the ruined gates and then, once I am in the magic oleander square, find that I have wandered into a fairyland, protected poisonously from the eyes of people passing? Once I have stepped between the magic gateposts, will I find myself through the protective barrier, the spell broken? I will go into a sweet garden, with fountains and low benches and roses trained over arbours, and find one path — jewelled, perhaps, with rubies and emeralds, soft enough for a king's daughter to walk upon with her little sandalled feet — and it will lead me directly to the palace which lies under a spell. I will walk up low stone steps past stone lions guarding and into a courtyard where a fountain plays and the queen waits, weeping, for the princess to return. She will drop her embroidery when she sees me, and cry out to the palace servants — stirring at last after their long sleep — to prepare a great feast, because the enchantment is ended and the palace is itself again. And we shall live happily ever after.

No, of course, she thought, turning to start her car again, once the palace becomes visible and the spell is broken, the *whole* spell will be broken and all this countryside outside the oleanders will return to its proper form, fading away, towns and signs and cows, into a soft green picture from a fairy tale. Then, coming down from the hills there will be a prince riding, bright in green and silver with a hundred bowmen riding behind him, pennants stirring, horses tossing, jewels flashing...

She laughed and turned to smile good-bye at the magic oleanders. Another day, she told them, another day I'll come back and break your spell.

She stopped for lunch after she had driven a hundred miles and a mile. She found a country restaurant which advertised itself as an old mill and found herself seated, incredibly, upon a balcony over a dashing stream, looking down upon wet rocks and the intoxicating sparkle of moving water, with a cut-glass bowl of cottage cheese on the table before her, and corn sticks in a napkin. Because this was a time and a land where enchantments were swiftly made and broken she wanted to linger over her lunch, knowing that Hill House always waited for her at the end of her day. The only other people in the dining-room were a family party, a mother and father with a small boy and girl, and they talked to one another softly and gently, and once the little girl turned and regarded Eleanor with frank curiosity and, after a minute, smiled. The lights from the stream below touched the ceiling and the polished tables and glanced along the little girl's curls, and the little girl's mother said, 'She wants her cup of stars.'

Eleanor looked up, surprised; the little girl was sliding back in her chair, sullenly refusing her milk, while her father frowned and her brother giggled and her mother said calmly, 'She wants her cup of stars.'

Indeed yes, Eleanor thought; indeed, so do I; a cup of stars, of course.

'Her little cup,' the mother was explaining, smiling apologetically at the waitress, who was thunderstruck at the thought that the mill's good country milk was not rich enough for the little girl. 'It has stars in the bottom, and she always drinks her milk from it at home. She calls it her cup of stars because she can see the stars while she drinks her milk.' The waitress nodded, unconvinced, and the mother told the little girl, 'You'll have your milk from your cup of stars tonight when we get home. But just for now, just to be a very good little girl, will you take a little milk from this glass?'

Don't do it, Eleanor told the little girl; insist on your cup of stars; once they have trapped you into being like everyone else you will never see your cup of stars again; don’t do it; and the little girl glanced at her, and smiled a little subtle, dimpling, wholly comprehending smile, and shook her head stubbornly at the glass. Brave girl, Eleanor thought; wise, brave girl.

‘You’re spoiling her,’ the father said. ‘She ought not to be allowed these whims.’

‘Just this once,’ the mother said. She put down the glass of milk and touched the little girl gently on the hand. ‘Eat your ice cream,’ she said.

When they left, the little girl waved good-bye to Eleanor, and Eleanor waved back, sitting in joyful loneliness to finish her coffee while the gay stream tumbled along below her. I have not very much farther to go, Eleanor thought; I am more than half-way there. Journey’s end, she thought, and far back in her mind, sparkling like the little stream, a tag end of a tune danced through her head, bringing distantly a word or so; ‘In delay there lies no plenty,’ she thought, ‘in delay there lies no plenty.’

She nearly stopped for ever just outside Ashton, because she came to a tiny cottage buried in a garden. I could live there all alone, she thought, slowing the car to look down the winding garden path to the small blue front door with, perfectly, a white cat on the step. No one would ever find me there, either, behind all those roses, and just to make sure I would plant oleanders by the road. I will light a fire in the cool evenings and toast apples at my own hearth. I will raise white cats and sew white curtains for the windows and sometimes come out of my door to go to the store to buy cinnamon and tea and thread. People will come to me to have their fortunes told, and I will brew love potions for sad maidens; I will have a robin.... But the cottage was far behind, and it was time to look for her new road, so carefully charted by Dr Montague.

‘Turn left on to Route 5 going west,’ his letter said, and, as efficiently and promptly as though he had been guiding her from some spot far away, moving her car with controls in his hands, it was done; she was on Route 5 going west, and her journey was nearly done. In spite of what he said, though, she thought, I will stop in Hillsdale for a minute, just for a cup of coffee, because I cannot bear to have my long trip end so soon. It was not really disobeying, anyway; the letter said it was inadvisable to stop in Hillsdale to ask the way, not forbidden to stop for coffee, and perhaps if I don't mention Hill House I will not be doing wrong. Anyway, she thought obscurely, it's my last chance.

Hillsdale was upon her before she knew it, a tangled disorderly mess of dirty houses and crooked streets. It was small; once she had come on to the main street she could see the corner at the end with the gas station and the church. There seemed to be only one place to stop for coffee, and that was an unattractive diner, but Eleanor was bound to stop in Hillsdale and so she brought her car to the broken kerb in front of the diner and got out. After a minute's thought, with a silent nod to Hillsdale, she locked the car, mindful of her suitcase on the floor and the carton on the back seat. I will not spend long in Hillsdale, she thought, looking up and down the street, which managed, even in the sunlight, to be dark and ugly. A dog slept uneasily in the shade against a wall, a woman stood in a doorway across the street and looked at Eleanor, and two young boys lounged against a fence, elaborately silent. Eleanor, who was afraid of strange dogs and jeering women and young hoodlums, went quickly into the diner, clutching her pocketbook and her car keys. Inside, she found a counter with a chinless, tired girl behind it, and a man sitting at the end eating. She wondered briefly how hungry he must have been to come in here at all, when she looked at the grey counter and the smeared glass bowl over a plate of doughnuts. 'Coffee,' she said to the girl behind the counter, and the girl turned wearily and tumbled down a cup from the piles on the shelves; I will have to drink this coffee because I said I was going to, Eleanor told herself sternly, but next time I will listen to Dr Montague.

There was some elaborate joke going on between the man eating and the girl behind the counter; when she set Eleanor's coffee down she glanced at him and half-smiled, and he shrugged, and then the girl laughed. Eleanor looked up, but the girl was examining her fingernails and the man was wiping his plate with bread. Perhaps Eleanor's coffee was poisoned; it certainly looked it. Determined to plumb the village of Hillsdale to its lowest depths, Eleanor said to the girl, 'I'll have one of those doughnuts too, please,' and the girl, glancing sideways at the man, slid one of the doughnuts on to a dish and set it down in front of Eleanor and laughed when she caught another look from the man.

'This is a pretty little town,' Eleanor said to the girl. 'What is it called?'

The girl stared at her; perhaps no one had ever before had the audacity to call Hillsdale a pretty little town; after a moment the girl looked again at the man, as though calling for confirmation, and said, 'Hillsdale.'

'Have you lived here long?' Eleanor asked. I'm not going to mention Hill House, she assured Dr Montague far away, I just want to waste a little time.

'Yeah,' the girl said.

'It must be pleasant, living in a small town like this. I come from the city.'

'Yeah?'

'Do you like it here?'

'It's all right,' the girl said. She looked again at the man, who was listening carefully. 'Not much to do.'

'How large a town is it?'

‘Pretty small. You want more coffee?’ This was addressed to the man, who was rattling his cup against his saucer, and Eleanor took a first, shuddering sip of her own coffee and wondered how he could possibly want more.

‘Do you have a lot of visitors around here?’ she asked when the girl had filled the coffee cup and gone back to lounge against the shelves. ‘Tourists, I mean?’

‘What for?’ For a minute the girl flashed at her, from what might have been an emptiness greater than any Eleanor had ever known. ‘Why would anybody come *here*?’ She looked sullenly at the man and added, ‘There’s not even a movie.’

‘But the hills are so pretty. Mostly, with small out-of-the-way towns like this one, you’ll find city people who have come and built themselves homes up in the hills. For privacy.’

The girl laughed shortly. ‘Not *here* they don’t.’

‘Or remodelling old houses — —’

‘Privacy,’ the girl said, and laughed again.

‘It just seems surprising,’ Eleanor said, feeling the man looking at her.

‘Yeah,’ the girl said. ‘If they’d put in a movie, even.’

‘I thought,’ Eleanor said carefully, ‘that I might even look around. Old houses are usually cheap, you know, and it’s fun to make them over.’

‘Not around here,’ the girl said.

‘Then,’ Eleanor said, ‘there are no old houses around here? Back in the hills?’

‘Nope.’

The man rose, taking change from his pocket, and spoke for the first time. ‘People *leave* this town,’ he said. ‘They don’t *come* here.’

When the door closed behind him the girl turned her flat eyes back to Eleanor, almost resentfully, as though Eleanor with her chatter had driven the man away. ‘He was right,’ she said finally. ‘They go away, the lucky ones.’

‘Why don’t *you* run away?’ Eleanor asked her, and the girl shrugged.

‘Would I be any better off?’ she asked. She took Eleanor’s money without interest and returned the change. Then, with another of her quick flashes, she glanced at the empty plates at the end of the counter and almost smiled. ‘He comes in every day,’ she said. When Eleanor smiled back and started to speak, the girl turned her back and busied herself with the cups on the shelves, and Eleanor, feeling herself dismissed, rose gratefully from her coffee and took up her car keys and pocketbook. ‘Good-bye,’ Eleanor said, and the girl, back still turned, said, ‘Good luck to you. I hope you find your house.’

5

The road leading away from the gas station and the church was very poor indeed, deeply rutted and rocky. Eleanor’s little car stumbled and bounced, reluctant to go farther into these unattractive hills, where the day seemed quickly drawing to an end under the thick, oppressive trees on either side. They do not really seem to have much traffic on this road, Eleanor thought wryly, turning the wheel quickly to avoid a particularly vicious rock ahead; six miles of this will not do the car any good; and for the first time in hours she thought of her sister and laughed. By now they would surely know that she had taken the car and gone, but they would not know where; they would be telling each other incredulously that they would never have suspected it of Eleanor. I would never have suspected it of myself, she thought, laughing still; everything is different, I am a new person, very far from home. ‘In delay there lies no plenty;... present mirth hath present laughter....' And she gasped as the car cracked against a rock and reeled back across the road with an ominous scraping somewhere beneath, but then gathered itself together valiantly and resumed its dogged climb. The tree branches brushed against the windshield, and it grew steadily darker; Hill House likes to make an entrance, she thought; I wonder if the sun ever shines along here. At last, with one final effort, the car cleared a tangle of dead leaves and small branches across the road, and came into a clearing by the gate of Hill House.

Why am I here? she thought helplessly and at once; why am I here? The gate was tall and ominous and heavy, set strongly into a stone wall which went off through the trees. Even from the car she could see the padlock and the chain that was twisted around and through the bars. Beyond the gate she could see only that the road continued, turned, shadowed on either side by the still, dark trees.

Since the gate was so clearly locked — locked and double-locked and chained and barred; who, she wondered, wants so badly to get in? — she made no attempt to get out of her car, but pressed the horn, and the trees and the gate shuddered and withdrew slightly from the sound. After a minute she blew the horn again and then saw a man coming towards her from inside the gate; he was as dark and unwelcoming as the padlock, and before he moved towards the gate he peered through the bars at her, scowling.

'What *you* want?' His voice was sharp, mean.

'I want to come in, please. Please unlock the gate.'

'Who say?'

'Why — —' She faltered. 'I'm supposed to come in,' she said at last.

'What for?'

‘I am expected.’ Or am I? she wondered suddenly; is this as far as I go?

‘Who by?’

She knew, of course, that he was delighting in exceeding his authority, as though once he moved to unlock the gate he would lose the little temporary superiority he thought he had — and what superiority have I? she wondered; I am *outside* the gate, after all. She could already see that losing her temper, which she did rarely because she was so afraid of being ineffectual, would only turn him away, leaving her still outside the gate, railing futilely. She could even anticipate his innocence if he were reproved later for this arrogance — the maliciously vacant grin, the wide, blank eyes, the whining voice protesting that he *would* have let her in, he *planned* to let her in, but how could he be sure? He had his orders, didn’t he? And he had to do what he was told? *He*’d be the one to get into trouble, wouldn’t he, if he let in someone wasn’t supposed to be inside? She could anticipate his shrug, and, picturing him, laughed, perhaps the worst thing she could have done.

Eyeing her, he moved back from the gate. ‘You better come back later,’ he said, and turned his back with an air of virtuous triumph.

‘Listen,’ she called after him, still trying not to sound angry, ‘I am one of Doctor Montague’s guests; he will be expecting me in the house — please *listen* to me!’

He turned and grinned at her. ‘They couldn’t rightly be *expecting* you,’ he said, ‘seeing as you’re the only one’s *come*, so far.’

‘Do you mean that there’s no one in the house?’

‘No one *I* know of. Maybe my wife, getting it fixed up. So they couldn’t be there exactly *expecting* you, now *could* they?’

She sat back against the car seat and closed her eyes. Hill House, she thought, you’re as hard to get into as heaven.

‘I suppose you know what you’re *asking* for, coming here? I suppose they told you, back in the city? You *hear* anything about this place?’

‘I heard that I was invited here as a guest of Doctor Montague’s. When you open the gates I will go inside.’

‘I’ll open them; I’m going to open them. I just want to be sure you know what’s waiting for you in there. You ever been here before? One of the family, maybe?’ He looked at her now, peering through the bars, his jeering face one more barrier, after padlock and chain. ‘I can’t let you in till I’m *sure*, can I? What’d you say your name was?’

She sighed. ‘Eleanor Vance.’

‘Not one of the family then, I guess. You ever hear anything about this place?’

It’s my chance, I suppose, she thought; I’m being given a last chance. I could turn my car around right here and now in front of these gates and go away from here, and no one would blame me. Anyone has a right to run away. She put her head out through the car window and said with fury, ‘My name is Eleanor Vance. I am expected in Hill House. Unlock those gates at once.’

‘All right, all *right*.’ Deliberately, making a wholly unnecessary display of fitting the key and turning it, he opened the padlock and loosened the chain and swung the gates just wide enough for the car to come through. Eleanor moved the car slowly, but the alacrity with which he leaped to the side of the road made her think for a minute that he had perceived the fleeting impulse crossing her mind; she laughed, and then stopped the car because he was coming towards her — safely, from the side.

‘You won’t like it,’ he said. ‘You’ll be sorry I ever opened that gate.’

‘Out of the way, please,’ she said. ‘You’ve held me up long enough.’

‘You think they could get anyone else to open this gate? You think anyone else’d stay around here that long, except me and my wife? You think we can’t have things just about the way we want them, long as we stay around here and fix up the house and open the gates for all you city people think you know everything?’

‘Please get away from my car.’ She dared not admit to herself that he frightened her, for fear that he might perceive it; his nearness, leaning against the side of the car, was ugly, and his enormous resentment puzzled her; she had certainly made him open the gate for her, but did he think of the house and gardens inside as his own? A name from Dr Montague’s letter came into her mind, and she asked curiously, ‘Are you Dudley, the caretaker?’

‘Yes, I’m Dudley, the caretaker.’ He mimicked her. ‘Who else you think would be around here?’

The honest old family retainer, she thought, proud and loyal and thoroughly unpleasant. ‘You and your wife take care of the house all alone?’

‘Who else?’ It was his boast, his curse, his refrain.

She moved restlessly, afraid to draw away from him too obviously, and yet wanting, with small motions of starting the car, to make him stand aside. ‘I’m sure you’ll be able to make us very comfortable, you and your wife,’ she said, putting a tone of finality into her voice. ‘Meanwhile, I’m very anxious to get to the house as soon as possible.’

He snickered disagreeably. ‘*Me*, now,’ he said, ‘me, I don’t hang around here after dark.’

Grinning, satisfied with himself, he stood away from the car, and Eleanor was grateful, although awkward starting the car under his eye; perhaps he will keep popping out at me all along the drive, she thought, a sneering

Cheshire Cat, yelling each time that I should be happy to find anyone willing to hang around this place, until dark, anyway. To show that she was not at all affected by the thought of the face of Dudley the caretaker between the trees she began to whistle, a little annoyed to find that the same tune still ran through her head. ‘Present mirth hath present laughter...’ And she told herself crossly that she must really make an effort to think of something else; she was sure that the rest of the words must be most unsuitable, to hide so stubbornly from her memory, and probably wholly disreputable to be caught singing on her arrival at Hill House.

Over the trees, occasionally, between them and the hills, she caught glimpses of what must be the roofs, perhaps a tower, of Hill House. They made houses so oddly back when Hill House was built, she thought; they put towers and turrets and buttresses and wooden lace on them, even sometimes Gothic spires and gargoyles; nothing was ever left undecorated. Perhaps Hill House has a tower, or a secret chamber, or even a passageway going off into the hills and probably used by smugglers — although what could smugglers find to smuggle around these lonely hills? Perhaps I will encounter a devilishly handsome smuggler and...

She turned her car on to the last stretch of straight drive leading her directly, face to face, to Hill House and, moving without thought, pressed her foot on the brake to stall the car and sat, staring.

The house was vile. She shivered and thought, the words coming freely into her mind, Hill House is vile, it is diseased; get away from here at once.

TWO

NO HUMAN EYE can isolate the unhappy coincidence of line and place which suggests evil in the face of a house, and yet somehow a maniac juxtaposition, a badly turned angle, some chance meeting of roof and sky, turned Hill House into a place of despair, more frightening because the face of Hill House seemed awake, with a watchfulness from the blank windows and a touch of glee in the eyebrow of a cornice. Almost any house, caught unexpectedly or at an odd angle, can turn a deeply humorous look on a watching person; even a mischievous little chimney, or a dormer like a dimple, can catch up a beholder with a sense of fellowship; but a house arrogant and hating, never off guard, can only be evil. This house, which seemed somehow to have formed itself, flying together into its own powerful pattern under the hands of its builders, fitting itself into its own construction of lines and angles, reared its great head back against the sky without concession to humanity. It was a house without kindness, never meant to be lived in, not a fit place for people or for love or for hope. Exorcism cannot alter the countenance of a house; Hill House would stay as it was until it was destroyed.

I should have turned back at the gate, Eleanor thought. The house had caught her with an atavistic turn in the pit of the stomach, and she looked along the lines of its roofs, fruitlessly endeavouring to locate the badness, whatever dwelt there; her hands turned nervously cold so that she fumbled, trying to take out a cigarette, and beyond everything else she was afraid, listening to the sick voice inside her which whispered, *Get away from here, get away*.

But this is what I came so far to find, she told herself; I can't go back. Besides, he would laugh at me if I tried to get back out through that gate.

Trying not to look up at the house — and she could not even have told its colour, or its style, or its size, except that it was enormous and dark, looking down over her — she started the car again, and drove up the last bit of driveway directly to the steps, which led in a forthright, no-escape manner on to the verandah and aimed at the front door. The drive turned off on either side, to encircle the house, and probably later she could take her car around and find a building of some kind to put it in; now she felt uneasily that she did not care to cut off her means of departure too completely. She turned the car just enough to move it off to one side, out of the way of later arrivals — it would be a pity, she thought grimly, for anyone to get a first look at this house with anything so comforting as a human automobile parked in front of it — and got out, taking her suitcase and her coat. Well, she thought inadequately, here I am.

It was an act of moral strength to lift her foot and set it on the bottom step, and she thought that her deep unwillingness to touch Hill House for the first time came directly from the vivid feeling that it was waiting for her, evil, but patient. Journeys end in lovers meeting, she thought, remembering her song at last, and laughed, standing on the steps of Hill House, journeys end in lovers meeting, and she put her feet down firmly and went up to the verandah and the door. Hill House came around her in a rush; she was enshadowed, and the sound of her feet on the wood of the verandah was an outrage in the utter silence, as though it had been a very long time since feet stamped across the boards of Hill House. She brought her hand up to the heavy iron knocker that had a child's face, determined to make more noise and yet more, so that Hill House might be very sure she was there, and then the door opened without warning and she was looking at a woman who, if like ever merited like, could only be the wife of the man at the gate.

‘Mrs Dudley?’ she said, catching her breath. ‘I’m Eleanor Vance. I’m expected.’

Silently the woman stood aside. Her apron was clean, her hair was neat, and yet she gave an indefinable air of dirtiness, quite in keeping with her husband, and the suspicious sullenness of her face was a match for the malicious petulance of his. No, Eleanor told herself; it’s partly because everything seems so dark around here, and partly because I expected that man’s wife to be ugly. If I hadn’t seen Hill House, would I be so unfair to these people? They only take care of it, after all.

The hall in which they stood was overfull of dark wood and weighty carving, dim under the heaviness of the staircase, which lay back from the farther end. Above there seemed to be another hallway, going the width of the house; she could see a wide landing and then, across the staircase well, doors closed along the upper hall. On either side of her now were great double doors, carved with fruit and grain and living things; all the doors she could see in this house were closed.

When she tried to speak, her voice was drowned in the dim stillness, and she had to try again to make a sound. ‘Can you take me to my room?’ she asked at last, gesturing towards her suitcase on the floor and watching the wavering reflection of her hand going down and down into the deep shadows of the polished floor, ‘I gather I’m the first one here. You — you *did* say you were Mrs Dudley?’ I think I’m going to cry, she thought, like a child sobbing and wailing, *I don’t like it here....*

Mrs Dudley turned and started up the stairs, and Eleanor took up her suitcase and followed, hurrying after anything else alive in this house. No, she thought, I don’t like it here. Mrs Dudley came to the top of the stairs and turned right, and Eleanor saw that with some rare perception the builders of the house had given up any attempt at style — probably after realising what the house was going to be, whether they chose it or not — and had, on this second floor, set in a long, straight hall to accommodate the doors to the bedrooms; she had a quick impression of the builders finishing off the second and third storeys of the house with a kind of indecent haste, eager to finish their work without embellishment and get out of there, following the simplest possible pattern for the rooms. At the left end of the hall was a second staircase, probably going from servants' rooms on the third floor down past the second to the service rooms below; at the right end of the hall another room had been set in, perhaps, since it was on the end, to get the maximum amount of sun and light. Except for a continuation of the dark woodwork, and what looked like a series of poorly executed engravings arranged with unlovely exactness along the hall in either direction, nothing broke the straightness of the hall except the series of doors, all closed.

Mrs Dudley crossed the hall and opened a door, perhaps at random. 'This is the blue room,' she said.

From the turn in the staircase Eleanor assumed that the room would be at the front of the house; sister Anne, sister Anne, she thought, and moved gratefully towards the light from the room. 'How nice,' she said, standing in the doorway, but only from the sense that she must say something; it was not nice at all, and only barely tolerable; it held enclosed the same clashing disharmony that marked Hill House throughout.

Mrs Dudley turned aside to let Eleanor come in, and spoke, apparently to the wall. 'I set dinner on the dining-room sideboard at six sharp,' she said. 'You can serve yourselves. I clear up in the morning. I have breakfast ready for you at nine. That's the way I agreed to do. I can't keep the rooms up the way you'd like; but there's no one else you could get that would help me. I don't wait on people. What I agreed to, it doesn't mean I wait on people.'

Eleanor nodded, standing uncertainly in the doorway.

'I don't stay after I set out dinner,' Mrs Dudley went on. 'Not after it begins to get dark. I leave before dark comes.'

'I know,' Eleanor said.

'We live over in the town, six miles away.'

'Yes,' Eleanor said, remembering Hillsdale.

'So there won't be anyone around if you need help.'

'I understand.'

'We couldn't even hear you, in the night.'

'I don't suppose — —'

'No one could. No one lives any nearer than the town. No one else will come any nearer than that.'

'I know,' Eleanor said tiredly.

'In the night,' Mrs Dudley said, and smiled outright. 'In the dark,' she said, and closed the door behind her.

Eleanor almost giggled, thinking of herself calling, 'Oh, Mrs Dudley, I need your help in the dark,' and then she shivered.

2

She stood alone beside her suitcase, her coat still hanging over her arm, thoroughly miserable, telling herself helplessly, Journeys end in lovers meeting, and wishing she could go home. Behind her lay the dark staircase and the polished hallway and the great front door and Mrs Dudley and Dudley laughing at the gate and the padlocks and Hillsdale and the cottage of flowers and the family at the inn and the oleander garden and the house with the stone lions in front, and they had brought her, under Dr Montague's unerring eye, to the blue room at Hill House. It’s awful, she thought, unwilling to move, since motion might imply acceptance, a gesture of moving in, it’s awful and I don’t want to stay; but there was nowhere else to go; Dr Montague’s letter had brought her this far and could take her no farther. After a minute she sighed and shook her head and walked across to set her suitcase down on the bed.

Here I am in the blue room of Hill House, she said half aloud, although it was real enough, and beyond all question a blue room. There were blue dimity curtains over the two windows, which looked out over the roof of the verandah on to the lawn, and a blue-figured rug on the floor, and a blue spread on the bed and a blue quilt at the foot. The walls, dark woodwork to shoulder height, were blue-figured paper above, with a design of tiny blue flowers, wreathed and gathered and delicate. Perhaps someone had once hoped to lighten the air of the blue room in Hill House with a dainty wallpaper, not seeing how such a hope would evaporate in Hill House, leaving only the faintest hint of its existence, like an almost inaudible echo of sobbing far away.... Eleanor shook herself, turning to see the room complete. It had an unbelievably faulty design which left it chillingly wrong in all its dimensions, so that the walls seemed always in one direction a fraction longer than the eye could endure, and in another direction a fraction less than the barest possible tolerable length; this is where they want me to *sleep*, Eleanor thought incredulously; what nightmares are waiting, shadowed, in those high corners — what breath of mindless fear will drift across my mouth... and shook herself again. *Really*, she told herself, *really*, Eleanor.

She opened her suitcase on the high bed and, slipping off her stiff city shoes with grateful relief, began to unpack, at the back of her mind the thoroughly female conviction that the best way to soothe a troubled mind is to put on comfortable shoes. Yesterday, packing her suitcase in the city, she had chosen clothes which she assumed would be suitable for wearing in an isolated country house; she had even run out at the last minute and bought — excited at her own daring — two pairs of slacks, something she had not worn in more years than she could remember. Mother would be *furious*, she had thought, packing the slacks down at the bottom of her suitcase so that she need not take them out, need never let anyone know she had them, in case she lost her courage. Now, in Hill House, they no longer seemed so new; she unpacked carelessly, setting dresses crookedly on hangers, tossing the slacks into the bottom drawer of the high marble-topped dresser, throwing her city shoes into a corner of the great wardrobe. She was bored already with the books she had brought; I am probably not going to stay anyway, she thought, and closed her empty suitcase and set it in the wardrobe corner; it won't take me five minutes to pack again. She discovered that she had been trying to put her suitcase down without making a sound and then realised that while she unpacked she had been in her stockinged feet, trying to move as silently as possible, as though stillness were vital in Hill House; she remembered that Mrs Dudley had also walked without sound. When she stood still in the middle of the room the pressing silence of Hill House came back all around her. I am like a small creature swallowed whole by a monster, she thought, and the monster feels my tiny little movements inside. 'No,' she said aloud, and the one word echoed. She went quickly across the room and pushed aside the blue dimity curtains, but the sunlight came only palely through the thick glass of the windows, and she could see only the roof of the verandah and a stretch of the lawn beyond. Somewhere down there was her little car, which could take her away again. Journeys end in lovers meeting, she thought; it was my own choice to come. Then she realised that she was afraid to go back across the room.

She was standing with her back to the window, looking from the door to the wardrobe to the dresser to the bed, telling herself that she was not afraid at all, when she heard, far below, the sounds of a car door slamming and then quick footsteps, almost dancing, up the steps and across the verandah, and then, shockingly, the crash of the great iron knocker coming down. Why, she thought, there are other people coming; I am not going to be here all alone. Almost laughing, she ran across the room and into the hall, to look down the staircase into the hallway below.

‘Thank heaven you’re here,’ she said, peering through the dimness, ‘thank heaven somebody’s here.’ She realised without surprise that she was speaking as though Mrs Dudley could not hear her, although Mrs Dudley stood, straight and pale, in the hall. ‘Come on up,’ Eleanor said, ‘you’ll have to carry your own suitcase.’ She was breathless and seemed unable to stop talking, her usual shyness melted away by relief. ‘My name’s Eleanor Vance,’ she said, ‘and ‘I’m so glad you’re here.’

‘I’m Theodora. Just Theodora. This *bloody* house — —’

‘It’s just as bad up here. Come on up. Make her give you the room next to mine.’

Theodora came up the heavy stairway after Mrs Dudley, looking incredulously at the stained-glass window on the landing, the marble urn in a niche, the patterned carpet. Her suitcase was considerably larger than Eleanor’s, and considerably more luxurious, and Eleanor came forward to help her, glad that her own things were safely put away out of sight. ‘Wait till you see the bedrooms,’ Eleanor said. ‘Mine used to be the embalming room, I think.’

‘It’s the home I’ve always dreamed of,’ Theodora said. ‘A little hideaway where I can be alone with my thoughts. Particularly if my thoughts happened to be about murder or suicide or — —’

‘Green room,’ Mrs Dudley said coldly, and Eleanor sensed, with a quick turn of apprehension, that flippant or critical talk about the house bothered Mrs Dudley in some manner; maybe she thinks it can hear us, Eleanor thought, and then was sorry she had thought it. Perhaps she shivered, because Theodora turned with a quick smile and touched her shoulder gently, reassuringly; she is charming, Eleanor thought, smiling back, not at all the sort of person who belongs in this dreary, dark place, but then, probably, I don’t belong here either; I am not the sort of person for Hill House but I can’t think of anybody who would be. She laughed then, watching Theodora’s expression as she stood in the doorway of the green room.

‘Good Lord,’ Theodora said, looking sideways at Eleanor. ‘How perfectly enchanting. A positive bower.’

‘I set dinner on the dining-room sideboard at six sharp,’ Mrs Dudley said. ‘You can serve yourselves. I clear up in the morning. I have breakfast ready for you at nine. That’s the way I agreed to do.’

‘You’re frightened,’ Theodora said, watching Eleanor.

‘I can’t keep the rooms up the way you’d like, but there’s no one else you could get that would help me. I don’t wait on people. What I agreed to, it doesn’t mean I wait on people.’

‘It was just when I thought I was all alone,’ Eleanor said.

‘I don’t stay after six. Not after it begins to get dark.’

‘I’m here now,’ Theodora said, ‘so it’s all right.’

‘We have a connecting bathroom,’ Eleanor said absurdly. ‘The rooms are exactly alike.’

Green dimity curtains hung over the windows in Theodora's room, the wallpaper was decked with green garlands, the bedspread and quilt were green, the marble-topped dresser and the huge wardrobe were the same. 'I've never seen such awful places in my *life*,' Eleanor said, her voice rising.

'Like the very best hotels,' Theodora said, 'or any good girls' camp.'

'I leave before dark comes,' Mrs Dudley went on.

'No one can hear you if you scream in the night,' Eleanor told Theodora. She realised that she was clutching at the door-knob and, under Theodora's quizzical eye, unclenched her fingers and walked steadily across the room. 'We'll have to find some way of opening these windows,' she said.

'So there won't be anyone around if you need help,' Mrs Dudley said. 'We couldn't hear you, even in the night. No one could.'

'All right now?' Theodora asked, and Eleanor nodded.

'No one lives any nearer than the town. No one else will come any nearer than that.'

'You're probably just hungry,' Theodora said. 'And I'm starved myself.' She set her suitcase on the bed and slipped off her shoes. '*Nothing*,' she said, 'upsets me more than being hungry; I snarl and snap and burst into tears.' She lifted a pair of softly tailored slacks out of the suitcase.

'In the night,' Mrs Dudley said. She smiled. 'In the dark,' she said, and closed the door behind her.

After a minute Eleanor said, 'She also walks without making a sound.'

'Delightful old body.' Theodora turned, regarding her room. 'I take it back, that about the best hotels,' she said. 'It's a little bit like a boarding school I went to for a while.'

'Come and see mine,' Eleanor said. She opened the bathroom door and led the way into her blue room. 'I was all unpacked and thinking about packing again when you came.’

‘Poor baby. You’re certainly starving. All *I* could think of when I got a look at the place from outside was what fun it would be to stand out there and watch it burn down. Maybe before we leave...’

‘It was terrible, being here alone.’

‘You should have seen that boarding school of mine during vacations.’ Theodora went back into her own room and, with the sense of movement and sound in the two rooms, Eleanor felt more cheerful. She straightened her clothes on the hangers in the wardrobe and set her books evenly on the bed-table. ‘You know,’ Theodora called from the other room, ‘it *is* kind of like the first day at school; everything’s ugly and strange, and you don’t know anybody, and you’re afraid everyone’s going to laugh at your clothes.’

Eleanor, who had opened the dresser drawer to take out a pair of slacks, stopped and then laughed and threw the slacks on the bed.

‘Did I understand correctly,’ Theodora went on, ‘that Mrs Dudley is not going to come if we scream in the night?’

‘It was not what she agreed to. Did you meet the amiable old retainer at the gate?’

‘We had a lovely chat. He said I couldn’t come in and I said I could and then I tried to run him down with my car but he jumped. Look, do you think we have to sit around here in our rooms and wait? I’d like to change into something comfortable — unless we dress for dinner, do you think?’

‘I won’t if you won’t.’

‘I won’t if *you* won’t. They can’t fight both of us. Anyway, let’s get out of here and go exploring; I would very much like to get this roof off from over my head.’

‘It gets dark so early, in these hills, with all the trees...’ Eleanor went to the window again, but there was still sunlight slanting across the lawn.

‘It won’t be really dark for nearly an hour. I want to go outside and roll on the grass.’

Eleanor chose a red sweater, thinking that in this room in this house the red of the sweater and the red of the sandals bought to match it would almost certainly be utterly at war with each other, although they had been close enough yesterday in the city. Serves me right anyway, she thought, for wanting to wear such things; I never did before. But she looked oddly well, it seemed to her as she stood by the long mirror on the wardrobe door, almost comfortable. ‘Do you have any idea who else is coming?’ she asked. ‘Or when?’

‘Doctor Montague.’ Theodora said. ‘I thought he’d be here before anyone else.’

‘Have you known Doctor Montague long?’

‘Never met him,’ Theodora said. ‘Have you?’

‘Never. You almost ready?’

‘All ready.’ Theodora came through the bathroom door into Eleanor’s room; she is lovely, Eleanor thought, turning to look; I wish I were lovely. Theodora was wearing a vivid yellow shirt, and Eleanor laughed and said, ‘You bring more light into this room than the window.’

Theodora came over and regarded herself approvingly in Eleanor’s mirror. ‘I feel,’ she said, ‘that in this dreary place it is our duty to look as bright as possible. I approve of your red sweater; the two of us will be visible from one end of Hill House to the other.’ Still looking into the mirror, she asked, ‘I suppose Doctor Montague wrote to you?’

‘Yes.’ Eleanor was embarrassed. ‘I didn’t know, at first, whether it was a joke or not. But my brother-in-law checked up on him.’

‘You know,’ Theodora said slowly, ‘up until the last minute — when I got to the gates, I guess — I never really thought there *would* be a Hill House. You don’t go around expecting things like this to happen.’

‘But some of us go around hoping,’ Eleanor said.

Theodora laughed and swung around before the mirror and caught Eleanor’s hand. ‘Fellow babe in the woods,’ she said, ‘let’s go exploring.’

‘We can’t go far away from the house — —’

‘I promise not to go one step farther than you say. Do you think we have to check in and out with Mrs Dudley?’

‘She probably watches every move we make, anyway; it’s probably part of what she agreed to.’

‘Agreed to with whom, I wonder? Count Dracula?’

‘You think *he* lives in Hill House?’

‘I think he spends all his week-ends here; I swear I saw bats in the woodwork downstairs. Follow, follow.’

They ran downstairs, moving with colour and life against the dark woodwork and the clouded light of the stairs, their feet clattering, and Mrs Dudley stood below and watched them in silence.

‘We’re going exploring, Mrs Dudley,’ Theodora said lightly. ‘We’ll be outside somewhere.’

‘But we’ll be back soon,’ Eleanor added.

‘I set dinner on the sideboard at six o’clock,’ Mrs Dudley explained.

Eleanor, tugging, got the great front door open; it was just as heavy as it looked, and she thought, We will really have to find some easier way to get back in. ‘Leave this open,’ she said over her shoulder to Theodora. ‘It’s terribly heavy. Get one of those big vases and prop it open.’

Theodora wheeled one of the big stone vases from the corner of the hall, and they stood it in the doorway and rested the door against it. The fading sunlight outside was bright after the darkness of the house, and the air was fresh and sweet. Behind them Mrs Dudley moved the vase again, and the big door slammed shut.

‘Lovable old thing,’ Theodora said to the closed door. For a moment her face was thin with anger, and Eleanor thought, I hope she never looks at *me* like that, and was surprised, remembering that she was always shy with strangers, awkward and timid, and yet had come in no more than half an hour to think of Theodora as close and vital, someone whose anger would be frightening. ‘I think,’ Eleanor said hesitantly, and relaxed, because when she spoke Theodora turned and smiled again, ‘I think that during the daylight hours when Mrs Dudley is around I shall find myself some absorbing occupation far, far from the house. Rolling the tennis court, perhaps. Or tending the grapes in the hothouse.’

‘Perhaps you could help Dudley with the gates.’

‘Or look for nameless graves in the nettle-patch.’

They were standing by the rail of the verandah; from there they could see down the drive to the point where it turned among the trees again, and down over the soft curve of the hills to the distant small line which might have been the main highway, the road back to the cities from which they had come. Except for the wires which ran to the house from a spot among the trees, there was no evidence that Hill House belonged in any way to the rest of the world. Eleanor turned and followed the verandah; it went, apparently, all around the house. ‘Oh, look,’ she said, turning the corner.

Behind the house the hills were piled in great pressing masses, flooded with summer green now, rich, and still. ‘It’s why they called it Hill House,’ Eleanor said inadequately.

‘It’s altogether Victorian,’ Theodora said. ‘They simply wallowed in this kind of great billowing overdone sort of thing and buried themselves in folds of velvet and tassels and purple plush. Anyone before them or after would have put this house right up there on *top* of those hills where it belongs, instead of snuggling it down here.'

'If it were on top of the hill everyone could see it. I vote for keeping it well hidden where it is.'

'All the time I'm here I'm going to be terrified,' Theodora said, 'thinking one of those hills will fall on us.'

'They don't fall on you. They just slide down, silently and secretly, rolling over you while you try to run away.'

'Thank you,' Theodora said in a small voice. 'What Mrs Dudley has started you have completed nicely. I shall pack and go home at once.'

Believing her for a minute, Eleanor turned and stared, and then saw the amusement on her face and thought, She's much braver than I am. Unexpectedly — although it was later to become a familiar note, a recognisable attribute of what was to mean 'Theodora' in Eleanor's mind — Theodora caught at Eleanor's thought, and answered her. 'Don't be so afraid all the time,' she said and reached out to touch Eleanor's cheek with one finger. 'We never know where our courage is coming from.' Then, quickly, she ran down the steps and out on to the lawn between the tall grouped trees. 'Hurry,' she called back, 'I want to see if there's a brook somewhere.'

'We can't go too far,' Eleanor said, following. Like two children they ran across the grass, both welcoming the sudden openness of clear spaces after even a little time in Hill House, their feet grateful for the grass after the solid floors; with an instinct almost animal, they followed the sound and smell of water. 'Over here,' Theodora said, 'a little path.'

It led them tantalisingly closer to the sound of the water, doubling back and forth through the trees, giving them occasional glimpses down the hill to the driveway, leading them around out of sight of the house across a rocky meadow, and always downhill. As they came away from the house and out of the trees to places where the sunlight could still find them Eleanor was easier, although she could see that the sun was dropping disturbingly closer to the heaped hills. She called to Theodora, but Theodora only called back, ‘Follow, follow,’ and ran down the path. Suddenly she stopped, breathless and tottering, on the very edge of the brook, which had leaped up before her almost without warning; Eleanor, coming more slowly behind, caught at her hand and held her back and then, laughing, they fell together against the bank which sloped sharply down to the brook.

‘They like to surprise you around here,’ Theodora said, gasping.

‘Serve you right if you went diving in,’ Eleanor said. ‘Running like that.’

‘It’s pretty, isn’t it?’ The water of the brook moved quickly in little lighted ripples; on the other side the grass grew down to the edge of the water and yellow and blue flowers leaned their heads over; there was a rounded soft hill there, and perhaps more meadow beyond, and, far away, the great hills, still catching the light of the sun. ‘It’s pretty,’ Theodora said with finality.

‘I’m sure I’ve been here before,’ Eleanor said. ‘In a book of fairy tales, perhaps.’

‘I’m sure of it. Can you skip rocks?’

‘This is where the princess comes to meet the magic golden fish who is really a prince in disguise — —’

‘He couldn’t draw much water, that golden fish of yours; it can’t be more than three inches deep.’

‘There are stepping-stones to go across, and *little* fish swimming, tiny ones — minnows?’

‘Princes in disguise, all of them.’ Theodora stretched in the sun on the bank, and yawned. ‘Tadpoles?’ she suggested.

‘Minnows. It’s too late for tadpoles, silly, but I bet we can find frogs’ eggs. I used to catch minnows in my hands and let them go.’

‘What a farmer’s wife you might have made.’

‘This is a place for picnics, with lunch beside the brook and hard-boiled eggs.’

Theodora laughed. ‘Chicken salad and chocolate cake.’

‘Lemonade in a Thermos bottle. Spilled salt.’

Theodora rolled over luxuriously. ‘They’re wrong about ants, you know. There were almost never ants. Cows, maybe, but I don’t think I ever *did* see an ant on a picnic.’

‘Was there always a bull in a field? Did someone always say, “But we can’t go through that field; that’s where the bull is”?’

Theodora opened one eye. ‘Did you use to have a comic uncle? Everyone always laughed, whatever he said? And he used to tell you not to be afraid of the bull — if the bull came after you all you had to do was grab the ring through his nose and swing him around your head?’

Eleanor tossed a pebble into the brook and watched it sink clearly to the bottom. ‘Did you have a lot of uncles?’

‘Thousands. Do you?’

After a minute Eleanor said, ‘Oh, yes. Big ones and little ones and fat ones and thin ones — —’

‘Do you have an Aunt Edna?’

‘Aunt Muriel.’

‘Kind of thin? Rimless glasses?’

‘A garnet brooch,’ Eleanor said.

‘Does she wear a kind of dark red dress to family parties?’

‘Lace cuffs — —’

‘Then I think we must really be related,’ Theodora said. ‘Did you use to have braces on your teeth?’

‘No. Freckles.’

‘I went to that private school where they made me learn to curtsy.’

‘I always had colds all winter long. My mother made me wear woollen stockings.’

‘*My* mother made my brother take me to dances, and I used to curtsy like mad. My brother still hates me.’

‘I fell down during the graduation procession.’

‘I forgot my lines in the operetta.’

‘I used to write poetry.’

‘Yes,’ Theodora said, I’m positive we’re cousins.’

She sat up, laughing, and then Eleanor said, ‘Be quiet; there’s something moving over there.’ Frozen, shoulders pressed together, they stared, watching the spot of hillside across the brook where the grass moved, watching something unseen move slowly across the bright green hill, chilling the sunlight and the dancing little brook. ‘What is it?’ Eleanor said in a breath, and Theodora put a strong hand on her wrist.

‘It’s gone,’ Theodora said clearly, and the sun came back and it was warm again. ‘It was a rabbit,’ Theodora said.

‘I couldn’t see it,’ Eleanor said.

‘I saw it the minute you spoke,’ Theodora said firmly. ‘It was a rabbit; it went over the hill and out of sight.’

‘We’ve been away too long,’ Eleanor said and looked up anxiously at the sun touching the hilltops. She got up quickly and found that her legs were stiff from kneeling on the damp grass.

‘Imagine two splendid old picnic-going girls like us,’ Theodora said, ‘afraid of a rabbit.’

Eleanor leaned down and held out a hand to help her up. ‘We’d really better hurry back,’ she said and, because she did not herself understand her compelling anxiety, added, ‘The others might be there by now.’

‘We’ll have to come back here for a picnic soon,’ Theodora said, following carefully up the path, which went steadily uphill. ‘We really must have a good old-fashioned picnic down by the brook.’

‘We can ask Mrs Dudley to hard-boil some eggs.’ Eleanor stopped on the path, not turning. ‘Theodora,’ she said, ‘I don’t think I can, you know. I don’t think I really will be able to do it.’

‘Eleanor.’ Theodora put an arm across her shoulders. ‘Would you let them separate us now? Now that we’ve found out we’re cousins?’

THREE

THE SUN WENT down smoothly behind the hills, slipping almost eagerly, at last, into the pillowy masses. There were already long shadows on the lawn as Eleanor and Theodora came up the path towards the side verandah of Hill House, blessedly hiding its mad face in the growing darkness.

‘There’s someone waiting there,’ Eleanor said, walking more quickly, and so saw Luke for the first time. Journeys end in lovers meeting, she thought, and could only say inadequately, ‘Are you looking for us?’

He had come to the verandah rail, looking down at them in the dusk, and now he bowed with a deep welcoming gesture, ‘”These being dead,”’ he said, ‘”then dead must I be.” Ladies, if you are the ghostly inhabitants of Hill House, I am here for ever.’

He’s really kind of silly, Eleanor thought sternly, and Theodora said, ‘Sorry we weren’t here to meet you; we’ve been exploring.’

‘A sour old beldame with a face of curds welcomed us, thank you,’ he said. ‘”Howdy-do,” she told me, “I hope I see you alive when I come back in the morning and your dinner’s on the sideboard.” Saying which, she departed in a late-model convertible with First and Second Murderers.’

‘Mrs Dudley,’ Theodora said. ‘First Murderer must be Dudley-at-the-gate; I suppose the other was Count Dracula. A wholesome family.’

‘Since we are listing our cast of characters,’ he said, ‘my name is Luke Sanderson.’

Eleanor was startled into speaking. ‘Then you’re one of the family? The people who own Hill House? Not one of Doctor Montague’s guests?’

‘I am one of the family; some day this stately pile will belong to me; until then, however, I am here as one of Doctor Montague’s guests.’

Theodora giggled. ‘*We*,’ she said, ‘are Eleanor and Theodora, two little girls who were planning a picnic down by the brook and got scared home by a rabbit.’

‘I go in mortal terror of rabbits,’ Luke agreed politely. ‘May I come if I carry the picnic basket?’

‘You may bring your ukulele and strum to us while we eat chicken sandwiches. Is Doctor Montague here?’

‘He’s inside,’ Luke said, ‘gloating over his haunted house.’

They were silent for a minute, wanting to move closer together, and then Theodora said thinly, ‘It doesn’t sound so funny, does it, now it’s getting dark?’

‘Ladies, welcome.’ And the great front door opened. ‘Come inside. I am Doctor Montague.’

2

The four of them stood, for the first time, in the wide, dark entrance hall of Hill House. Around them the house steadied and located them, above them the hills slept watchfully, small eddies of air and sound and movement stirred and waited and whispered, and the centre of consciousness was somehow the small space where they stood, four separated people, and looked trustingly at one another.

‘I am very happy that everyone arrived safely, and on time,’ Doctor Montague said. ‘Welcome, all of you, welcome to Hill House — although perhaps that sentiment ought to come more properly from you, my boy? In any case, welcome, welcome. Luke, my boy, can you make a martini?’

3

Dr Montague raised his glass and sipped hopefully, and sighed. ‘Fair,’ he said. ‘Only fair, my boy. To our success at Hill House, however.’

‘How would one reckon success, exactly, in an affair like this?’ Luke inquired curiously.

The doctor laughed. ‘Put it, then,’ he said, ‘that I hope that all of us will have an exciting visit and my book will rock my colleagues back on their heels. I cannot call your visit a vacation, although to some it might seem so, because I am hopeful of your working — although work, of course, depends largely upon what is to be done, does it not? Notes,’ he said with relief, as though fixing upon one unshakable solidity in a world of fog, ‘notes. We will take notes — to some, a not unbearable task.’

‘So long as no one makes any puns about spirits and spirits,’ Theodora said, holding out her glass to Luke to be filled.

‘Spirits?’ The doctor peered at her. ‘Spirits? Yes, indeed. Of course, none of *us*…’ He hesitated, frowning. ‘Certainly not,’ he said and took three quick agitated sips at his cocktail.

‘Everything’s so strange,’ Eleanor said. ‘I mean, this morning I was wondering what Hill House would be like, and now I can’t believe that it’s real, and we’re here.’

They were sitting in a small room, chosen by the doctor, who had led them into it, down a narrow corridor, fumbling a little at first, but then finding his way. It was not a cosy room, certainly. It had an unpleasantly high ceiling, and a narrow tiled fireplace which looked chill in spite of the fire which Luke had lighted at once; the chairs in which they sat were rounded and slippery, and the light coming through the coloured beaded shades of the lamps sent shadows into the corners. The overwhelming sense of the room was purple; beneath their feet the carpeting glowed in dim convoluted patterns, the walls were papered and gilt, and a marble cupid beamed fatuously down at them from the mantel. When they were silent for a moment the quiet weight of the house pressed down from all around them. Eleanor, wondering if she were really here at all, and not dreaming of Hill House from some safe spot impossibly remote, looked slowly and carefully around the room, telling herself that this was real, these things existed, from the tiles around the fireplace to the marble cupid; these people were going to be her friends. The doctor was round and rosy and bearded and looked as though he might be more suitably established before a fire in a pleasant little sitting-room, with a cat on his knee and a rosy little wife to bring him scones and jam, and yet he was undeniably the Dr Montague who had guided Eleanor here, a little man both knowledgeable and stubborn. Across the fire from the doctor was Theodora, who had gone unerringly to the most nearly comfortable chair, had wriggled herself into it somehow with her legs over the arm and her head tucked in against the back; she was like a cat, Eleanor thought, and clearly a cat waiting for its dinner. Luke was not still for a minute, but moved back and forth across the shadows, filling glasses, stirring the fire, touching the marble cupid; he was bright in the firelight, and restless. They were all silent, looking into the fire, lazy after their several journeys, and Eleanor thought, I am the fourth person in this room; I am one of them; I belong.

‘Since we *are* all here,’ Luke said suddenly, as though there had been no pause in the conversation, ‘shouldn’t we get acquainted? We know only names, so far. I know that it is Eleanor, here, who is wearing a red sweater, and consequently it must be Theodora who wears yellow — —’

‘Doctor Montague has a beard,’ Theodora said, ‘so you must be Luke.’

‘And you are Theodora,’ Eleanor said, ‘because *I* am Eleanor.’ An Eleanor, she told herself triumphantly, who belongs, who is talking easily, who is sitting by the fire with her friends.

‘Therefore *you* are wearing the red sweater,’ Theodora explained to her soberly.

‘I have no beard,’ Luke said, ‘so *he* must be Doctor Montague.’

‘*I* have a beard,’ Dr Montague said, pleased, and looked around at them with a happy beam. ‘My wife,’ he told them, ‘*likes* a man to wear a beard. Many women, on the other hand, find a beard distasteful. A clean-shaven man — you’ll excuse me, my boy — never looks fully dressed, my wife tells me.’ He held out his glass to Luke.

‘Now that I know which of us is me,’ Luke said, ‘let me identify myself further. I am, in private life — assuming that this is public life and the rest of the world *is* actually private — let me see, a bullfighter. Yes. A bullfighter.’

‘I love my love with a B,’ Eleanor said in spite of herself, ‘because he is bearded.’

‘Very true.’ Luke nodded at her. ‘That makes me Doctor Montague. I live in Bangkok, and my hobby is bothering women.’

‘Not at all,’ Dr Montague protested, amused. ‘I live in Belmont.’

Theodora laughed and gave Luke that quick, understanding glance she had earlier given Eleanor. Eleanor, watching, thought wryly that it might sometimes be oppressive to be for long around one so immediately in tune, so perceptive, as Theodora. ‘I am by profession an artist’s model,’ Eleanor said quickly, to silence her own thoughts. ‘I live a mad, abandoned life, draped in a shawl and going from garret to garret.’

‘Are you heartless and wanton?’ Luke asked. ‘Or are you one of the fragile creatures who will fall in love with a lord’s son and pine away?’

‘Losing all your beauty and coughing a good deal?’ Theodora added.

'I rather think I have a heart of gold,' Eleanor said reflectively. 'At any rate, my affairs are the talk of the cafés.' Dear me, she thought. Dear me.

'Alas,' Theodora said, 'I am a lord's *daughter*. Ordinarily I go clad in silk and lace and cloth of gold, but I have borrowed my maid's finery to appear among you. I may of course become so enamoured of the common life that I will never go back, and the poor girl will have to get herself new clothes. And you, Doctor Montague?'

He smiled in the firelight. 'A pilgrim. A wanderer.'

'Truly a congenial little group,' Luke said approvingly. 'Destined to be inseparable friends, in fact. A courtesan, a pilgrim, a princess, and a bullfighter. Hill House has surely never seen our like.'

'I will give the honour to Hill House,' Theodora said. 'I have never seen *its* like.' She rose, carrying her glass, and went to examine a bowl of glass flowers. 'What did they *call* this room, do you suppose?'

'A parlour, perhaps,' Dr Montague said. 'Perhaps a boudoir. I thought we would be more comfortable in here than in one of the other rooms. As a matter of fact, I think we ought to regard this room as our centre of operations, a kind of common room; it may not be cheerful — —'

'Of *course* it's cheerful,' Theodora said staunchly. 'There is nothing more exhilarating than maroon upholstery and oak panelling, and what is that in the corner there? A sedan chair?'

'Tomorrow you will see the *other* rooms,' the doctor told her.

'If we are going to have this for a rumpus room,' Luke said, 'I propose we move in something to sit on. I cannot perch for long on anything here; I skid,' he said confidentially to Eleanor.

'Tomorrow,' the doctor said. 'Tomorrow, as a matter of fact, we will explore the entire house and arrange things to please ourselves. And now, if you have all finished, I suggest that we determine what Mrs Dudley has done about our dinner.'

Theodora moved at once and then stopped, bewildered. 'Someone is going to have to lead me,' she said. 'I can't possibly tell where the dining-room is.' She pointed. '*That* door leads to the long passage and then into the front hall,' she said.

The doctor chuckled. 'Wrong, my dear. That door leads to the conservatory.' He rose to lead the way. '*I* have studied a map of the house,' he said complacently, 'and I believe that we have only to go through the door here, down the passage, into the front hall, and across the hall and through the billiard room to find the dining-room. Not hard,' he said, 'once you get into practice.'

'Why did they mix themselves up so?' Theodora asked. 'Why so many little odd rooms?'

'Maybe they liked to hide from each other,' Luke said.

'*I* can't understand why they wanted everything so dark,' Theodora said. She and Eleanor were following Dr Montague down the passage, and Luke came behind, lingering to look into the drawer of a narrow table, and wondering aloud to himself at the valance of cupid-heads and ribbon-bunches which topped the panelling in the dark hall.

'Some of these rooms are entirely inside rooms,' the doctor said from ahead of them. 'No windows, no access to the outdoors at all. However, a series of enclosed rooms is not altogether surprising in a house of this period, particularly when you recall that what windows they *did* have were heavily shrouded with hangings and draperies within, and shrubbery without. Ah.' He opened the passage door and led them into the front hall. 'Now,' he said, considering the doorways opposite, two smaller doors flanking the great central double door; 'Now,' he said, and selected the nearest. ‘The house *does* have its little oddities,’ he continued, holding the door so that they might pass through into the dark room beyond. ‘Luke, come and hold this open so I can find the dining-room.’ Moving cautiously, he crossed the dark room and opened a door, and they followed him into the pleasantest room they had seen so far, more pleasant, certainly, because of the lights and the sight and smell of food. ‘I congratulate myself,’ he said, rubbing his hands happily. ‘I have led you to civilisation through the uncharted wastes of Hill House.’

‘We ought to make a practice of leaving every door wide open.’ Theodora glanced nervously over her shoulder. ‘I *hate* this wandering around in the dark.’

‘You’d have to prop them open with something, then,’ Eleanor said. ‘Every door in this house swings shut when you let go of it.’

‘Tomorrow,’ Dr Montague said. ‘I will make a note. Door stops.’ He moved happily towards the sideboard, where Mrs Dudley had set a warming oven and an impressive row of covered dishes. The table was set for four, with a lavish display of candles and damask and heavy silver.

‘No stinting, I see,’ Luke said, taking up a fork with a gesture which would have confirmed his aunt’s worst suspicions. ‘We get the company silver.’

‘I think Mrs Dudley is proud of the house,’ Eleanor said.

‘She doesn’t intend to give us a poor table, at any rate,’ the doctor said, peering into the warming oven. This is an excellent arrangement, I think. It gets Mrs Dudley well away from here before dark and enables us to have our dinners without her uninviting company.’

‘Perhaps,’ Luke said, regarding the plate which he was filling generously, ‘perhaps I did good Mrs Dudley — why *must* I continue to think of her, perversely, as *good* Mrs Dudley? — perhaps I really did her an injustice. She said she hoped to find me alive in the morning, and our dinner was in the oven; now I suspect that she intended me to die of gluttony.'

'What keeps her here?' Eleanor asked Dr Montague. 'Why do she and her husband stay on, alone in this house?'

'As I understand it, the Dudleys have taken care of Hill House ever since anyone can remember; certainly the Sandersons were happy enough to keep them on. But tomorrow — —'

Theodora giggled. 'Mrs Dudley is probably the only true surviving member of the family to whom Hill House *really* belongs. *I* think she is only waiting until all the Sanderson heirs — that's you, Luke — die off in various horrible ways, and then she gets the house and the fortune in jewels buried in the cellar. Or maybe she and Dudley hoard their gold in the secret chamber, or there's oil under the house.'

'There are no secret chambers in Hill House,' the doctor said with finality. 'Naturally, that possibility has been suggested before, and I think I may say with assurance that no such romantic devices exist here. But tomorrow — —'

'In any case, oil is definitely old hat, nothing at all to discover on the property these days,' Luke told Theodora. 'The very least Mrs Dudley could murder me for in cold blood is uranium.'

'Or just the pure fun of it,' Theodora said.

'Yes,' Eleanor said, 'but why are we here?'

For a long minute the three of them looked at her, Theodora and Luke curiously, the doctor gravely. Then Theodora said, 'Just what *I* was going to ask. Why *are* we here? What *is* wrong with Hill House? What is going to happen?'

'Tomorrow — —'

‘No,’ Theodora said, almost petulantly. ‘We are three adult, intelligent people. We have all come a long way, Doctor Montague, to meet you here in Hill House; Eleanor wants to know why, and so do I.’

‘Me too,’ Luke said.

‘Why did you bring us here, Doctor? Why are you here yourself? How did you hear about Hill House, and why does it have such a reputation and what really goes on here? What is going to *happen*?’

The doctor frowned unhappily. ‘I don’t know,’ he said, and then, when Theodora made a quick, irritated gesture, he went on, ‘I know very little more about the house than you do, and naturally I intended to tell you everything I do know; as for what is going to *happen*, I will learn that when you do. But tomorrow is soon enough to talk about it, I think; daylight — —’

‘Not for me,’ Theodora said.

‘I assure you,’ the doctor said, ‘that Hill House will be quiet tonight. There is a pattern to these things, as though psychic phenomena were subject to laws of a very particular sort.’

‘I really think we ought to talk it over tonight,’ Luke said.

‘We’re not afraid,’ Eleanor added.

The doctor sighed again. ‘Suppose,’ he said slowly, ‘you heard the story of Hill House and decided not to stay. How would you leave, tonight?’ He looked around at them again, quickly. ‘The gates are locked. Hill House has a reputation for insistent hospitality; it seemingly dislikes letting its guests get away. The last person who tried to leave Hill House in darkness — it was eighteen years ago, I grant you — was killed at the turn in the driveway, where his horse bolted and crushed him against the big tree. Suppose I tell you about Hill House, and one of you wants to leave? Tomorrow, at least, we could see that you got safely to the village.’

‘But we’re not going to run away,’ Theodora said. ‘I’m not, and Eleanor isn’t, and Luke isn’t.’

‘Stoutly, upon the ramparts,’ Luke agreed.

‘You are a mutinous group of assistants. After dinner, then. We will retire to our little boudoir for coffee and a little of the good brandy Luke has in his suitcase, and I will tell you all I know about Hill House. Now, however, let us talk about music, or painting, or even politics.’

4

‘I had not decided,’ the doctor said, turning the brandy in his glass, ‘how best to prepare the three of you for Hill House. I certainly could not write you about it, and I am most unwilling now to influence your minds with its complete history before you have had a chance to see for yourselves.’ They were back in the small parlour, warm and almost sleepy. Theodora had abandoned any attempt at a chair and had put herself down on the hearthrug, cross-legged and drowsy. Eleanor, wanting to sit on the hearthrug beside her, had not thought of it in time and had condemned herself to one of the slippery chairs, unwilling now to attract attention by moving and getting herself awkwardly down on to the floor. Mrs Dudley’s good dinner and an hour’s quiet conversation had evaporated the faint air of unreality and constraint; they had begun to know one another, recognise individual voices and mannerisms, faces and laughter; Eleanor thought with a little shock of surprise that she had been in Hill House only for four or five hours, and smiled a little at the fire. She could feel the thin stem of her glass between her fingers, the stiff pressure of the chair against her back, the faint movements of air through the room which were barely perceptible in small stirrings of tassels and beads. Darkness lay in the corners, and the marble cupid smiled down on them with chubby good humour.

‘What a time for a ghost story,’ Theodora said.

‘If you please.’ The doctor was stiff. ‘We are not children trying to frighten one another,’ he said.

‘Sorry.’ Theodora smiled up at him. ‘I’m just trying to get myself used to all of this.’

‘Let us,’ said the doctor, ‘exercise great caution in our language. Preconceived notions of ghosts and apparitions — —’

‘The disembodied hand in the soup,’ Luke said helpfully.

‘My dear boy. *If* you please. I was trying to explain that our purpose here, since it is of a scientific and exploratory nature, ought not to be affected, perhaps even warped, by half-remembered spooky stories which belong more properly to a — let me see — a marshmallow roast.’ Pleased with himself, he looked around to be sure that they were all amused. ‘As a matter of fact, my researches over the past few years have led me to certain theories regarding psychic phenomena which I have now, for the first time, an opportunity of testing. Ideally, of course, you ought not to know anything about Hill House. You should be ignorant and receptive.’

‘And take notes,’ Theodora murmured.

‘Notes. Yes, indeed. Notes. However, I realise that it is most impractical to leave you entirely without background information, largely because you are not people accustomed to meeting a situation without preparation.’ He beamed at them slyly. ‘You are three wilful, spoiled children who are prepared to nag me for your bedtime story.’ Theodora giggled, and the doctor nodded at her happily. He rose and moved to stand by the fire in an unmistakable classroom pose; he seemed to feel the lack of a blackboard behind him, because once or twice he half turned, hand raised, as though looking for chalk to illustrate a point. ‘Now,’ he said, ‘we will take up the history of Hill House.’ I wish I had a notebook and a pen, Eleanor thought, just to make him feel at home. She glanced at Theodora and Luke and found both their faces fallen instinctively into a completely rapt classroom look; high earnestness, she thought; we have moved into another stage of our adventure.

‘You will recall,’ the doctor began, ‘the houses described in Leviticus as “leprous,” *tsaraas*, or Homer’s phrase for the underworld: *aidao domos*, the house of Hades; I need not remind you, I think, that the concept of certain houses as unclean or forbidden — perhaps sacred — is as old as the mind of man. Certainly there are spots which inevitably attach to themselves an atmosphere of holiness and goodness; it might not then be too fanciful to say that some houses are born bad. Hill House, whatever the cause, has been unfit for human habitation for upwards of twenty years. What it was like before then, whether its personality was moulded by the people who lived here, or the things they did, or whether it was evil from its start are all questions I cannot answer. Naturally I hope that we will all know a good deal more about Hill House before we leave. No one knows, even, why some houses are called haunted.’

‘What else *could* you call Hill House?’ Luke demanded.

‘Well — disturbed, perhaps. Leprous. Sick. Any of the popular euphemisms for insanity; a deranged house is a pretty conceit. There are popular theories, however, which discount the eerie, the mysterious; there are people who will tell you that the disturbances I am calling “psychic” are actually the result of subterranean waters, or electric currents, or hallucinations caused by polluted air; atmospheric pressure, sun spots, earth tremors all have their advocates among the sceptical. People,’ the doctor said sadly, ‘are always so anxious to get things out into the open where they can put a name to them, even a meaningless name, so long as it has something of a scientific ring.’ He sighed, relaxing, and gave them a little quizzical smile. ‘A haunted house,’ he said. ‘Everyone laughs. I found myself telling my colleagues at the university that I was going camping this summer.’

‘I told people I was participating in a scientific experiment,’ Theodora said helpfully. ‘Without telling them where or what, of course.’

‘Presumably your friends feel less strongly about scientific experiments than mine. Yes.’ The doctor sighed again. ‘Camping. At my age. And yet *that* they believed. Well.’ He straightened up again and fumbled at his side, perhaps for a yardstick. ‘I first heard about Hill House a year ago, from a former tenant. He began by assuring me that he had left Hill House because his family objected to living so far out in the country, and ended by saying that in his opinion the house ought to be burned down and the ground sowed with salt. I learned of other people who had rented Hill House, and found that none of them had stayed more than a few days, certainly never the full terms of their leases, giving reasons that ranged from the dampness of the location — not at all true, by the way; the house is very dry — to a pressing need to move elsewhere, for business reasons. That is, every tenant who has left Hill House hastily has made an effort to supply a rational reason for leaving, and yet every one of them has left. I tried, of course, to learn more from these former tenants, and yet in no case could I persuade them to discuss the house; they all seemed most unwilling to give me information and were, in fact, reluctant to recall the details of their several stays. In only one opinion were they united. Without exception, every person who has spent any length of time in this house urged me to stay as far away from it as possible. Not one of the former tenants could bring himself to admit that Hill House was haunted, but when I visited Hillsdale and looked up the newspaper records — —’

‘Newspapers?’ Theodora asked. ‘Was there a scandal?’

‘Oh, yes,’ the doctor said. ‘A perfectly splendid scandal, with a suicide and madness and lawsuits. *Then* I learned that the local people had no doubts about the house. I heard a dozen different stories, of course — it is really *unbelievably* difficult to get accurate information about a haunted house; it would astonish you to know what I have gone through to learn only as much as I have — and as a result I went to Mrs Sanderson, Luke’s aunt, and arranged to rent Hill House. She was most frank about its undesirability — —’

‘It’s harder to burn down a house than you think,’ Luke said.

‘ — but agreed to allow me a short lease to carry out my researches, on condition that a member of the family be one of my party.’

‘They hope,’ Luke said solemnly, ‘that I will dissuade you from digging up the lovely old scandals.’

‘There. Now I have explained how I happen to be here, and why Luke has come. As for you two ladies, we all know by now that you are here because I wrote you, and you accepted my invitation. I hoped that each of you might, in her own way, intensify the forces at work in the house; Theodora has shown herself possessed of some telepathic ability, and Eleanor has in the past been intimately involved in poltergeist phenomena — —’

‘*I?*’

‘Of course.’ The doctor looked at her curiously. ‘Many years ago, when you were a child. The stones — —’

Eleanor frowned, and shook her head. Her fingers trembled around the stem of her glass, and then she said, ‘That was the neighbours. My mother said the neighbours did that. People are always jealous.’

‘Perhaps so.’ The doctor spoke quietly and smiled at Eleanor. ‘The incident has been forgotten long ago, of course; I only mentioned it because that is why I wanted you in Hill House.'

'When *I* was a child,' Theodora said lazily, ' — — "many years ago," Doctor, as you put it so tactfully — I was whipped for throwing a brick through a greenhouse roof. I remember I thought about it for a long time, remembering the whipping but remembering also the lovely crash, and after thinking about it very seriously I went out and did it again.'

'I don't remember very well,' Eleanor said uncertainly to the doctor.

'But *why*? Theodora asked. 'I mean, I can accept that Hill House is supposed to be haunted, and you want us here, Doctor Montague, to help keep track of what happens — and I bet besides that you wouldn't at all like being here *alone* — but I just don't understand. It's a horrible old house, and if I rented it I'd scream for my money back after one fast look at the front hall, but what's *here*? What really frightens people so?'

'I will not put a name to what has no name,' the doctor said. 'I don't know.'

'They never even told me what was going on,' Eleanor said urgently to the doctor. 'My mother said it was the neighbours, they were always against us because she wouldn't mix with them. My mother — —'

Luke interrupted her, slowly and deliberately. 'I think,' he said, 'that what we all want is facts. Something we can understand and put together.'

'First,' the doctor said, 'I am going to ask you all a question. Do you want to leave? Do you advise that we pack up now and leave Hill House to itself, and never have anything more to do with it?'

He looked at Eleanor, and Eleanor put her hands together tight; it is another chance to get away, she was thinking, and she said, 'No,' and glanced with embarrassment at Theodora. 'I was kind of a baby this afternoon,' she explained. 'I did let myself get frightened.'

‘She’s not telling all the truth,’ Theodora said loyally. ‘She wasn’t any more frightened than I was; we scared each other to death over a rabbit.’

‘Horrible creatures, rabbits,’ Luke said.

The doctor laughed. ‘I suppose we were all nervous this afternoon, anyway. It is a rude shock to turn that corner and get a clear look at Hill House.’

‘I thought he was going to send the car into a tree,’ Luke said.

‘I am really very brave now, in a warm room with a fire and company,’ Theodora said.

‘I don’t think we could leave now if we wanted to.’ Eleanor had spoken before she realised clearly what she was going to say, or what it was going to sound like to the others; she saw that they were staring at her, and laughed and added lamely, ‘Mrs Dudley would never forgive us.’ She wondered if they really believed that that was what she had meant to say, and thought, Perhaps it has us now, this house, perhaps it will not let us go.

‘Let us have a little more brandy,’ the doctor said, ‘and I will tell you the story of Hill House.’ He returned to his classroom position before the fireplace and began slowly, as one giving an account of kings long dead and wars long done with; his voice was carefully unemotional. ‘Hill House was built eighty-odd years ago,’ he began. ‘It was built as a home for his family by a man named Hugh Crain, a country home where he hoped to see his children and grandchildren live in comfortable luxury, and where he fully expected to end his days in quiet. Unfortunately Hill House was a sad house almost from the beginning; Hugh Crain’s young wife died minutes before she first was to set eyes on the house, when the carriage bringing her here overturned in the driveway, and the lady was brought — ah, *lifeless*, I believe is the phrase they use — into the home her husband had built for her. He was a sad and bitter man, Hugh Crain, left with two small daughters to bring up, but he did not leave Hill House.'

'Children grew up here?' Eleanor asked incredulously.

The doctor smiled. 'The house is dry, as I said. There were no swamps to bring them fevers, the country air was thought to be beneficial to them, and the house itself was regarded as luxurious. I have no doubt that two small children could play here, lonely perhaps, but not unhappy.'

'I hope they went wading in the brook,' Theodora said. She stared deeply into the fire. 'Poor little things. I hope someone let them run in that meadow and pick wildflowers.'

'Their father married again,' the doctor went on. 'Twice more, as a matter of fact. He seems to have been — unlucky in his wives. The second Mrs Crain died of a fall, although I have been unable to ascertain how or why. Her death seems to have been as tragically unexpected as her predecessor's. The third Mrs Crain died of what they used to call consumption, somewhere in Europe; there is, somewhere in the library, a collection of postcards sent to the two little girls left behind in Hill House from their father and their stepmother travelling from one health resort to another. The little girls were left here with their governess until their stepmother's death. After that Hugh Crain declared his intention of closing Hill House and remaining abroad, and his daughters were sent to live with a cousin of their mother's, and there they remained until they were grown up.'

'I hope Mama's cousin was a little jollier than old Hugh,' Theodora said, still staring darkly into the fire. 'It's not nice to think of children growing up like mushrooms, in the dark.'

'They felt differently,' the doctor said. 'The two sisters spent the rest of their lives quarrelling over Hill House. After all his high hopes of a dynasty centred here, Hugh Crain died somewhere in Europe, shortly after his wife, and Hill House was left jointly to the two sisters, who must have been quite young ladies by then; the older sister had, at any rate, made her début into society.'

'And put up her hair, and learned to drink champagne and carry a fan...'

'Hill House was empty for a number of years, but kept always in readiness for the family; at first in expectation of Hugh Crain's return, and then, after his death, for either of the sisters who chose to live there. Somewhere during this time it was apparently agreed between the two sisters that Hill House should become the property of the older; the younger sister had married — —'

'Aha,' Theodora said. 'The *younger* sister married. Stole her sister's beau, I've no doubt.'

'It was said that the older sister was crossed in love,' the doctor agreed, 'although that is said of almost any lady who prefers, for whatever reason, to live alone. At any rate, it was the older sister who came back here to live. She seems to have resembled her father strongly; she lived here alone for a number of years, almost in seclusion, although the village of Hillsdale knew her. Incredible as it may sound to you, she genuinely loved Hill House and looked upon it as her family home. She eventually took a girl from the village to live with her, as a kind of companion; so far as I can learn there seems to have been no strong feeling among the villagers about the house then, since old Miss Crain — as she was inevitably known — hired her servants in the village, and it was thought a fine thing for her to take the village girl as a companion. Old Miss Crain was in constant disagreement with her sister over the house, the younger sister insisting that she had given up her claim on the house in exchange for a number of family heirlooms, some of considerable value, which her sister then refused to give her. There were some jewels, several pieces of antique furniture, and a set of gold-rimmed dishes, which seemed to irritate the younger sister more than anything else. Mrs Sanderson let me rummage through a box of family papers, and so I have seen some of the letters Miss Crain received from her sister, and in all of them those dishes stand out as the recurrent sore subject. At any rate, the older sister died of pneumonia here in the house, with only the little companion to help her — there were stories later of a doctor called too late, of the old lady lying neglected upstairs while the younger woman dallied in the garden with some village lout, but I suspect that these are only scandalous inventions; I certainly cannot find that anything of the sort was widely believed at the time, and in fact most of the stories seem to stem directly from the poisonous vengefulness of the younger sister, who never rested in her anger.'

'I don't like the younger sister,' Theodora said. 'First she stole her sister's lover, and then she tried to steal her sister's dishes. No, I don't like her.'

'Hill House has an impressive list of tragedies connected with it, but then, most old houses have. People have to live and die *somewhere*, after all, and a house can hardly stand for eighty years without seeing some of its inhabitants die within its walls. After the death of the older sister, there was a lawsuit over the house. The companion insisted that the house was left to her, but the younger sister and her husband maintained most violently that the house belonged legally to them and claimed that the companion had tricked the older sister into signing away property which she had always intended leaving to her sister. It was an unpleasant business, like all family quarrels, and as in all family quarrels incredibly harsh and cruel things were said on either side. The companion swore in court — and here, I think, is the first hint of Hill House in its true personality — that the younger sister came into the house at night and stole things. When she was pressed to enlarge upon this accusation, she became very nervous and incoherent, and finally, forced to give some evidence for her charge, said that a silver service was missing, and a valuable set of enamels, in addition to the famous set of gold-rimmed dishes, which would actually be a very difficult thing to steal, when you think about it. For her part, the younger sister went so far as to mention murder and demand an investigation into the death of old Miss Crain, bringing up the first hints of the stories of neglect and mismanagement. I cannot discover that these suggestions were ever taken seriously. There is no record whatever of any but the most formal notice of the older sister's death, and certainly the villagers would have been the first to wonder if there had been any oddness about the death. The companion won her case at last, and could, in my opinion, have won a case for slander besides, and the house became legally hers, although the younger sister never gave up trying to get it. She kept after the unfortunate companion with letters and threats, made the wildest accusations against her everywhere, and in the local police records there is listed at least one occasion when the companion was forced to apply for police protection to prevent her enemy from attacking her with a broom. The companion went in terror, seemingly; her house burgled at night — she never stopped insisting that they came and stole things — and I read one pathetic letter in which she complained that she had not spent a peaceful night in the house since the death of her benefactress. Oddly enough, sympathy around the village was almost entirely with the younger sister, perhaps because the companion, once a village girl, was now lady of the manor. The villagers believed — and still believe, I think — that the younger sister was defrauded of her inheritance by a scheming young woman. They did not believe that she would murder her friend, you see, but they were delighted to believe that she was dishonest, certainly because they were capable of dishonesty themselves when opportunity arose. Well, gossip is always a bad enemy. When the poor creature killed herself — —'

'Killed herself?' Eleanor, shocked into speech, half rose. 'She had to kill herself?'

'You mean, was there another way of escaping her tormentor? She certainly did not seem to think so. It was accepted locally that she had chosen suicide because her guilty conscience drove her to it. I am more inclined to believe that she was one of those tenacious, unclever young women who can hold on desperately to what they believe is their own but cannot withstand, mentally, a constant nagging persecution; she had certainly no weapons to fight back against the younger sister's campaign of hatred, her own friends in the village had been turned against her, and she seems to have been maddened by the conviction that locks and bolts could not keep out the enemy who stole into her house at night — —'

'She should have gone away,' Eleanor said. 'Left the house and run as far as she could go.'

'In effect, she did. I really think the poor girl was hated to death; she hanged herself, by the way. Gossip says she hanged herself from the turret on the tower, but when you have a house like Hill House with a tower and a turret, gossip would hardly allow you to hang yourself anywhere else. After her death, the house passed legally into the hands of the Sanderson family, who were cousins of hers and in no way as vulnerable to the persecutions of the younger sister, who must have been a little demented herself by that time. I heard from Mrs Sanderson that when the family — it would have been her husband's parents — first came to see the house, the younger sister showed up to abuse them, standing on the road to howl at them as they went by, and found herself packed right off to the local police station. And that seems to be the end of the younger sister's part in the story: from the day the first Sanderson sent her packing to the brief notice of her death a few years later, she seems to have spent her time brooding silently over her wrongs, but far away from the Sandersons. Oddly enough, in all her ranting, she insisted always on one point — she had not, would not, come into this house at night, to steal or for any other reason.'

'Was anything ever really stolen?' Luke asked.

'As I told you, the companion was finally pressed into saying that one or two things seemed to be missing, but could not say for sure. As you can imagine, the story of the nightly intruder did a good deal to enhance Hill House's further reputation. Moreover, the Sandersons did not live here at all. They spent a few days in the house, telling the villagers that they were preparing it for their immediate occupancy, and then abruptly cleared out, closing the house the way it stood. They told around the village that urgent business took them to live in the city, but the villagers thought they knew better. No one has lived in the house since for more than a few days at a time. It has been on the market, for sale or rent, ever since. Well, that is a long story. I need more brandy.'

'Those two poor little girls,' Eleanor said, looking into the fire. 'I can't forget them, walking through these dark rooms, trying to play dolls, maybe, in here or those bedrooms upstairs.'

'And so the old house has just been sitting here.' Luke put out a tentative finger and touched the marble cupid gingerly. 'Nothing in it touched, nothing used, nothing here wanted by anyone any more, just sitting here thinking.'

'And waiting,' Eleanor said.

'And waiting,' the doctor confirmed. 'Essentially,' he went on slowly, 'the evil is the house itself, I think. It has enchained and destroyed its people and their lives, it is a place of contained ill will. Well. Tomorrow you will see it all. The Sandersons put in electricity and plumbing and a telephone when they first thought to live here, but otherwise nothing has been changed.'

'Well,' Luke said after a little silence, 'I'm sure we will all be very comfortable here.'

5

Eleanor found herself unexpectedly admiring her own feet. Theodora dreamed over the fire just beyond the tips of her toes, and Eleanor thought with deep satisfaction that her feet were handsome in their red sandals; what a complete and separate thing I am, she thought, going from my red toes to the top of my head, individually an I, possessed of attributes belonging only to me. I have red shoes, she thought — that goes with being Eleanor; I dislike lobster and sleep on my left side and crack my knuckles when I am nervous and save buttons. I am holding a brandy glass which is mine because I am here and I am using it and I have a place in this room. I have red shoes and tomorrow I will wake up and I will still be here.

'I have red shoes,' she said very softly, and Theodora turned and smiled up at her.

'I *had* intended — —' and the doctor looked around at them with bright, anxious optimism— 'I *had* intended to ask if you all played bridge?'

'Of course,' Eleanor said. I play bridge, she thought; I used to have a cat named Dancer; I can swim.

'I'm afraid not,' Theodora said, and the other three turned and regarded her with frank dismay.

'Not at all?' the doctor asked.

‘I’ve been playing bridge twice a week for eleven years,’ Eleanor said, ‘with my mother and her lawyer and his wife — I’m *sure* you must play as well as *that*.’

‘Maybe you could teach me?’ Theodora asked. ‘I’m quick at learning games.’

‘Oh, dear,’ the doctor said, and Eleanor and Luke laughed.

‘We’ll do something else instead,’ Eleanor said; I can play bridge, she thought; I like apple pie with sour cream, and I drove here by myself.

‘Backgammon,’ the doctor said with bitterness.

‘I play a fair game of chess,’ Luke said to the doctor, who cheered at once.

Theodora set her mouth stubbornly. ‘I didn’t suppose we came here to play *games*,’ she said.

‘Relaxation,’ the doctor said vaguely, and Theodora turned with a sullen shrug and stared again into the fire.

‘I’ll get the chessmen, if you’ll tell me where,’ Luke said, and the doctor smiled.

‘Better let me go,’ he said. ‘I’ve studied a floor plan of the house, remember. If we let you go off wandering by yourself we’d very likely never find you again.’ As the door closed behind him Luke gave Theodora a quick curious glance and then came over to stand by Eleanor. ‘You’re not nervous, are you? Did that story frighten you?’

Eleanor shook her head emphatically, and Luke said, ‘You looked pale.’

‘I probably ought to be in bed,’ Eleanor said. I’m not used to driving as far as I did today.’

‘Brandy,’ Luke said. ‘It will make you sleep better. You too,’ he said to the back of Theodora’s head.

‘Thank you,’ Theodora said coldly, not turning. ‘I rarely have trouble sleeping.’

Luke grinned knowingly at Eleanor, and then turned as the doctor opened the door. ‘My wild imagination,’ the doctor said, setting down the chess set. ‘What a house this is.’

‘Did something happen?’ Eleanor asked.

The doctor shook his head. ‘We probably ought to agree, now, not to wander around the house alone,’ he said.

‘What happened?’ Eleanor asked.

‘My own imagination,’ the doctor said firmly. ‘This table all right, Luke?’

‘It’s a lovely old chess set,’ Luke said. ‘I wonder how the younger sister happened to overlook it.’

‘I can tell you one thing,’ the doctor said, ‘if it *was* the younger sister sneaking around this house at night, she had nerves of iron. It watches,’ he added suddenly. ‘The house. It watches every move you make.’ And then, ‘My own imagination, of course.’

In the light of the fire Theodora’s face was stiff and sulky; she likes attention, Eleanor thought wisely and, without thinking, moved and sat on the floor beside Theodora. Behind her she could hear the gentle sound of chessmen being set down on a board and the comfortable small movements of Luke and the doctor taking each other’s measure, and in the fire there were points of flame and little stirrings. She waited a minute for Theodora to speak, and then said agreeably, ‘Still hard to believe you’re really here?’

‘I had no idea it would be so dull,’ Theodora said.

‘We’ll find plenty to do in the morning,’ Eleanor said.

‘At home there would be people around, and lots of talking and laughing and lights and excitement — —’

‘I suppose I don’t need such things,’ Eleanor said, almost apologetically. ‘There never was much excitement for me. I had to stay with Mother, of course. And when she was asleep I kind of got used to playing solitaire or listening to the radio. I never could bear to read in the evenings because I had to read aloud to her for two hours every afternoon. Love stories’ — and she smiled a little, looking into the fire. But that’s not all, she thought, astonished at herself, that doesn’t tell what it was like, even if I wanted to tell; why am I talking?

‘I’m terrible, aren’t I?’ Theodora moved quickly and put her hand over Eleanor’s. ‘I sit here and grouch because there’s nothing to amuse me; I’m very selfish. Tell me how horrible I am.’ And in the firelight her eyes shone with delight.

‘You’re horrible,’ Eleanor said obediently; Theodora’s hand on her own embarrassed her. She disliked being touched, and yet a small physical gesture seemed to be Theodora’s chosen way of expressing contrition, or pleasure, or sympathy; I wonder if my fingernails are clean, Eleanor thought, and slid her hand away gently.

‘I am horrible,’ Theodora said, good-humoured again. ‘I’m horrible and beastly and no one can stand me. There. Now tell me about yourself.’

‘I’m horrible and beastly and no one can stand me.’

Theodora laughed. ‘Don’t make fun of me. You’re sweet and pleasant and everyone likes you very much; Luke has fallen madly in love with you, and I am jealous. Now I want to know more about you. Did you really take care of your mother for many years?’

‘Yes,’ Eleanor said. Her fingernails *were* dirty, and her hand was badly shaped and people made jokes about love because sometimes it was funny. ‘Eleven years, until she died three months ago.’

‘Were you sorry when she died? Should I say how sorry *I* am?’

‘No. She wasn’t very happy.’

‘And neither were you?’

‘And neither was I.’

‘But what about now? What did you do afterwards, when you were free at last?’

‘I sold the house,’ Eleanor said. ‘My sister and I each took whatever we wanted from it, small things; there was really nothing much except little things my mother had saved — my father’s watch, and some old jewellery. Not at all like the sisters of Hill House.’

‘And you sold everything else?’

‘Everything. Just as soon as I could.’

‘And then of course you started a gay, mad fling that brought you inevitably to Hill House?’

‘Not exactly.’ Eleanor laughed.

‘But all those wasted years! Did you go on a cruise, look for exciting young men, buy new clothes...?’

‘Unfortunately,’ Eleanor said dryly, ‘there was not at all that much money. My sister put her share into the bank for her little girl’s education. I did buy some clothes, to come to Hill House.’ People like answering questions about themselves, she thought; what an odd pleasure it is. I would answer anything right now.

‘What will you do when you go back? Do you have a job?’

‘*No*, no job right now. I don’t know what I’m going to do.’

‘I know what *I*’ll do.’ Theodora stretched luxuriously. ‘I’ll turn on every light in our apartment and just bask.’

‘What is your apartment like?’

Theodora shrugged. ‘Nice,’ she said. ‘We found an old place and fixed it up ourselves. One big room, and a couple of small bedrooms, nice kitchen

— we painted it red and white and made over a lot of old furniture we dug up in junk shops — one really nice table, with a marble top. We both love doing over old things.'

'Are you married?' Eleanor asked.

There was a little silence, and then Theodora laughed quickly and said, 'No.'

'Sorry,' Eleanor said, horribly embarrassed. 'I didn't mean to be curious.'

'You're funny,' Theodora said and touched Eleanor's cheek with her finger. There are lines by my eyes, Eleanor thought, and turned her face away from the fire. 'Tell me where you live,' Theodora said.

Eleanor thought, looking down at her hands which were badly shaped. We could have afforded a laundress, she thought; it wasn't fair. My hands are awful. 'I have a little place of my own,' she said slowly. 'An apartment, like yours, only I live alone. Smaller than yours, I'm sure. I'm still furnishing it — buying one thing at a time, you know, to make sure I get everything absolutely right. White curtains. I had to look for weeks before I found my little stone lions on each corner of the mantel, and I have a white cat and my books and records and pictures. Everything has to be exactly the way I want it, because there's only me to use it; once I had a blue cup with stars painted on the inside; when you looked down into a cup of tea it was full of stars. I want a cup like that.'

'Maybe one will turn up some day, in my shop,' Theodora said. 'Then I can send it to you. Some day you'll get a little package saying "To Eleanor with love from her friend Theodora," and it will be a blue cup full of stars.'

'I would have stolen those gold-rimmed dishes,' Eleanor said, laughing.

'Mate,' Luke said, and the doctor said, 'Oh dear, oh dear.'

‘Blind luck,’ Luke said cheerfully. ‘Have you ladies fallen asleep there by the fire?’

‘Just about,’ Theodora said. Luke came across the room and held out a hand to each of them to help them up, and Eleanor, moving awkwardly, almost fell; Theodora rose in a quick motion and stretched and yawned. ‘Theo is sleepy,’ she said.

‘I’ll have to lead you upstairs,’ the doctor said. ‘Tomorrow we must really start to learn our way around. Luke, will you screen the fire?’

‘Had we better make sure that the doors are locked?’ Luke asked. ‘I imagine that Mrs Dudley locked the back door when she left, but what about the others?’

‘I hardly think we’ll catch anyone breaking in,’ Theodora said. ‘Anyway, the little companion used to lock her doors, and what good did it do her?’

‘Suppose we want to break out?’ Eleanor asked.

The doctor glanced quickly at Eleanor and then away. ‘I see no need for locking doors,’ he said quietly.

‘There is certainly not much danger of burglars from the village,’ Luke said.

‘In any case,’ the doctor said, ‘I will not sleep for an hour or so yet; at my age an hour’s reading before bedtime is essential, and I wisely brought *Pamela* with me. If any of you has trouble sleeping, I will read aloud to you. I never yet knew anyone who could not fall asleep with Richardson being read aloud to him.’ Talking quietly, he led them down the narrow hallway and through the great front hall and to the stairs. ‘I have often planned to try it on very small children,’ he went on.

Eleanor followed Theodora up the stairs; she had not realised until now how worn she was, and each step was an effort. She reminded herself naggingly that she was in Hill House, but even the blue room meant only, right now, the bed with the blue coverlet and the blue quilt. ‘On the other hand,’ the doctor continued behind her, ‘a Fielding novel comparable in length, although hardly in subject-matter, would never do for very young children. I even have doubts about Sterne — —’

Theodora went to the door of the green room and turned and smiled. ‘If you feel the least bit nervous,’ she said to Eleanor, ‘run right into my room.’

‘I will,’ Eleanor said earnestly. ‘Thank you; good night.’

‘ — and certainly not Smollett. Ladies, Luke and I are here, on the other side of the stairway — —’

‘What colour are your rooms?’ Eleanor asked, unable to resist.

‘Yellow,’ the doctor said, surprised.

‘Pink,’ Luke said with a dainty gesture of distaste.

‘We’re blue and green down here,’ Theodora said.

‘I will be awake, reading,’ the doctor said. ‘I will leave my door ajar, so I will certainly hear any sound. Good night. Sleep well.’

‘Good night,’ Luke said. ‘Good night, all.’

As she closed the door of the blue room behind her Eleanor thought wearily that it might be the darkness and oppression of Hill House that tired her so, and then it no longer mattered. The blue bed was unbelievably soft. Odd, she thought sleepily, that the house should be so dreadful and yet in many respects so physically comfortable — the soft bed, the pleasant lawn, the good fire, the cooking of Mrs Dudley. The company too, she thought, and then thought, Now I can think about them; I am all alone. Why is Luke here? But why am *I* here? Journeys end in lovers meeting. They all saw that I was afraid.

She shivered and sat up in bed to reach for the quilt at the foot. Then, half amused and half cold, she slipped out of bed and went, barefoot and silent, across the room to turn the key in the lock of the door; they won’t know I locked it, she thought, and went hastily back to bed. With the quilt pulled up around her she found herself looking with quick apprehension at the window, shining palely in the darkness, and then at the door. I wish I had a sleeping pill to take, she thought, and looked again over her shoulder, compulsively, at the window, and then again at the door, and thought, Is it moving? But I locked it; is it moving?

I think, she decided concretely, that I would like this better if I had the blankets over my head. Hidden deep in the bed under the blankets, she giggled and was glad none of the others could hear her. In the city she never slept with her head under the covers; I have come all this way today, she thought.

Then she slept, secure; in the next room Theodora slept, smiling, with her light on. Farther down the hall the doctor, reading *Pamela*, lifted his head occasionally to listen, and once went to his door and stood for a minute, looking down the hall, before going back to his book. A nightlight shone at the top of the stairs over the pool of blackness which was the hall. Luke slept, on his bedside table a flashlight and the lucky piece he always carried with him. Around them the house brooded, settling and stirring with a movement that was almost like a shudder.

Six miles away Mrs Dudley awakened, looked at her clock, thought of Hill House, and shut her eyes quickly. Mrs Gloria Sanderson, who owned Hill House and lived three hundred miles away from it, closed her detective story, yawned, and reached up to turn off her light, wondering briefly if she had remembered to put the chain on the front door. Theodora’s friend slept; so did the doctor’s wife and Eleanor’s sister. Far away, in the trees over Hill House, an owl cried out, and towards morning a thin, fine rain began, misty and dull.

FOUR

ELEANOR AWAKENED TO find the blue room grey and colourless in the morning rain. She found that she had thrown the quilt off during the night and had finished sleeping in her usual manner, with her head on the pillow. It was a surprise to find that she had slept until after eight, and she thought that it was ironic that the first good night's sleep she had had in years had come to her in Hill House. Lying in the blue bed, looking up into the dim ceiling with its remote carved pattern, she asked herself, half asleep still, What did I do; did I make a fool of myself? Were they laughing at me?

Thinking quickly over the evening before, she could remember only that she had — must have — seemed foolishly, childishly contented, almost happy; had the others been amused to see that she was so simple? I said silly things, she told herself, and of course they noticed. Today I will be more reserved, less openly grateful to all of them for having me.

Then, awakening completely, she shook her head and sighed. You are a very silly baby, Eleanor, she told herself, as she did every morning.

The room came clearly alive around her; she was in the blue room at Hill House, the dimity curtains were moving slightly at the window, and the wild splashing in the bathroom must be Theodora, awake, sure to be dressed and ready first, certain to be hungry. 'Good morning,' Eleanor called, and Theodora answering, gasping, 'Good morning — through in a minute — I'll leave the tub filled for you — are you starving? Because I am.' Does she think I wouldn't bathe unless she left a full tub for me? Eleanor wondered, and then was ashamed; I came here to stop thinking things like that, she told herself sternly and rolled out of bed and went to the window. She looked out across the verandah roof to the wide lawn below, with its bushes and little clumps of trees wound around with mist. Far down at the end of the lawn was the line of trees which marked the path to the creek, although the prospect of a jolly picnic on the grass was not, this morning, so appealing. It was clearly going to be wet all day, but it was a summer rain, deepening the green of the grass and the trees, sweetening and cleaning the air. It's charming, Eleanor thought, surprised at herself; she wondered if she was the first person ever to find Hill House charming and then thought, chilled, Or do they *all* think so, the *first* morning? She shivered, and found herself at the same time unable to account for the excitement she felt, which made it difficult to remember why it was so odd to wake up happy in Hill House.

'I'll *starve* to death.' Theodora pounded on the bathroom door, and Eleanor snatched at her robe and hurried. 'Try to look like a stray sunbeam,' Theodora called out from her room. 'It's such a dark day we've got to be a little brighter than usual.'

Sing before breakfast you'll cry before eight, Eleanor told herself, because she had been singing softly, 'In delay there lies no plenty....'

'I thought *I* was the lazy one,' Theodora said complacently through the door, 'but you're much, *much* worse. Lazy hardly *begins* to describe you. You *must* be clean enough now to come and have breakfast.'

'Mrs Dudley sets out breakfast at nine. What will she think when we show up bright and smiling?'

'She will sob with disappointment. Did anyone scream for her in the night, do you suppose?'

Eleanor regarded a soapy leg critically. 'I slept like a log,' she said.

'So did I. If you are not ready in three minutes I will come in and drown you. I want my *breakfast*.'

Eleanor was thinking that it had been a very long time since she had dressed to look like a stray sunbeam, or been so hungry for breakfast, or arisen so aware, so conscious of herself, so deliberate and tender in her attentions; she even brushed her teeth with a niceness she could not remember ever feeling before. It is all the result of a good night's sleep, she thought; since Mother died I must have been sleeping even more poorly than I realised.

'Aren't you ready *yet*?'

'Coming, coming,' Eleanor said, and ran to the door, remembered that it was still locked, and unlocked it softly. Theodora was waiting for her in the hall, vivid in the dullness in gaudy plaid; looking at Theodora, it was not possible for Eleanor to believe that she ever dressed or washed or moved or ate or slept or talked without enjoying every minute of what she was doing; perhaps Theodora never cared at all what other people thought of her.

'Do you realise that we may be another hour or so just *finding* the dining-room?' Theodora said. 'But maybe they have left us a map — did you know that Luke and the doctor have been up for hours? I was talking to them from the window.'

They have started without me, Eleanor thought; tomorrow I will wake up earlier and be there to talk from the window too. They came to the foot of the stairs, and Theodora crossed the great dark hall and put her hand confidently to a door. 'Here,' she said, but the door opened into a dim, echoing room neither of them had seen before. 'Here,' Eleanor said, but the door she chose led on to the narrow passage to the little parlour where last night they had sat before a fire.

'It's across the hall from *that*,' Theodora said, and turned, baffled. '*Damn* it,' she said, and put her head back and shouted. 'Luke? Doctor?'

Distantly they heard an answering shout, and Theodora moved to open another door. ‘If they think,’ she said over her shoulder, ‘that they are going to keep me for ever in this filthy hall, trying one door after another to get to my breakfast — —’

‘That’s the right one, I think,’ Eleanor said, ‘with the dark room to go through, and then the dining-room beyond.’

Theodora shouted again, blundered against some light piece of furniture, cursed, and then the door beyond was opened and the doctor said, ‘Good morning.’

‘Foul, filthy house,’ Theodora said, rubbing her knee. ‘Good morning.’

‘You will never believe this now, of course,’ the doctor said, ‘but three minutes ago these doors were wide open. We left them open so you could find your way. We sat here and watched them swing shut just before you called. Well. Good morning.’

‘Kippers,’ Luke said from the table. ‘Good morning. I hope you ladies *are* the kipper kind.’

They had come through the darkness of one night, they had met morning in Hill House, and they were a family, greeting one another with easy informality and going to the chairs they had used last night at dinner, their own places at the table.

‘A fine big breakfast is what Mrs Dudley certainly agreed to set out at nine,’ Luke said, waving a fork. ‘We had begun to wonder if you were the coffee-and-a-roll-in-bed types.’

‘We would have been here much sooner in any other house,’ Theodora said.

‘Did you really leave all the doors open for us?’ Eleanor asked.

‘That’s how we knew you were coming,’ Luke told her. ‘We saw the doors swing shut.’

‘Today we will nail all the doors open,’ Theodora said. ‘I am going to pace this house until I can find food ten times out of ten. I slept with my light on all night,’ she confided to the doctor, ‘but nothing happened at all.’

‘It was all very quiet,’ the doctor said.

‘Did you watch over us all night?’ Eleanor asked.

‘Until about three, when *Pamela* finally put me to sleep. There wasn’t a sound until the rain started some time after two. One of you ladies called out in her sleep once — —’

‘That must have been me,’ Theodora said shamelessly. ‘Dreaming about the wicked sister at the gates of Hill House.’

‘I dreamed about her too,’ Eleanor said. She looked at the doctor and said suddenly, ‘It’s *embarrassing*. To think about being afraid, I mean.’

‘We’re all in it together, you know,’ Theodora said.

‘It’s worse if you try not to show it,’ the doctor said.

‘Stuff yourself very full of kippers,’ Luke said. ‘Then it will be impossible to feel anything at all.’

Eleanor felt, as she had the day before, that the conversation was being skilfully guided away from the thought of fear, so very present in her own mind. Perhaps she was to be allowed to speak occasionally for all of them so that, quieting her, they quieted themselves and could leave the subject behind them; perhaps, vehicle for every kind of fear, she contained enough for all. They are like children, she thought crossly, daring each other to go first, ready to turn and call names at whoever comes last; she pushed her plate away from her and sighed.

‘Before I go to sleep *tonight*,’ Theodora was saying to the doctor, ‘I want to be sure that I have seen every inch of this house. No more lying there wondering what is over my head or under me. And we *have* to open some windows and keep the doors open and stop feeling our way around.’

‘Little signs,’ Luke suggested. ‘Arrows pointing, reading THIS WAY OUT.’

‘Or DEAD END,’ Eleanor said.

‘Or WATCH OUT FOR FALLING FURNITURE,’ Theodora said. ‘*We*’ll make them,’ she said to Luke.

‘First we all explore the house,’ Eleanor said, too quickly perhaps, because Theodora turned and looked at her curiously. ‘I don’t want to find myself left behind in an attic or something,’ Eleanor added uncomfortably.

‘No one wants to leave you behind anywhere,’ Theodora said.

‘Then *I* suggest,’ Luke said, ‘that we first of all finish off the coffee in the pot, and then go nervously from room to room, endeavouring to discover some rational plan to this house, and leaving doors open as we go. I never thought,’ he said, shaking his head sadly, ‘that I would stand to inherit a house where I had to put up signs to find my way around.’

‘We need to find out what to call the rooms,’ Theodora said. ‘Suppose I told you, Luke, that I would meet you clandestinely in the second-best drawing-room — how would you ever know where to find me?’

‘You could keep whistling till I got there,’ Luke offered.

Theodora shuddered. ‘You would hear me whistling, and calling you, while you wandered from door to door, never opening the right one, and I would be inside, not able to find any way to get out — —’

‘And nothing to eat,’ Eleanor said unkindly.

Theodora looked at her again. ‘And nothing to eat,’ she agreed after a minute. Then, ‘It’s the crazy house at the carnival,’ she said. ‘Rooms opening out of each other and doors going everywhere at once and swinging shut when you come, and I bet that somewhere there are mirrors that make you look all sideways and an air hose to blow up your skirts, and something that comes out of a dark passage and laughs in your face — —' She was suddenly quiet and picked up her cup so quickly that her coffee spilled.

'Not as bad as all that,' the doctor said easily. 'Actually, the ground floor is laid out in what I might almost call concentric circles of rooms; at the centre is the little parlour where we sat last night; around it, roughly, are a series of rooms — the billiard room, for instance, and a dismal little den entirely furnished in rose-coloured satin — —'

'Where Eleanor and I will go each morning with our needlework.'

' — and surrounding these — I call them the inside rooms because they are the ones with no direct way to the outside; they have no windows, you remember — surrounding these are the ring of outside rooms, the drawing-room, the library, the conservatory, the — —'

'No,' Theodora said, shaking her head. 'I am still lost back in the rose-coloured satin.'

'And the verandah goes all around the house. There are doors opening on to the verandah from the drawing-room, and the conservatory, and one sitting-room. There is also a passage — —'

'Stop, stop.' Theodora was laughing, but she shook her head. 'It's a filthy, *rotten* house.'

The swinging door in the corner of the dining-room opened, and Mrs Dudley stood, one hand holding the door open, looking without expression at the breakfast table. 'I clear off at ten,' Mrs Dudley said.

'Good morning, Mrs Dudley,' Luke said.

Mrs Dudley turned her eyes to him. 'I clear off at ten,' she said. 'The dishes are supposed to be back on the shelves. I take them out again for lunch. I set out lunch at one, but first the dishes have to be back on the shelves.'

‘Of course, Mrs Dudley.’ The doctor rose and put down his napkin. ‘Everybody ready?’ he asked.

Under Mrs Dudley’s eye Theodora deliberately lifted her cup and finished the last of her coffee, then touched her mouth with her napkin and sat back. ‘Splendid breakfast,’ she said conversationally. ‘Do the dishes belong to the house?’

‘They belong on the shelves,’ Mrs Dudley said.

‘And the glassware and the silver and the linen? Lovely old things.’

‘The linen,’ Mrs Dudley said, ‘belongs in the linen drawers in the dining-room. The silver belongs in the silver chest. The glasses belong on the shelves.’

‘We must be quite a bother to you,’ Theodora said.

Mrs Dudley was silent. Finally she said, ‘I clear up at ten. I set out lunch at one.’

Theodora laughed and rose. ‘On,’ she said, ‘on, on. Let us go and open doors.’

They began reasonably enough with the dining-room door, which they propped open with a heavy chair. The room beyond was the game room; the table against which Theodora had stumbled was a low inlaid chess table (‘Now, I could not have overlooked that last night,’ the doctor said irritably), and at one end of the room were card tables and chairs, and a tall cabinet where the chessmen had been, with croquet balls and the cribbage board.

‘Jolly spot to spend a carefree hour,’ Luke said, standing in the doorway regarding the bleak room. The cold greens of the table tops were reflected unhappily in the dark tiles around the fireplace; the inevitable wood panelling was, here, not at all enlivened by a series of sporting prints which seemed entirely devoted to various methods of doing wild animals to death, and over the mantel a deerhead looked down upon them in patent embarrassment.

‘This is where they came to enjoy themselves,’ Theodora said, and her voice echoed shakily from the high ceiling. ‘They came here,’ she explained, ‘to relax from the oppressive atmosphere of the rest of the house.’ The deerhead looked down on her mournfully. ‘Those two little girls,’ she said. ‘Can we *please* take down that *beast* up there?’

‘I think it’s taken a fancy to you,’ Luke said. ‘It’s never taken its eyes off you since you came in. Let’s get out of here.’

They propped the door open as they left, and came out into the hall, which shone dully under the light from the open rooms. ‘When we find a room with a window,’ the doctor remarked, ‘we will open it; until then, let us be content with opening the front door.’

‘You keep thinking of the little children,’ Eleanor said to Theodora, ‘but I can’t forget that lonely little companion, walking around these rooms, wondering who else was in the house.’

Luke tugged the great front door open and wheeled the big vase to hold it; ‘Fresh air,’ he said thankfully. The warm smell of rain and wet grass swept into the hall, and for a minute they stood in the open doorway, breathing air from outside Hill House. Then the doctor said, ‘Now *here* is something none of you anticipated,’ and he opened a small door tucked in beside the tall front door and stood back, smiling. ‘The library,’ he said. ‘In the tower.’

‘I can’t go in there,’ Eleanor said, surprising herself, but she could not. She backed away, overwhelmed with the cold air of mould and earth which rushed at her. ‘My mother — —’ she said, not knowing what she wanted to tell them, and pressed herself against the wall.

‘Indeed?’ said the doctor, regarding her with interest. ‘Theodora?’ Theodora shrugged and stepped into the library; Eleanor shivered. ‘Luke?’ said the doctor, but Luke was already inside. From where she stood Eleanor could see only a part of the circular wall of the library, with a narrow iron staircase going up and perhaps, since it was the tower, up and up and up; Eleanor shut her eyes, hearing the doctor’s voice distantly, hollow against the stone of the library walls.

‘Can you see the little trapdoor up there in the shadows?’ he was asking. ‘It leads out on to a little balcony, and of course that’s where she is commonly supposed to have hanged herself — the girl, you remember. A most suitable spot, certainly; more suitable for suicides, I would think, than for books. She is supposed to have tied the rope on to the iron railing and then just stepped — —’

‘Thanks,’ Theodora said from within. ‘I can visualise it perfectly, thank you. For myself, I would probably have anchored the rope on to the deerhead in the game room, but I suppose she had some sentimental attachment to the tower; what a nice word “attachment” is in that context, don’t you think?’

‘Delicious.’ It was Luke’s voice, louder; they were coming out of the library and back to the hall where Eleanor waited. ‘I think that I will make this room into a night club. I will put the orchestra up there on the balcony, and dancing girls will come down that winding iron staircase; the bar — —’

‘Eleanor,’ Theodora said, ‘are you all right now? It’s a perfectly awful room, and you were right to stay out of it.’

Eleanor stood away from the wall; her hands were cold and she wanted to cry, but she turned her back to the library door, which the doctor propped open with a stack of books. ‘I don’t think I’ll do much reading while I’m here,' she said, trying to speak lightly. 'Not if the books smell like the library.'

'I hadn't noticed a smell,' the doctor said. He looked inquiringly at Luke, who shook his head. 'Odd,' the doctor went on, 'and just the kind of thing we're looking for. Make a note of it, my dear, and try to describe it exactly.'

Theodora was puzzled. She stood in the hallway, turning, looking behind her at the staircase and then around again at the front door. 'Are there two front doors?' she asked. 'Am I just mixed up?'

The doctor smiled happily; he had clearly been hoping for some such question. 'This is the only front door,' he said. 'It is the one you came in yesterday.'

Theodora frowned. 'Then why can't Eleanor and I see the tower from our bedroom windows? Our rooms look out over the front of the house, and yet — —'

The doctor laughed and clapped his hands. 'At last,' he said. 'Clever Theodora. This is why I wanted you to see the house by day. Come, sit on the stairs while I tell you.'

Obediently they settled on the stairs, looking up at the doctor, who took on his lecturing stance and began formally, 'One of the peculiar traits of Hill House is its design — —'

'Crazy house at the carnival.'

'Precisely. Have you not wondered at our *extreme* difficulty in finding our way around? An ordinary house would not have had the four of us in such confusion for so long, and yet time after time we choose the wrong doors, the room we want eludes us. Even I have had my troubles.' He sighed and nodded. 'I dare say,' he went on, 'that old Hugh Crain expected that some day Hill House might become a showplace, like the Winchester House in California or the many octagon houses; he designed Hill House himself, remember, and, I have told you before, he was a strange man. Every angle' — and the doctor gestured towards the doorway— 'every angle is slightly wrong. Hugh Crain must have detested other people and their sensible squared-away houses, because he made his house to suit his mind. Angles which you assume are the right angles you are accustomed to, and have every right to expect are true, are actually a fraction of a degree off in one direction or another. I am sure, for instance, that you believe that the stairs you are sitting on are level, because you are not prepared for stairs which are not level — —'

They moved uneasily, and Theodora put out a quick hand to take hold of the balustrade, as though she felt she might be falling.

' — are actually on a very slight slant towards the central shaft; the doorways are all a very little bit off centre — that may be, by the way, the reason the doors swing shut unless they are held; I wondered this morning whether the approaching footsteps of you two ladies upset the delicate balance of the doors. Of course the result of all these tiny aberrations of measurement adds up to a fairly large distortion in the house as a whole. Theodora cannot see the tower from her bedroom window because the tower actually stands at the corner of the house. From Theodora's bedroom window it is completely invisible, although from here it seems to be directly outside her room. The window of Theodora's room is actually fifteen feet to the left of where we are now.'

Theodora spread her hands helplessly. 'Golly,' she said.

'I see,' Eleanor said. 'The verandah roof is what misleads us. I can look out my window and see the verandah roof and because I came directly into the house and up the stairs I assumed that the front door was right below, although really — —'

‘You see only the verandah roof,’ the doctor said. ‘The front door is far away; it and the tower are visible from the nursery, which is the big room at the end of the hallway; we will see it later today. It is’ — and his voice was saddened— ‘a masterpiece of architectural misdirection. The double stairway at Chambord — —’

‘Then everything is a little bit off centre?’ Theodora asked uncertainly. ‘That’s why it all feels so disjointed?’

‘What happens when you go back to a real house?’ Eleanor asked. ‘I mean — a — well — a *real* house?’

‘It must be like coming off shipboard,’ Luke said. ‘After being here for a while your sense of balance could be so distorted that it would take you a while to lose your sea legs, or your Hill House legs. Could it be,’ he asked the doctor, ‘that what people have been assuming were supernatural manifestations were really only the result of a slight loss of balance in the people who live here? The inner ear,’ he told Theodora wisely.

‘It must certainly affect people in some way,’ the doctor said. ‘We have grown to trust blindly in our senses of balance and reason, and I can see where the mind might fight wildly to preserve its own familiar stable patterns against all evidence that it was leaning sideways.’ He turned away. ‘We have marvels still before us,’ he said, and they came down from the stairway and followed him, walking gingerly, testing the floors as they moved. They went down the narrow passage to the little parlour where they had sat the night before, and from there, leaving doors propped open behind them, they moved into the outer circle of rooms, which looked out on to the verandah. They pulled heavy draperies away from windows and the light from outside came into Hill House. They passed through a music room where a harp stood sternly apart from them, with never a jangle of strings to mark their footfalls. A grand piano stood tightly shut, with a candelabra above, no candle ever touched by flame. A marble-topped table held wax flowers under glass, and the chairs were twig-thin and gilded. Beyond this was the conservatory, with tall glass doors showing them the rain outside, and ferns growing damply around and over wicker furniture. Here it was uncomfortably moist, and they left it quickly, to come through an arched doorway into the drawing-room and stand, aghast and incredulous.

‘It’s not there,’ Theodora said, weak and laughing. ‘I don’t believe it’s there.’ She shook her head. ‘Eleanor, do you see it too?’

‘How...?’ Eleanor said helplessly.

‘I thought you would be pleased.’ The doctor was complacent.

One entire end of the drawing-room was in possession of a marble statuary piece; against the mauve stripes and flowered carpet it was huge and grotesque and somehow whitely naked; Eleanor put her hands over her eyes, and Theodora clung to her. ‘I thought it might be intended for Venus rising from the waves,’ the doctor said.

‘Not at all,’ said Luke, finding his voice, ‘it’s Saint Francis curing the lepers.’

‘No, no,’ Eleanor said. ‘One of them is a dragon.’

‘It’s none of that,’ said Theodora roundly; ‘it’s a family portrait, you sillies. Composite. *Anyone* would know it at once; that figure in the centre, that tall, undraped — good heavens! — masculine one, that’s old Hugh, patting himself on the back because he built Hill House, and his two attendant nymphs are his daughters. The one on the right who seems to be brandishing an ear of corn is actually telling about her lawsuit, and the other one, the little one on the end, is the companion, and the one on the *other* end — —’

‘Is Mrs Dudley, done from life,’ Luke said.

‘And that grass stuff they’re all standing on is really supposed to be the dining-room carpet, grown up a little. Did anyone else notice that dining-room carpet? It looks like a field of hay, and you can feel it tickling your ankles. In the background, that kind of overspreading apple-tree kind of thing, *that’s* — —’

‘A symbol of the protection of the house, surely,’ Dr Montague said.

I’d hate to think it might fall on us,’ Eleanor said. ‘Since the house is so unbalanced, Doctor, isn’t there some chance of that?’

‘I have read that the statue was carefully, and at great expense, constructed to offset the uncertainty of the floor on which it stands. It was put in, at any rate, when the house was built, and it has not fallen yet. It is possible, you know, that Hugh Crain admired it, even found it lovely.’

It is also possible that he used it to scare his children with,’ Theodora said. ‘What a pretty room this would be without it.’ She turned, swinging. ‘A dancing room,’ she said, ‘for ladies in full skirts, and room enough for a full country dance. Hugh Crain, will you take a turn with me?’ and she curtsied to the statue.

‘I believe he’s going to accept,’ Eleanor said, taking an involuntary step backward.

‘Don’t let him tread on your toes,’ the doctor said, and laughed. ‘Remember what happened to Don Juan.’

Theodora touched the statue timidly, putting her finger against the outstretched hand of one of the figures. ‘Marble is always a shock,’ she said. ‘It never feels like you think it’s going to. I suppose a lifesize statue looks enough like a real person to make you expect to feel skin.’ Then, turning again, and shimmering in the dim room, she waltzed alone, turning to bow to the statue.

‘At the end of the room,’ the doctor said to Eleanor and Luke, ‘under those draperies, are doors leading on to the verandah; when Theodora is heated from dancing she may step into the cooler air.’ He went the length of the room to pull aside the heavy blue draperies and opened the doors. Again the smell of the warm rain came in, and a burst of wind, so that a little breath seemed to move across the statue, and light touched the coloured walls.

‘Nothing in this house moves,’ Eleanor said, ‘until you look away, and then you just catch something from the corner of your eye. Look at the little figurines on the shelves; when we all had our backs turned they were dancing with Theodora.’

‘*I* move,’ Theodora said, circling towards them.

‘Flowers under glass,’ Luke said. ‘Tassels. I am beginning to fancy this house.’

Theodora pulled at Eleanor’s hair. ‘Race you around the verandah,’ she said and darted for the doors. Eleanor, with no time for hesitation or thought, followed, and they ran out on to the verandah. Eleanor, running and laughing, came around a curve of the verandah to find Theodora going in through another door, and stopped, breathless. They had come to the kitchen, and Mrs Dudley, turning away from the sink, watched them silently.

‘Mrs Dudley,’ Theodora said politely, ‘we’ve been exploring the house.’

Mrs Dudley’s eyes moved to the clock on the shelf over the stove. ‘It is half-past eleven,’ she said. ‘I — —’

‘ — set lunch on at one,’ Theodora said. ‘We’d like to look over the kitchen, if we may. We’ve seen all the other downstairs rooms, I think.’

Mrs Dudley was still for a minute and then, moving her head acquiescently, turned and walked deliberately across the kitchen to a farther doorway. When she opened it they could see the back stairs beyond, and Mrs Dudley turned and closed the door behind her before she started up. Theodora cocked her head at the doorway and waited a minute before she said, ‘I wonder if Mrs Dudley has a soft spot in her heart for me, I really do.’

‘I suppose she’s gone up to hang herself from the turret,’ Eleanor said. ‘Let’s see what’s for lunch while we’re here.’

‘Don’t joggle anything,’ Theodora said. ‘You know perfectly well that the dishes belong on the shelves. Do you think that woman really means to make us a soufflé? Here is certainly a soufflé dish, and eggs and cheese — —’

‘It’s a nice kitchen,’ Eleanor said. ‘In my mother’s house the kitchen was dark and narrow, and nothing you cooked there ever had any taste or colour.’

‘What about your own kitchen?’ Theodora asked absently. ‘In your little apartment? Eleanor, look at the doors.’

‘I can’t make a soufflé,’ Eleanor said.

‘Look, Eleanor. There’s the door on to the verandah, and another that opens on to steps going down; — to the cellar, I guess — and another over there going on to the verandah again, and the one she used to go upstairs, and another one over there — —’

‘To the verandah again,’ Eleanor said, opening it. ‘Three doors going out on to the verandah from one kitchen.’

‘And the door to the butler’s pantry and on into the dining-room. Our good Mrs Dudley likes doors, doesn’t she? She can certainly’ — and their eyes met— ‘get out fast in any direction if she wants to.’

Eleanor turned abruptly and went back to the verandah. ‘I wonder if she had Dudley cut extra doors for her. I wonder how she likes working in a kitchen where a door behind her might open without her knowing it. I wonder, actually, just what Mrs Dudley is in the habit of meeting in her kitchen so that she wants to make sure that she'll find a way out no matter which direction she runs. I wonder — —'

'Shut up,' Theodora said amiably. 'A nervous cook can't make a good soufflé, anyone knows that, and she's probably listening on the stairs. Let us choose one of her doors and leave it open behind us.'

Luke and the doctor were standing on the verandah, looking out over the lawn; the front door was oddly close, beyond them. Behind the house, seeming almost overhead, the great hills were muted and dull in the rain. Eleanor wandered along the verandah, thinking that she had never before known a house so completely surrounded. Like a very tight belt, she thought; would the house fly apart if the verandah came off? She went what she thought must be the greater part of the circle around the house, and then she saw the tower. It rose up before her suddenly, almost without warning, as she came around the curve of the verandah. It was made of grey stone, grotesquely solid, jammed hard against the wooden side of the house, with the insistent verandah holding it there. Hideous, she thought, and then thought that if the house burned away some day the tower would still stand, grey and forbidding over the ruins, warning people away from what was left of Hill House, with perhaps a stone fallen here and there, so owls and bats might fly in and out and nest among the books below. Half-way up windows began, thin angled slits in the stone, and she wondered what it would be like, looking down from them, and wondered that she had not been able to enter the tower. I will never look down from those windows, she thought, and tried to imagine the narrow iron stairway going up and around inside. High on top was a conical wooden roof, topped by a wooden spire. It must have been laughable in any other house, but here in Hill

House it belonged, gleeful and expectant, awaiting perhaps a slight creature creeping out from the little window on to the slanted roof, reaching up to the spire, knotting a rope....

‘You’ll fall,’ Luke said, and Eleanor gasped; she brought her eyes down with an effort and found that she was gripping the verandah rail tightly and leaning far backward. ‘Don’t trust your balance in my charming Hill House,’ Luke said, and Eleanor breathed deeply, dizzy, and staggered. He caught her and held her while she tried to steady herself in the rocking world where the trees and the lawn seemed somehow tilted sideways and the sky turned and swung.

‘Eleanor?’ Theodora said near by, and she heard the sound of the doctor’s feet running along the verandah. ‘This damnable house,’ Luke said. ‘You have to watch it every minute.’

‘Eleanor?’ said the doctor.

‘I’m all right,’ Eleanor said, shaking her head and standing unsteadily by herself. ‘I was leaning back to see the top of the tower and I got dizzy.’

‘She was standing almost sideways when I caught her,’ Luke said.

‘I’ve had that feeling once or twice this morning,’ Theodora said, ‘as though I was walking up the wall.’

‘Bring her back inside,’ the doctor said. ‘It’s not so bad when you’re *inside* the house.’

‘I’m really all right,’ Eleanor said, very much embarrassed, and she walked with deliberate steps along the verandah to the front door, which was closed. ‘I thought we left it open,’ she said with a little shake in her voice, and the doctor came past her and pushed the heavy door open again. Inside, the hall had returned to itself; all the doors they had left open were neatly closed. When the doctor opened the door into the game room they could see beyond him that the doors to the dining-room were closed, and the little stool they had used to prop one door open was neatly back in its place against the wall. In the boudoir and the drawing-room, the parlour and the conservatory, the doors and windows were closed, the draperies pulled together, and the darkness back again.

'It's Mrs Dudley,' Theodora said, trailing after the doctor and Luke, who moved quickly from one room to the next, pushing doors wide open again and propping them, sweeping drapes away from windows and letting in the warm, wet air. 'Mrs Dudley did it yesterday, as soon as Eleanor and I were out of the way, because she'd rather shut them herself than come along and find them shut by themselves because the doors belong shut and the windows belong shut and the dishes belong — —' She began to laugh foolishly, and the doctor turned and frowned at her with irritation.

'Mrs Dudley had better learn her place,' he said. 'I will nail these doors open if I have to.' He turned down the passageway to their little parlour and sent the door swinging open with a crash. 'Losing my temper will not help,' he said, and gave the door a vicious kick.

'Sherry in the parlour before lunch,' Luke said amiably. 'Ladies, enter.'

2

'Mrs Dudley,' the doctor said, putting down his fork, 'an admirable soufflé.'

Mrs Dudley turned to regard him briefly and went into the kitchen with an empty dish.

The doctor sighed and moved his shoulders tiredly. 'After my vigil last night, I feel the need for a rest this afternoon, and you,' he said to Eleanor, 'would do well to lie down for an hour. Perhaps a regular afternoon rest might be more comfortable for all of us.'

'I see,' said Theodora, amused. 'I must take an afternoon nap. It may look funny when I go home again, but I can always tell them that it was part of my schedule at Hill House.'

'Perhaps we will have trouble sleeping at night,' the doctor said, and a little chill went around the table, darkening the light of the silver and the bright colours of the china, a little cloud that drifted through the dining-room and brought Mrs Dudley after it.

'It's five minutes to two,' Mrs Dudley said.

3

Eleanor did not sleep during the afternoon, although she would have liked to; instead, she lay on Theodora's bed in the green room and watched Theodora do her nails, chatting lazily, unwilling to let herself perceive that she had followed Theodora into the green room because she had not dared to be alone.

'I love decorating myself,' Theodora said, regarding her hand affectionately. 'I'd like to paint myself all over.'

Eleanor moved comfortably. 'Gold paint,' she suggested, hardly thinking. With her eyes almost closed she could see Theodora only as a mass of colour sitting on the floor.

'Nail polish and perfume and bath salts,' Theodora said, as one telling the cities of the Nile. 'Mascara. You don't think half enough of such things, Eleanor.'

Eleanor laughed and closed her eyes altogether. 'No time,' she said.

'Well,' Theodora said with determination, 'by the time I'm through with you, you will be a different person; I dislike being with women of no colour.' She laughed to show that she was teasing, and then went on, 'I think I will put red polish on your toes.'

Eleanor laughed too and held out her bare foot. After a minute, nearly asleep, she felt the odd cold little touch of the brush on her toes, and shivered.

‘Surely a famous courtesan like yourself is accustomed to the ministrations of handmaidens,’ Theodora said. ‘Your feet are dirty.’

Shocked, Eleanor sat up and looked; her feet *were* dirty, and her nails were painted bright red. ‘It’s *horrible*,’ she said to Theodora, ‘it’s *wicked*,’ wanting to cry. Then, helplessly, she began to laugh at the look on Theodora’s face. ‘I’ll go and wash my feet,’ she said.

‘Golly.’ Theodora sat on the floor beside the bed, staring. ‘Look,’ she said. ‘My feet are dirty, too, baby, honest. *Look.*’

‘Anyway,’ Eleanor said, ‘I hate having things done to me.’

‘You’re about as crazy as anyone *I* ever saw,’ Theodora said cheerfully.

‘I don’t like to feel helpless,’ Eleanor said. ‘My mother — —’

‘Your mother would have been delighted to see you with your toe-nails painted red,’ Theodora said. ‘They look nice.’

Eleanor looked at her feet again. ‘It’s wicked,’ she said inadequately. ‘I mean — on *my* feet. It makes me feel like I look like a fool.’

‘You’ve got foolishness and wickedness somehow mixed up.’ Theodora began to gather her equipment together. ‘Anyway, I won’t take it off and we’ll both watch to see whether Luke and the doctor look at your feet first.’

‘No matter what I try to say, you make it sound foolish,’ Eleanor said.

‘Or wicked.’ Theodora looked up at her gravely. ‘I have a hunch,’ she said, ‘that you ought to go home, Eleanor.’

Is she laughing at me? Eleanor wondered; has she decided that I am not fit to stay? ‘I don’t want to go,’ she said, and Theodora looked at her again quickly and then away, and touched Eleanor’s toes softly. ‘The polish is dry,’ she said. ‘I’m an idiot. Just something frightened me for a minute.’ She stood up and stretched. ‘Let’s go and look for the others,’ she said.

Luke leaned himself wearily against the wall of the upstairs hall, his head resting against the gold frame of an engraving of a ruin. ‘I keep thinking of this house as my own future property,’ he said, ‘more now than I did before; I keep telling myself that it will belong to me some day, and I keep asking myself why.’ He gestured at the length of the hall. ‘If I had a passion for doors,’ he said, ‘or gilded clocks, or miniatures; if I wanted a Turkish corner of my own, I would very likely regard Hill House as a fairyland of beauty.’

‘It’s a handsome house,’ the doctor said staunchly. ‘It must have been thought of as elegant when it was built.’ He started off down the hall, to the large room on the end which had once been the nursery. ‘Now,’ he said, ‘we shall see the tower from a window’ — and shivered as he passed through the door. Then he turned and looked back curiously. ‘Could there be a draught across that doorway?’

‘A draught? In Hill House?’ Theodora laughed. ‘Not unless you could manage to make one of those doors stay open.’

‘Come here one at a time, then,’ the doctor said, and Theodora moved forward, grimacing as she passed the doorway.

‘Like the doorway of a tomb,’ she said. ‘It’s warm enough inside, though.’

Luke came, hesitated in the cold spot, and then moved quickly to get out of it, and Eleanor, following, felt with incredulity the piercing cold that struck her between one step and the next; it was like passing through a wall of ice, she thought, and asked the doctor, ‘What is it?’

The doctor was patting his hands together with delight. ‘You can keep your Turkish corners, my boy,’ he said. He reached out a hand and held it carefully over the location of the cold. ‘They *cannot* explain this,’ he said. ‘The very essence of the tomb, as Theodora points out. The cold spot in

Borley Rectory only dropped eleven degrees,' he went on complacently. 'This, I should think, is considerably colder. The heart of the house.'

Theodora and Eleanor had moved to stand closer together; although the nursery was warm, it smelled musty and close, and the cold crossing the doorway was almost tangible, visible as a barrier which must be crossed in order to get out. Beyond the windows the grey stone of the tower pressed close; inside, the room was dark and the line of nursery animals painted along the wall seemed somehow not at all jolly, but as though they were trapped, or related to the dying deer in the sporting prints of the game room. The nursery, larger than the other bedrooms, had an indefinable air of neglect found nowhere else in Hill House, and it crossed Eleanor's mind that even Mrs Dudley's diligent care might not bring her across that cold barrier any oftener than necessary.

Luke had stepped back across the cold spot and was examining the hall carpet, then the walls, patting at the surfaces as though hoping to discover some cause for the odd cold. 'It *couldn't* be a draught,' he said, looking up at the doctor. 'Unless they've got a direct air line to the North Pole. Everything's solid, anyway.'

'I wonder who slept in the nursery,' the doctor said irrelevantly. 'Do you suppose they shut it up, once the children were gone?'

'Look,' Luke said, pointing. In either corner of the hall, over the nursery doorway, two grinning heads were set; meant, apparently, as gay decorations for the nursery entrance, they were no more jolly or carefree than the animals inside. Their separate stares, captured for ever in distorted laughter, met and locked at the point of the hall where the vicious cold centred. 'When you stand where they can look at you,' Luke explained, 'they freeze you.'

Curiously, the doctor stepped down the hall to join him, looking up. ‘Don’t leave us alone in here,’ Theodora said, and ran out of the nursery, pulling Eleanor through the cold, which was like a fast slap, or a close cold breath. ‘A fine place to chill our beer,’ she said, and put out her tongue at the grinning faces.

‘I must make a full account of this,’ the doctor said happily.

‘It doesn’t seem like an *impartial* cold,’ Eleanor said, awkward because she was not quite sure what she meant. ‘I felt it as *deliberate*, as though something wanted to give me an unpleasant shock.’

‘It’s because of the faces, I suppose,’ the doctor said; he was on his hands and knees, feeling along the floor. ‘Measuring tape and thermometer,’ he told himself, ‘chalk for an outline; perhaps the cold intensifies at night? Everything is worse,’ he said, looking at Eleanor, ‘if you think something is looking at you.’

Luke stepped through the cold, with a shiver, and closed the door to the nursery; he came back to the others in the hall with a kind of leap, as though he thought he could escape the cold by not touching the floor. With the nursery door closed they realised all at once how much darker it had become, and Theodora said restlessly, ‘Let’s get downstairs to our parlour; I can feel those hills pushing in.’

‘After five,’ Luke said. ‘Cocktail time. I suppose,’ he said to the doctor, ‘you will trust me to mix you a cocktail again tonight?’

‘Too much vermouth,’ the doctor said, and followed them lingeringly, watching the nursery door over his shoulder.

5

‘I propose,’ the doctor said, setting down his napkin, ‘that we take our coffee in our little parlour. I find that fire very cheerful.’

Theodora giggled. ‘Mrs Dudley’s gone, so let’s race around fast and get all those doors and windows open and take everything down from the shelves — —’

‘The house seems different when she’s not in it,’ Eleanor said.

‘Emptier.’ Luke looked at her and nodded; he was arranging the coffee cups on a tray, and the doctor had already gone on, doggedly opening doors and propping them. ‘Each night I realise suddenly that we four are alone here.’

‘Although Mrs Dudley’s not much good as far as company is concerned; it’s funny,’ Eleanor said, looking down at the dinner-table, ‘I dislike Mrs Dudley as much as any of you, but my mother would *never* let me get up and leave a table looking like this until morning.’

‘If she wants to leave before dark she has to clear away in the morning,’ Theodora said without interest. ‘*I*’m certainly not going to do it.’

‘It’s not nice to walk away and leave a dirty table.’

‘You couldn’t get them back on the right shelves anyway, and she’d have to do it all over again just to get your fingermarks off things.’

‘If I just took the silverware and let it soak — —’

‘No,’ Theodora said, catching her hand. ‘Do you want to go out into that kitchen all alone, with all those doors?’

‘No,’ Eleanor said, setting down the handful of forks she had gathered. ‘I guess I don’t, really.’ She lingered to look uneasily at the table, at the crumpled napkins and the drop of wine spilled by Luke’s place, and shook her head. ‘I don’t know what my mother would say, though.’

‘Come on,’ Theodora said. ‘They’ve left lights for us.’

The fire in the little parlour was bright, and Theodora sat down beside the coffee tray while Luke brought brandy from the cupboard where he had carefully set it away the night before. ‘We must be cheerful at all costs,’ he said. ‘I’ll challenge you again tonight, Doctor.’

Before dinner they had ransacked the other downstairs rooms for comfortable chairs and lamps, and now their little parlour was easily the pleasantest room in the house. ‘Hill House has really been very kind to us,’ Theodora said, giving Eleanor her coffee, and Eleanor sat down gratefully in a pillowy, overstuffed chair. ‘No dirty dishes for Eleanor to wash, a pleasant evening in good company, and perhaps the sun shining again tomorrow.’

‘We must plan our picnic,’ Eleanor said.

‘I am going to get fat and lazy in Hill House,’ Theodora went on. Her insistence on naming Hill House troubled Eleanor. It’s as though she were saying it deliberately, Eleanor thought, telling the house she knows its name, calling the house to tell it where we are; is it bravado? ‘Hill House, Hill House, Hill House,’ Theodora said softly, and smiled across at Eleanor.

‘Tell me,’ Luke said politely to Theodora, ‘since you are a princess, tell me about the political situation in your country.’

‘Very unsettled,’ Theodora said. ‘I ran away because my father, who is of course the king, insists that I marry Black Michael, who is the pretender to the throne. I, of course, cannot endure the sight of Black Michael, who wears one gold ear-ring and beats his grooms with a riding crop.’

‘A most unstable country,’ Luke said. ‘How did you ever manage to get away?’

‘I fled in a hay wagon, disguised as a milkmaid. They never thought to look for me there, and I crossed the border with papers I forged myself in a woodcutter’s hut.’

‘And Black Michael will no doubt take over the country now in a *coup d’état*?’

‘Undoubtedly. And he can have it.’

It’s like waiting in a dentist’s office, Eleanor thought, watching them over her coffee cup; waiting in a dentist’s office and listening while other patients make brave jokes across the room, all of you certain to meet the dentist sooner or later. She looked up suddenly, aware of the doctor near her, and smiled uncertainly.

‘Nervous?’ the doctor asked, and Eleanor nodded.

‘Only because I wonder what’s going to happen,’ she said.

‘So do I.’ The doctor moved a chair and sat down beside her. ‘You have the feeling that something — whatever it is — is going to happen soon?’

‘Yes. Everything seems to be waiting.’

‘And *they*’ — the doctor nodded at Theodora and Luke, who were laughing at each other— ‘*they* meet it in *their* way; I wonder what it will do to all of us. I would have said a month ago that a situation like this would never really come about, that we four would sit here together, in this house.’ *He* does not name it, Eleanor noticed. ‘I’ve been waiting for a long time,’ he said.

‘You think we are right to stay?’

‘Right?’ he said. ‘I think we are all incredibly silly to stay. I think that an atmosphere like this one can find out the flaws and faults and weaknesses in all of us, and break us apart in a matter of days. We have only one defence, and that is running away. At least it can’t *follow* us, can it? When we feel ourselves endangered we can leave, just as we came. And,’ he added dryly, ‘just as fast as we can go.’

‘But we are forewarned,’ Eleanor said, ‘and there are four of us together.’

‘I have already mentioned this to Luke and Theodora,’ he said. ‘Promise me absolutely that you will leave, as fast as you can, if you begin to feel the house catching at you.'

'I promise,' Eleanor said, smiling. He is trying to make me feel braver, she thought, and was grateful. 'It's all right, though,' she told him. 'Really, it's all right.'

'I will feel no hesitation about sending you away,' he said, rising, 'if it seems to be necessary. Luke?' he said. 'Will the ladies excuse us?'

While they set up the chessboard and men Theodora wandered, cup in hand, around the room, and Eleanor thought, She moves like an animal, nervous and alert; she can't sit still while there is any scent of disturbance in the air; we are all uneasy. 'Come and sit by me,' she said, and Theodora came, moving with grace, circling to a resting spot. She sat down in the chair the doctor had left, and leaned her head back tiredly; how lovely she is, Eleanor thought, how thoughtlessly, luckily lovely. 'Are you tired?'

Theodora turned her head, smiling. 'I can't stand waiting much longer.'

'I was just thinking how relaxed you looked.'

'And *I* was just thinking of — when was it? day before yesterday? — and wondering how I could have brought myself to leave there and come here. Possibly I'm homesick.'

'Already?'

'Did you ever think about being homesick? If your home was Hill House would you be homesick for it? Did those two little girls cry for their dark, grim house when they were taken away?'

'I've never been away from anywhere,' Eleanor said carefully, 'so I suppose I've never been homesick.'

'How about now? Your little apartment?'

'Perhaps,' Eleanor said, looking into the fire, 'I haven't had it long enough to believe it's my own.'

'I want my own bed,' Theodora said, and Eleanor thought, She is sulking again; when she is hungry or tired or bored she turns into a baby. 'I'm sleepy,' Theodora said.

'It's after eleven,' Eleanor said, and as she turned to glance at the chess game the doctor shouted with joyful triumph, and Luke laughed.

'Now, sir,' the doctor said. '*Now*, sir.'

'Fairly beaten, I admit,' Luke said. He began to gather the chessmen and set them back into their box. 'Any reason why I can't take a drop of brandy upstairs with me? To put myself to sleep, or give myself Dutch courage, or some such reason. Actually' — and he smiled over at Theodora and Eleanor — 'I plan to stay up and read for a while.'

'Are you still reading *Pamela?*' Eleanor asked the doctor.

'Volume two. I have three volumes to go, and then I shall begin *Clarissa Harlowe*, I think. Perhaps Luke would care to borrow — —'

'No, thanks,' Luke said hastily. 'I have a suitcase full of mystery stories.'

The doctor turned to look around. 'Let me see,' he said, 'fire screened, lights out. Leave the doors for Mrs Dudley to close in the morning.'

Tiredly, following one another, they went up the great stairway, turning out lights behind them. 'Has everyone got a flashlight, by the way?' the doctor asked, and they nodded, more intent upon sleep than the waves of darkness which came after them up the stairs of Hill House.

'Good night, everyone,' Eleanor said, opening the door to the blue room.

'Good night,' Luke said.

'Good night,' Theodora said.

'Good night,' the doctor said. 'Sleep tight.'

'Coming, Mother, coming,' Eleanor said, fumbling for the light. 'It's all right, I'm coming.' *Eleanor*, she heard, *Eleanor*. 'Coming, coming,' she shouted irritably, 'just a *minute*, I'm *coming*.'

'Eleanor?'

Then she thought, with a crashing shock which brought her awake, cold and shivering, out of bed and awake: *I am in Hill House*.

'What?' she cried out. 'What? Theodora?'

'Eleanor? In here.'

'Coming.' No time for the light; she kicked a table out of the way, wondering at the noise of it, and struggled briefly with the door of the connecting bathroom. That is not the table falling, she thought; my mother is knocking on the wall. It was blessedly light in Theodora's room, and Theodora was sitting up in bed, her hair tangled from sleep and her eyes wide with the shock of awakening; I must look the same way, Eleanor thought, and said, 'I'm here, what *is* it?' — and then heard, clearly for the first time, although she had been hearing it ever since she awakened. 'What *is* it?' she whispered.

She sat down slowly on the foot of Theodora's bed, wondering at what seemed calmness in herself. Now, she thought, now. It is only a noise, and terribly cold, terribly, terribly cold. It is a noise down the hall, far down at the end, near the nursery door, and terribly cold, *not* my mother knocking on the wall.

'Something is knocking on the doors,' Theodora said in a tone of pure rationality.

'That's all. And it's down near the other end of the hall. Luke and the doctor are probably there already, to see what is going on.' Not at all like my mother knocking on the wall; I was dreaming again.

'Bang bang,' Theodora said.

‘Bang,’ Eleanor said, and giggled. I am calm, she thought, but so very cold; the noise is only a kind of banging on the doors, one after another; is this what I was so afraid about? ‘Bang’ is the best word for it; it sounds like something children do, not mothers knocking against the wall for help, and anyway Luke and the doctor are there; is this what they mean by cold chills going up and down your back? Because it is not pleasant; it starts in your stomach and goes in waves around and up and down again like something alive. Like something alive. Yes. Like something alive.

‘Theodora,’ she said, and closed her eyes and tightened her teeth together and wrapped her arms around herself, ‘it’s getting closer.’

‘Just a noise,’ Theodora said, and moved next to Eleanor and sat tight against her. ‘It has an echo.’

It sounded, Eleanor thought, like a hollow noise, a hollow bang, as though something were hitting the doors with an iron kettle, or an iron bar, or an iron glove. It pounded regularly for a minute, and then suddenly more softly, and then again in a quick flurry, seeming to be going methodically from door to door at the end of the hall. Distantly she thought she could hear the voices of Luke and the doctor, calling from somewhere below, and she thought, *Then they are not up here with us at all*, and heard the iron crashing against what must have been a door very close.

‘Maybe it will go on down the other side of the hall,’ Theodora whispered, and Eleanor thought that the oddest part of this indescribable experience was that Theodora should be having it too. ‘No,’ Theodora said, and they heard the crash against the door across the hall. It was louder, it was deafening, it struck against the door next to them (did it move back and forth across the hall? did it go on feet along the carpet? did it lift a hand to the door?), and Eleanor threw herself away from the bed and ran to hold her hands against the door. ‘Go away,’ she shouted wildly. ‘Go away, go away!’

There was complete silence, and Eleanor thought, standing with her face against the door, Now I've done it; it was looking for the room with someone inside.

The cold crept and pinched at them, filling and overflowing the room. Anyone would have thought that the inhabitants of Hill House slept sweetly in this quiet, and then, so suddenly that Eleanor wheeled around, the sound of Theodora's teeth chattering, and Eleanor laughed. 'You big baby,' she said.

'I'm cold,' Theodora said. 'Deadly cold.'

'So am I.' Eleanor took the green quilt and threw it around Theodora, and took up Theodora's warm dressing-gown and put it on. 'You warmer now?'

'Where's Luke? Where's the doctor?'

'I don't know. Are you warmer now?'

'No.' Theodora shivered.

'In a minute I'll go out in the hall and call them; are you — —'

It started again, as though it had been listening, waiting to hear their voices and what they said, to identify them, to know how well prepared they were against it, waiting to hear if they were afraid. So suddenly that Eleanor leaped back against the bed and Theodora gasped and cried out, the iron crash came against their door, and both of them lifted their eyes in horror, because the hammering was against the upper edge of the door, higher than either of them could reach, higher than Luke or the doctor could reach, and the sickening, degrading cold came in waves from whatever was outside the door.

Eleanor stood perfectly still and looked at the door. She did not quite know what to do, although she believed that she was thinking coherently and was not unusually frightened, not more frightened, certainly, than she had believed in her worst dreams she could be. The cold troubled her even more than the sounds; even Theodora's warm robe was useless against the icy little curls of fingers on her back. The intelligent thing to do, perhaps, was to walk over and open the door; that, perhaps, would belong with the doctor's views of pure scientific inquiry. Eleanor knew that, even if her feet would take her as far as the door, her hand would not lift to the door-knob; impartially, remotely, she told herself that no one's hand would touch that knob; it's not the work hands were made for, she told herself. She had been rocking a little, each crash against the door pushing her a little backward, and now she was still because the noise was fading. 'I'm going to complain to the janitor about the radiators,' Theodora said from behind her. 'Is it stopping?'

'No,' Eleanor said, sick. 'No.'

It had found them. Since Eleanor would not open the door, it was going to make its own way in. Eleanor said aloud, 'Now I know why people scream, because I think I'm going to,' and Theodora said, 'I will if you will,' and laughed, so that Eleanor turned quickly back to the bed and they held each other, listening in silence. Little pattings came from around the door-frame, small seeking sounds, feeling the edges of the door, trying to sneak a way in. The door-knob was fondled, and Eleanor, whispering, asked, 'Is it locked?' and Theodora nodded and then, wide-eyed, turned to stare at the connecting bathroom door. 'Mine's locked too,' Eleanor said against her ear, and Theodora closed her eyes in relief. The little sticky sounds moved on around the door-frame and then, as though a fury caught whatever was outside, the crashing came again, and Eleanor and Theodora saw the wood of the door tremble and shake, and the door move against its hinges.

‘You can’t get in,’ Eleanor said wildly, and again there was a silence, as though the house listened with attention to her words, understanding, cynically agreeing, content to wait. A thin little giggle came, in a breath of air through the room, a little mad rising laugh, the smallest whisper of a laugh, and Eleanor heard it all up and down her back, a little gloating laugh moving past them around the house, and then she heard the doctor and Luke calling from the stairs and, mercifully, it was over.

When the real silence came, Eleanor breathed shakily and moved stiffly. ‘We’ve been clutching each other like a couple of lost children,’ Theodora said and untwined her arms from around Eleanor’s neck. ‘You’re wearing my bathrobe.’

‘I forgot mine. Is it really over?’

‘For tonight, anyway.’ Theodora spoke with certainty. ‘Can’t you tell? Aren’t you warm again?’

The sickening cold was gone, except for a reminiscent little thrill of it down Eleanor’s back when she looked at the door. She began to pull at the tight knot she had put in the bathrobe cord, and said, ‘Intense cold is one of the symptoms of shock.’

‘Intense shock is one of the symptoms I’ve got,’ Theodora said. ‘Here come Luke and the doctor.’ Their voices were outside in the hall, speaking quickly, anxiously, and Eleanor dropped Theodora’s robe on the bed and said, ‘For heaven’s sake, don’t let them knock on that door — one more knock would finish me’ — and ran into her own room to get her own robe. Behind her she could hear Theodora telling them to wait a minute, and then going to unlock the door, and then Luke’s voice saying pleasantly to Theodora, ‘Why, you look as though you’d seen a ghost.’

When Eleanor came back she noticed that both Luke and the doctor were dressed, and it occurred to her that it might be a sound idea from now on; if that intense cold was going to come back at night it was going to find Eleanor sleeping in a wool suit and a heavy sweater, and she didn't care what Mrs Dudley was going to say when she found that at least one of the lady guests was lying in one of the clean beds in heavy shoes and wool socks. 'Well,' she asked, 'how do you gentlemen like living in a haunted house?'

'It's perfectly fine,' Luke said, 'perfectly fine. It gives me an excuse to have a drink in the middle of the night.' He had the brandy bottle and glasses, and Eleanor thought that they must make a companionable little group, the four of them, sitting around Theodora's room at four in the morning, drinking brandy. They spoke lightly, quickly, and gave one another fast, hidden, little curious glances, each of them wondering what secret terror had been tapped in the others, what changes might show in face or gesture, what unguarded weakness might have opened the way to ruin.

'Did anything happen in here while we were outside?' the doctor asked.

Eleanor and Theodora looked at each other and laughed, honestly at last, without any edge of hysteria or fear. After a minute Theodora said carefully, 'Nothing in particular. Someone knocked on the door with a cannon ball and then tried to get in and eat us, and started laughing its head off when we wouldn't open the door. But nothing really out of the way.'

Curiously, Eleanor went over and opened the door. 'I thought the whole door was going to shatter,' she said, bewildered, 'and there isn't even a scratch on the wood, nor on any of the other doors; they're perfectly smooth.'

'How nice that it didn't mar the woodwork,' Theodora said, holding her brandy glass out to Luke. 'I couldn't bear it if this dear old house got hurt.' She grinned at Eleanor. 'Nellie here was going to scream.'

'So were you.'

‘Not at all; I only said so to keep you company. Besides, Mrs Dudley already said she wouldn’t come. And where were *you*, our manly defenders?’

‘We were chasing a dog,’ Luke said. ‘At least, some animal like a dog.’ He stopped, and then went on reluctantly. ‘We followed it outside.’

Theodora stared, and Eleanor said, ‘You mean it was *inside*?’

‘I saw it run past my door,’ the doctor said, ‘just caught a glimpse of it, slipping along. I woke Luke and we followed it down the stairs and out into the garden and lost it somewhere at the back of the house?’

‘The front door was open?’

‘No,’ Luke said. ‘The front door was closed. So were all the other doors. We checked.’

‘We’ve been wandering around for quite a while,’ the doctor said. ‘We never dreamed that you ladies were awake until we heard your voices.’ He spoke gravely. ‘There is one thing we have not taken into account,’ he said.

They looked at him, puzzled, and he explained, checking on his fingers in his lecture style. ‘First,’ he said, ‘Luke and I were awakened earlier than you ladies, clearly; we have been up and about, outside and in, for better than two hours, led on what you perhaps might allow me to call a wild-goose chase. Second, neither of us’ — he glanced inquiringly at Luke as he spoke— ‘heard any sound up here until your voices began. It was perfectly quiet. That is, the sound which hammered on your door was not audible to us. When we gave up our vigil and decided to come upstairs we apparently drove away whatever was waiting outside your door. Now, as we sit here together, all is quiet.’

‘I still don’t see what you mean,’ Theodora said, frowning.

‘We must take precautions,’ he said.

‘Against what? How?’

‘When Luke and I are called outside, and you two are kept imprisoned inside, doesn’t it begin to seem’ — and his voice was very quiet— ‘doesn’t it begin to seem that the intention is, somehow, to separate us?’

FIVE

LOOKING AT HERSELF in the mirror, with the bright morning sunlight freshening even the blue room of Hill House, Eleanor thought, It is my second morning in Hill House, and I am unbelievably happy. Journeys end in lovers meeting; I have spent an all but sleepless night, I have told lies and made a fool of myself, and the very air tastes like wine. I have been frightened half out of my foolish wits, but I have somehow earned this joy; I have been waiting for it for so long. Abandoning a lifelong belief that to name happiness is to dissipate it, she smiled at herself in the mirror and told herself silently, You are happy, Eleanor, you have finally been given a part of your measure of happiness. Looking away from her own face in the mirror, she thought blindly, Journeys end in lovers meeting, lovers meeting.

'Luke?' It was Theodora, calling outside in the hall. 'You carried off one of my stockings last night, and you are a thieving cad, and I hope Mrs Dudley can hear me.'

Eleanor could hear Luke, faintly, answering; he protested that a gentleman had a right to keep the favours bestowed upon him by a lady, and he was absolutely certain that Mrs Dudley could hear every word.

'Eleanor?' Now Theodora pounded on the connecting door. 'Are you awake? May I come in?'

'Come, of course,' Eleanor said, looking at her own face in the mirror. You deserve it, she told herself, you have spent your life earning it. Theodora opened the door and said happily, 'How pretty you look this morning, my Nell. This curious life agrees with you.'

Eleanor smiled at her; the life clearly agreed with Theodora too.

‘We ought by rights to be walking around with dark circles under our eyes and a look of wild despair,’ Theodora said, putting an arm around Eleanor and looking into the mirror beside her, ‘and look at us — two blooming, fresh young lovelies.’

‘I’m thirty-four years old,’ Eleanor said, and wondered what obscure defiance made her add two years.

‘And you look about fourteen,’ Theodora said. ‘Come along; we’ve earned our breakfast.’

Laughing, they raced down the great staircase and found their way through the game room and into the dining-room. ‘Good morning,’ Luke said brightly. ‘And how did everyone sleep?’

‘Delightfully, thank you,’ Eleanor said. ‘Like a baby.’

‘There may have been a little noise,’ Theodora said, ‘but one has to expect that in these old houses. Doctor, what do we do this morning?’

‘Hm?’ said the doctor, looking up. He alone looked tired, but his eyes were lighted with the same brightness they found, all, in one another; it is excitement, Eleanor thought; we are all enjoying ourselves.

‘Ballechin House,’ the doctor said, savouring his words. ‘Borley Rectory. Glamis Castle. It is incredible to find oneself experiencing it, absolutely incredible. I could *not* have believed it. I begin to understand, dimly, the remote delight of your true medium. I think I shall have the marmalade, if you would be so kind. Thank you. My wife will never believe me. Food has a new flavour — do you find it so?’

‘It isn’t just that Mrs Dudley has surpassed herself, then; I was wondering,’ Luke said.

‘I’ve been trying to remember,’ Eleanor said. ‘About last night, I mean. I can remember *knowing* that I was frightened, but I can’t imagine actually *being* frightened — —’

‘I remember the cold,’ Theodora said, and shivered.

‘I think it’s because it was so unreal by any pattern of thought I’m used to; I mean, it just didn’t make *sense*.’ Eleanor stopped and laughed, embarrassed.

‘I agree,’ Luke said. ‘I found myself this morning *telling* myself what had happened last night; the reverse of a bad dream, as a matter of fact, where you keep telling yourself that it *didn’t* really happen.’

‘I thought it was exciting,’ Theodora said.

The doctor lifted a warning finger. ‘It is still perfectly possible that it is all caused by subterranean waters.’

‘Then more houses ought to be built over secret springs,’ Theodora said.

The doctor frowned. ‘This excitement troubles me,’ he said. ‘It is intoxicating, certainly, but might it not also be dangerous? An effect of the atmosphere of Hill House? The first sign that we have — as it were — fallen under a spell?’

‘Then I will be an enchanted princess,’ Theodora said.

‘And yet,’ Luke said, ‘if last night is a true measure of Hill House, we are not going to have much trouble; we were frightened, certainly, and found the experience unpleasant while it was going on, and yet I cannot remember that I felt in any *physical* danger; even Theodora telling that whatever was outside her door was coming to eat her did not really sound — —’

‘I know what she meant,’ Eleanor said, ‘because I thought it was exactly the right word. The sense was that it wanted to consume us, take us into itself, make us a part of the house, maybe — oh, dear. I thought I knew what I was saying, but I’m doing it very badly.’

‘No physical danger exists,’ the doctor said positively. ‘No ghost in all the long histories of ghosts has ever hurt anyone physically. The only damage done is by the victim to himself. One cannot even say that the ghost attacks the mind, because the mind, the conscious, thinking mind, is invulnerable; in all our conscious minds, as we sit here talking, there is not one iota of belief in ghosts. Not one of us, even after last night, can say the word "ghost" without a little involuntary smile. No, the menace of the supernatural is that it attacks where modern minds are weakest, where we have abandoned our protective armour of superstition and have no substitute defence. Not one of us thinks rationally that what ran through the garden last night was a ghost, and what knocked on the door was a ghost, and yet there was certainly *something* going on in Hill House last night, and the mind's instinctive refuge — self-doubt — is eliminated. We cannot say, "It was my imagination," because three other people were there too.'

'I could say,' Eleanor put in, smiling, '"All three of you are in my imagination; none of this is real."'

'If I thought you could really believe that,' the doctor said gravely, 'I would turn you out of Hill House this morning. You would be venturing far too close to the state of mind which would welcome the perils of Hill House with a kind of sisterly embrace.'

'He means he would think you were batty, Nell dear.'

'Well,' Eleanor said, 'I expect I would be. If I had to take sides with Hill House against the rest of you, I would expect you to send me away.' Why me, she wondered, why me? Am I the public conscience? Expected always to say in cold words what the rest of them are too arrogant to recognise? Am I supposed to be the weakest, weaker than Theodora? Of all of us, she thought, I am surely the one least likely to turn against the others.

'Poltergeists are another thing altogether,' the doctor said, his eyes resting briefly on Eleanor. 'They deal entirely with the physical world; they throw stones, they move objects, they smash dishes; Mrs Foyster at Borley

Rectory was a long-suffering woman, but she finally lost her temper entirely when her best teapot was hurled through the window. Poltergeists, however, are rock-bottom on the supernatural social scale; they are destructive, but mindless and will-less; they are merely undirected force. Do you recall,' he asked with a little smile, 'Oscar Wilde's lovely story, "The Canterville Ghost"?'

'The American twins who routed the fine old English ghost,' Theodora said.

'Exactly. I have always liked the notion that the American twins were actually a poltergeist phenomenon; certainly poltergeists can overshadow any more interesting manifestation. Bad ghosts drive out good.' And he patted his hands happily. 'They drive out everything else, too,' he added. 'There is a manor in Scotland, infested with poltergeists, where as many as seventeen spontaneous fires have broken out in one day; poltergeists like to turn people out of bed violently by tipping the bed end over end, and I remember the case of a minister who was forced to leave his home because he was tormented, day after day, by a poltergeist who hurled at his head hymn books stolen from a rival church.'

Suddenly, without reason, laughter trembled inside Eleanor; she wanted to run to the head of the table and hug the doctor, she wanted to reel, chanting, across the stretches of the lawn, she wanted to sing and to shout and to fling her arms and move in great emphatic, possessing circles around the rooms of Hill House; I am here, I am here, she thought. She shut her eyes quickly in delight and then said demurely to the doctor, 'And what do we do today?'

'You're still like a pack of children,' the doctor said, smiling too. 'Always asking me what to do today. Can't you amuse yourselves with your toys? Or with each other? I have work to do.'

‘All I *really* want to do’ — and Theodora giggled— ’is slide down that banister.’ The excited gaiety had caught her as it had Eleanor.

‘Hide and seek,’ Luke said.

‘Try not to wander around alone too much,’ the doctor said. ‘I can’t think of a good reason why not, but it does seem sensible.’

‘Because there are bears in the woods,’ Theodora said.

‘And tigers in the attic,’ Eleanor said.

‘And an old witch in the tower, and a dragon in the drawing-room.’

‘I am quite serious,’ the doctor said, laughing.

‘It’s ten o’clock. I clear — —’

‘Good morning, Mrs Dudley,’ the doctor said, and Eleanor and Theodora and Luke leaned back and laughed helplessly.

‘I clear at ten o’clock.’

‘We won’t keep you long. About fifteen minutes, please, and then you can clear the table.’

‘I clear breakfast at ten o’clock. I set on lunch at one. Dinner I set on at six. It’s ten o’clock.’

‘Mrs Dudley,’ the doctor began sternly, and then, noticing Luke’s face tight with silent laughter, lifted his napkin to cover his eyes, and gave in. ‘You may clear the table, Mrs Dudley,’ the doctor said brokenly.

Happily, the sound of their laughter echoing along the halls of Hill House and carrying to the marble group in the drawing-room and the nursery upstairs and the odd little top of the tower, they made their way down the passage to their parlour and fell, still laughing, into chairs. ‘We must not make fun of Mrs Dudley,’ the doctor said and leaned forward, his face in his hands and his shoulders shaking.

They laughed for a long time, speaking now and then in half-phrases, trying to tell one another something, pointing at one another wildly, and their laughter rocked Hill House until, weak and aching, they lay back, spent, and regarded one another. ‘Now — —’ the doctor began, and was stopped by a little giggling burst from Theodora.

‘Now,’ the doctor said again, more severely, and they were quiet. ‘I want more coffee,’ he said, appealing. ‘Don’t we all?’

‘You mean go right in there and ask Mrs Dudley?’ Eleanor asked.

‘Walk right up to her when it isn’t one o’clock or six o’clock and just *ask* her for some coffee?’ Theodora demanded.

‘Roughly, yes,’ the doctor said. ‘Luke, my boy, I have observed that you are already something of a favourite with Mrs Dudley — —’

‘And how,’ Luke inquired with amazement, ‘did you ever manage to observe anything so unlikely? Mrs Dudley regards me with the same particular loathing she gives a dish not properly on its shelf; in Mrs Dudley’s eyes — —’

‘You are, after all, the heir to the house,’ the doctor said coaxingly. ‘Mrs Dudley must feel for you as an old family retainer feels for the young master.’

‘In Mrs Dudley’s eyes I am something lower than a dropped fork. I beg of you, if you are contemplating asking the old fool for something, send Theo, or our charming Nell. *They* are not afraid — —’

‘Nope,’ Theodora said. ‘You can’t send a helpless female to face down Mrs Dudley. Nell and I are here to be protected, not to man the battlements for you cowards.’

‘The doctor — —’

‘Nonsense,’ the doctor said heartily. ‘You certainly wouldn’t think of asking *me*, an older man; anyway, you *know* she adores you.’

‘Insolent greybeard,’ Luke said. ‘Sacrificing me for a cup of coffee. Do not be surprised, and I say it darkly, do not be surprised if you lose your

Luke in this cause; perhaps Mrs Dudley has not yet had her own mid-morning snack, and she is perfectly capable of a *filet de Luke à la meunière*, or perhaps *dieppoise*, depending upon her mood; if I do not return' — and he shook his finger warningly under the doctor's nose— 'I entreat you to regard your lunch with the gravest suspicion.' Bowing extravagantly, as befitted one off to slay a giant, he closed the door behind him.

'Lovely Luke.' Theodora stretched luxuriously.

'Lovely Hill House,' Eleanor said. 'Theo, there is a kind of little summerhouse in the side garden, all overgrown; I noticed it yesterday. Can we explore it this morning?'

'Delighted,' Theodora said. 'I would not like to leave one inch of Hill House uncherished. Anyway, it's too nice a day to stay inside.'

'We'll ask Luke to come too,' Eleanor said. 'And you, Doctor?'

'My notes — —' the doctor began, and then stopped as the door opened so suddenly that in Eleanor's mind was only the thought that Luke had not dared face Mrs Dudley after all, but had stood, waiting, pressed against the door; then, looking at his white face and hearing the doctor say with fury, 'I broke my own first rule; I sent him alone,' she found herself only asking urgently, 'Luke? Luke?'

'It's all right,' Luke even smiled. 'But come into the long hallway.'

Chilled by his face and his voice and his smile, they got up silently and followed him through the doorway into the dark long hallway which led back to the front hall. 'Here,' Luke said, and a little winding shiver of sickness went down Eleanor's back when she saw that he was holding a lighted match up to the wall.

'It's — writing?' Eleanor asked, pressing closer to see.

'Writing,' Luke said. 'I didn't even notice it until I was coming back. Mrs Dudley said no,' he added, his voice tight.

‘My flash.’ The doctor took his flashlight from his pocket, and under its light, as he moved slowly from one end of the hall to the other, the letters stood out clearly. ‘Chalk,’ the doctor said, stepping forward to touch a letter with the tip of his finger. ‘Written in chalk.’

The writing was large and straggling and ought to have looked, Eleanor thought, as though it had been scribbled by bad boys on a fence. Instead, it was incredibly real, going in broken lines over the thick panelling of the hallway. From one end of the hallway to the other the letters went, almost too large to read, even when she stood back against the opposite wall.

‘Can you read it?’ Luke asked softly, and the doctor, moving his flashlight, read slowly: HELP ELEANOR COME HOME.

‘No.’ And Eleanor felt the words stop in her throat; she had seen her name as the doctor read it. It is me, she thought. It is my name standing out there so clearly; I should not be on the walls of this house. ‘Wipe it off, *please*,’ she said, and felt Theodora’s arm go around her shoulders. ‘It’s *crazy*,’ Eleanor said, bewildered.

‘Crazy is the word, all right,’ Theodora said strongly. ‘Come back inside, Nell, and sit down. Luke will get something and wipe it off.’

‘But it’s *crazy*,’ Eleanor said, hanging back to see her name on the wall. ‘*Why ——?*’

Firmly the doctor put her through the door into the little parlour and closed it; Luke had already attacked the message with his handkerchief. ‘Now you listen to me,’ the doctor said to Eleanor. ‘Just because your name — —’

‘That’s it,’ Eleanor said, staring at him. ‘It knows my name, doesn’t it? It knows *my* name.’

‘Shut up, will you?’ Theodora shook her violently. ‘It could have said any of us; it knows *all* our names.’

‘Did you write it?’ Eleanor turned to Theodora. ‘Please tell me — I won’t be angry or anything, just so I can know that — maybe it was only a joke? To frighten me?’ She looked appealingly at the doctor.

‘You know that none of us wrote it,’ the doctor said.

Luke came in, wiping his hands on his handkerchief, and Eleanor turned hopefully. ‘Luke,’ she said, ‘you wrote it, didn’t you? When you went out?’

Luke stared, and then came to sit on the arm of her chair. ‘Listen,’ he said, ‘you want me to go writing your name everywhere? Carving your initials on trees? Writing “Eleanor, Eleanor” on little scraps of paper?’ He gave her hair a soft little pull. ‘I’ve got more sense,’ he said. ‘Behave yourself.’

‘Then why me?’ Eleanor said, looking from one of them to another; I am outside, she thought madly, I am the one chosen, and she said quickly, beggingly, ‘Did I do something to attract attention, more than anyone else?’

‘No more than usual, dear,’ Theodora said. She was standing by the fireplace, leaning on the mantel and tapping her fingers, and when she spoke she looked at Eleanor with a bright smile. ‘Maybe you wrote it yourself.’

Angry, Eleanor almost shouted. ‘You think I *want* to see my name scribbled all over this foul house? You think *I* like the idea that I’m the centre of attention? *I*’m not the spoiled baby, after all — *I* don’t like being singled out — —’

‘Asking for help, did you notice?’ Theodora said lightly. ‘Perhaps the spirit of the poor little companion has found a means of communication at last. Maybe she was only waiting for some drab, timid — —’

‘Maybe it was only addressed to me because no possible appeal for help could get through that iron selfishness of yours; maybe I might have more sympathy and understanding in one minute than — —’

‘And maybe, of course, you wrote it to yourself,’ Theodora said again.

After the manner of men who see women quarrelling, the doctor and Luke had withdrawn, standing tight together in miserable silence; now, at last, Luke moved and spoke. ‘That’s enough, Eleanor,’ he said, unbelievably, and Eleanor whirled around, stamping. ‘How dare you?’ she said, gasping. ‘How *dare* you?’

And the doctor laughed, then, and she stared at him and then at Luke, who was smiling and watching her. What is wrong with me? she thought. Then — but they think Theodora did it on purpose, made me mad so I wouldn’t be frightened; how shameful to be manœuvred that way. She covered her face and sat down in her chair.

‘Nell, dear,’ Theodora said, ‘I *am* sorry.’

I must say something, Eleanor told herself; I must show them that I am a good sport, after all; a good sport; let them think that I am ashamed of myself. ‘*I*’m sorry,’ she said. ‘I was frightened.’

‘Of course you were,’ the doctor said, and Eleanor thought, How simple he is, how transparent; he believes every silly thing he has ever heard. He thinks, even, that Theodora shocked me out of hysteria. She smiled at him and thought, Now I am back in the fold.

‘I really thought you were going to start shrieking,’ Theodora said, coming to kneel by Eleanor’s chair. ‘*I* would have, in your place. But we can’t afford to have you break up, you know.’

We can’t afford to have anyone but Theodora in the centre of the stage, Eleanor thought; if Eleanor is going to be the outsider, she is going to be it all alone. She reached out and patted Theodora’s head and said, ‘Thanks. I guess I was kind of shaky for a minute.’

‘I wondered if you two were going to come to blows,’ Luke said, ‘until I realised what Theodora was doing.’

Smiling down into Theodora's bright, happy eyes, Eleanor thought, But that isn't what Theodora was doing at all.

2

Time passed lazily at Hill House. Eleanor and Theodora, the doctor and Luke, alert against terror, wrapped around by the rich hills and securely set into the warm, dark luxuries of the house, were permitted a quiet day and a quiet night — enough, perhaps, to dull them a little. They took their meals together, and Mrs Dudley's cooking stayed perfect. They talked together and played chess; the doctor finished *Pamela* and began on *Sir Charles Grandison*. A compelling need for occasional privacy led them to spend some hours alone in their separate rooms, without disturbance. Theodora and Eleanor and Luke explored the tangled thicket behind the house and found the little summerhouse, while the doctor sat on the wide lawn, writing, within sight and hearing. They found a walled-in rose garden, grown over with weeds, and a vegetable garden tenderly nourished by the Dudleys. They spoke often of arranging their picnic by the brook. There were wild strawberries near the summerhouse, and Theodora and Eleanor and Luke brought back a handkerchief full and lay on the lawn near the doctor, eating them, staining their hands and their mouths; like children, the doctor told them, looking up with amusement from his notes. Each of them had written — carelessly, and with little attention to detail — an account of what they thought they had seen and heard so far in Hill House, and the doctor had put the papers away in his portfolio. The next morning — their third morning in Hill House — the doctor, aided by Luke, had spent a loving and maddening hour on the floor of the upstairs hall, trying, with chalk and measuring tape, to determine the precise dimensions of the cold spot, while Eleanor and Theodora sat cross-legged on the floor, noting down the doctor's measurements, and playing tic-tac-toe. The doctor was considerably hampered in his work by the fact that, his hands repeatedly chilled by the extreme cold, he could not hold either the chalk or the tape for more than a minute at a time. Luke, inside the nursery doorway, could hold one end of the tape until his hand came into the cold spot, and then his fingers lost strength and relaxed helplessly. A thermometer, dropped into the centre of the cold spot, refused to register any change at all, but continued doggedly maintaining that the temperature there was the same as the temperature down the rest of the hall, causing the doctor to fume wildly against the statisticians of Borley Rectory, who had caught an eleven-degree drop. When he had defined the cold spot as well as he could, and noted his results in his notebook, he brought them downstairs for lunch and issued a general challenge to them, to meet him at croquet in the cool of the afternoon.

'It seems foolish,' he explained, 'to spend a morning as glorious as this has been looking at a frigid place on a floor. We must plan to spend more time outside' — and was mildly surprised when they laughed.

'Is there still a world somewhere?' Eleanor asked wonderingly. Mrs Dudley had made them a peach shortcake, and she looked down at her plate and said, 'I am sure Mrs Dudley goes somewhere else at night, and she brings back fresh cream each morning, and Dudley comes up with groceries every afternoon, but as far as I can remember there is no other place than this.'

'We are on a desert island,' Luke said.

'I can't picture any world but Hill House,' Eleanor said.

'Perhaps,' Theodora said, 'we should make notches on a stick, or pile pebbles in a heap, one each day, so we will know how long we have been marooned.'

‘How pleasant not to have any word from outside.’ Luke helped himself to an enormous heap of whipped cream. ‘No letters, no newspapers; anything might be happening.’

‘Unfortunately — —’ the doctor said, and then stopped. ‘I beg your pardon,’ he went on. ‘I meant only to say that word *will* be reaching us from outside, and of course it is not unfortunate at all. Mrs Montague — my wife, that is — will be here on Saturday.’

‘But when is Saturday?’ Luke asked. ‘Delighted to see Mrs Montague, of course.’

‘Day after tomorrow.’ The doctor thought. ‘Yes,’ he said after a minute, ‘I believe that the day after tomorrow is Saturday. We will know it is Saturday, of course,’ he told them with a little twinkle, ‘because Mrs Montague will be here.’

‘I hope she is not holding high hopes of things going bump in the night,’ Theodora said. ‘Hill House has fallen far short of its original promise, I think. Or perhaps Mrs Montague will be greeted with a volley of psychic experiences.’

‘Mrs Montague,’ the doctor said, ‘will be perfectly ready to receive them.’

‘I wonder,’ Theodora said to Eleanor as they left the lunch table under Mrs Dudley’s watchful eye, ‘why everything *has* been so quiet. I think this waiting is nerve-racking, almost worse than having something happen.’

‘It’s not us doing the waiting,’ Eleanor said. ‘It’s the house. I think it’s biding its time.’

‘Waiting until we feel secure, maybe, and then it will pounce.’

‘I wonder how long it can wait.’ Eleanor shivered and started up the great staircase. ‘I am almost tempted to write a letter to my sister. You know — “Having a perfectly *splendid* time here in jolly old Hill House....” ’

‘ ”You really must plan to bring the whole family next summer,” ’ Theodora went on. ‘ ”We sleep under blankets every night....” ’

‘ ”The air is so bracing, particularly in the upstairs hall....” ’

‘ ”You go around all the time just glad to be alive....” ’

‘ ”There’s something going on every minute....” ’

‘ ”Civilisation seems so far away....” ’

Eleanor laughed. She was ahead of Theodora, at the top of the stairs. The dark hallway was a little lightened this afternoon, because they had left the nursery door open and the sunlight came through the windows by the tower and touched the doctor’s measuring tape and chalk on the floor. The light reflected from the stained-glass window on the stair landing and made shattered fragments of blue and orange and green on the dark wood of the hall. ‘I’m going to sleep,’ she said. ‘I’ve never been so lazy in my life.’

‘I’m going to lie on my bed and dream about streetcars,’ Theodora said.

It had become Eleanor’s habit to hesitate in the doorway of her room, glancing around quickly before she went inside; she told herself that this was because the room was so exceedingly blue and always took a moment to get used to. When she came inside she went across to open the window, which she always found closed; today she was half-way across the room before she heard Theodora’s door slam back, and Theodora’s smothered ‘Eleanor!’ Moving quickly, Eleanor ran into the hall and to Theodora’s doorway, to stop, aghast, looking over Theodora’s shoulder. ‘What *is* it?’ she whispered.

‘What does it *look* like?’ Theodora’s voice rose crazily. ‘What does it *look* like, you fool?’

And I won’t forgive her *that*, either, Eleanor thought concretely through her bewilderment. ‘It looks like paint,’ she said hesitantly. ‘Except’ — realising— ‘except the smell is awful.’

‘It’s blood,’ Theodora said with finality. She clung to the door, swaying as the door moved, staring. ‘Blood,’ she said. ‘All over. Do you see it?’

‘Of course I see it. And it’s not *all* over. Stop making such a fuss.’ Although, she thought conscientiously, Theodora was making very little of a fuss, actually. One of these times, she thought, one of us *is* going to put her head back and really howl, and I hope it won’t be me, because I’m trying to guard against it; it *will* be Theodora who... And then, cold, she asked, ‘Is that more writing on the wall?’ — and heard Theodora’s wild laugh, and thought, Maybe it will be me, after all, and I can’t afford to. I must be steady, and she closed her eyes and found herself saying silently, O stay and hear, your true love’s coming, that can sing both high and low. Trip no further, pretty sweeting; journeys end in lovers meeting...

‘Yes indeed, dear,’ Theodora said. ‘I don’t know how you managed it.’

Every wise man’s son doth know. ‘Be sensible,’ Eleanor said. ‘Call Luke. And the doctor.’

‘Why?’ Theodora asked. ‘Wasn’t it to be just a little private surprise for me? A secret just for the two of us?’ Then, pulling away from Eleanor, who tried to hold her from going farther into the room, she ran to the great wardrobe and threw open the door and, cruelly, began to cry. ‘My clothes,’ she said. ‘My clothes.’

Steadily Eleanor turned and went to the top of the stairs. ‘Luke,’ she called, leaning over the banisters. ‘Doctor.’ Her voice was not loud, and she had tried to keep it level, but she heard the doctor’s book drop to the floor and then the pounding of feet as he and Luke ran for the stairs. She watched them, seeing their apprehensive faces, wondering at the uneasiness which lay so close below the surface in all of them, so that each of them seemed always waiting for a cry for help from one of the others; intelligence and understanding are really no protection at all, she thought. ‘It’s Theo,’ she said as they came to the top of the stairs. ‘She’s hysterical. Someone — something — has got red paint in her room, and she’s crying over her clothes.’ Now I could not have put it more fairly than that, she thought, turning to follow them. Could I have put it more fairly than that? she asked herself, and found that she was smiling.

Theodora was still sobbing wildly in her room and kicking at the wardrobe door, in a tantrum that might have been laughable if she had not been holding her yellow shirt, matted and stained; her other clothes had been torn from the hangers and lay trampled and disordered on the wardrobe floor, all of them smeared and reddened. ‘What is it?’ Luke asked the doctor, and the doctor, shaking his head, said, ‘I would swear that it was blood, and yet to get so much blood one would almost have to...’ and then was abruptly quiet.

All of them stood in silence for a moment and looked at HELP ELEANOR COME HOME ELEANOR written in shaky red letters on the wallpaper over Theodora’s bed.

This time I am ready, Eleanor told herself, and said, ‘You’d better get her out of here; bring her into my room.’

‘My clothes are ruined,’ Theodora said to the doctor. ‘Do you see my clothes?’

The smell was atrocious, and the writing on the wall had dripped and splattered. There was a line of drops from the wall to the wardrobe — perhaps what had first turned Theodora’s attention that way — and a great irregular stain on the green rug. ‘It’s disgusting,’ Eleanor said. ‘Please get Theo into my room.’

Luke and the doctor between them persuaded Theodora through the bathroom and into Eleanor’s room, and Eleanor, looking at the red paint (It must be paint, she told herself; it’s simply *got* to be paint; what else *could* it be?), said aloud, ‘But *why?*’ — and stared up at the writing on the wall. Here lies one, she thought gracefully, whose name was writ in blood; is it possible that I am not quite coherent at this moment?

‘Is she all right?’ she asked, turning as the doctor came back into the room.

‘She will be in a few minutes. We’ll have to move her in with you for a while, I should think; I can’t imagine her wanting to sleep in *here* again.’ The doctor smiled a little wanly. ‘It will be a long time, I think, before she opens another door by herself.’

‘I suppose she’ll have to wear my clothes.’

‘I suppose she will, if you don’t mind.’ The doctor looked at her curiously. ‘This message troubles you less than the other?’

‘It’s too silly,’ Eleanor said, trying to understand her own feelings. ‘I’ve been standing here looking at it and just wondering *why*. I mean, it’s like a joke that didn’t come off; I was supposed to be *much* more frightened than this, I think, and I’m not because it’s simply *too* horrible to be real. And I keep remembering Theo putting red polish...’ She giggled, and the doctor looked at her sharply, but she went on, ‘It might as *well* be paint, don’t you see?’ I can’t stop talking, she thought; what do *I* have to explain in all this? ‘Maybe I can’t take it seriously,’ she said, ‘after the sight of Theo screaming over her poor clothes and accusing me of writing my name all over her wall. Maybe I’m getting used to her blaming me for everything.’

‘Nobody’s blaming you for anything,’ the doctor said, and Eleanor felt that she had been reproved.

‘I hope my clothes will be good enough for her,’ she said tartly.

The doctor turned, looking around the room; he touched one finger gingerly to the letters on the wall and moved Theodora’s yellow shirt with his foot. ‘Later,’ he said absently. ‘Tomorrow, perhaps.’ He glanced at Eleanor and smiled. ‘I can make an exact sketch of this,’ he said.

‘I can help you,’ Eleanor said. ‘It makes me sick, but it doesn’t frighten me.’

‘Yes,’ the doctor said. ‘I think we’d better close up the room for now, however; we don’t want Theodora blundering in here again. Then later, at my leisure, I can study it. Also,’ he said with a flash of amusement, ‘I would not like to have Mrs Dudley coming in here to straighten up.’

Eleanor watched silently while he locked the hall door from inside the room, and then they went through the bathroom and he locked the connecting door into Theodora’s green room. ‘I’ll see about moving in another bed,’ he said, and then, with some awkwardness, ‘You’ve kept your head well, Eleanor; it’s a help to me.’

‘I told you, it makes me sick but it doesn’t frighten me,’ she said, pleased, and turned to Theodora. Theodora was lying on Eleanor’s bed, and Eleanor saw with a queasy turn that Theodora had got red on her hands and it was rubbing off on to Eleanor’s pillow. ‘Look,’ she said harshly, coming over to Theodora, ‘you’ll have to wear my clothes until you get new ones, or until we get the others cleaned.’

‘Cleaned?’ Theodora rolled convulsively on the bed and pressed her stained hands against her eyes. ‘*Cleaned?*’

‘For heaven’s sake,’ Eleanor said, ‘let me wash you off.’ She thought, without trying to find a reason, that she had never felt such uncontrollable loathing for any person before, and she went into the bathroom and soaked a towel and came back to scrub roughly at Theodora’s hands and face. ‘You’re filthy with the stuff,’ she said, hating to touch Theodora.

Suddenly Theodora smiled at her. ‘I don’t really think you did it,’ she said, and Eleanor turned to see that Luke was behind her, looking down at them. ‘What a fool I am,’ Theodora said to him, and Luke laughed.

‘You will be a delight in Nell’s red sweater,’ he said.

She is wicked, Eleanor thought, beastly and soiled and dirty. She took the towel into the bathroom and left it to soak in cold water; when she came out Luke was saying, ‘... another bed in here; you girls are going to share a room from now on.’

‘Share a room and share our clothes,’ Theodora said. ‘We’re going to be practically twins.’

‘Cousins,’ Eleanor said, but no one heard her.

3

‘It was the custom, rigidly adhered to,’ Luke said, turning the brandy in his glass, ‘for the public executioner, before a quartering, to outline his knife strokes in chalk upon the belly of his victim — for fear of a slip, you understand.’

I would like to hit her with a stick, Eleanor thought, looking down on Theodora’s head beside her chair; I would like to batter her with rocks.

‘An exquisite refinement, exquisite. Because of course the chalk strokes would have been almost unbearable, excruciating, if the victim were ticklish.’

I hate her, Eleanor thought, she sickens me; she is all washed and clean and wearing my red sweater.

‘When the death was by hanging in chains, however, the executioner...’

‘Nell?’ Theodora looked up at her and smiled. ‘I really am sorry, you know,’ she said.

I would like to watch her dying, Eleanor thought, and smiled back and said, ‘Don’t be silly.’

‘Among the Sufis there is a teaching that the universe has never been created and consequently cannot be destroyed. I have spent the afternoon,’ Luke announced gravely, ‘browsing in our little library.’

The doctor sighed. ‘No chess tonight, I think,’ he said to Luke, and Luke nodded. ‘It has been an exhausting day,’ the doctor said, ‘and I think you ladies should retire early.’

‘Not until I am well dulled with brandy,’ Theodora said firmly.

‘Fear,’ the doctor said, ’is the relinquishment of logic, the *willing* relinquishing of reasonable patterns. We yield to it or we fight it, but we cannot meet it half-way.’

‘I was wondering earlier,’ Eleanor said, feeling she had somehow an apology to make to all of them. ‘I thought I was altogether calm, and yet now I know I was terribly afraid.’ She frowned, puzzled, and they waited for her to go on. ‘When I *am* afraid, I can see perfectly the sensible, beautiful not-afraid side of the world, I can see chairs and tables and windows staying the same, not affected in the least, and I can see things like the carefully woven texture of the carpet, not even moving. But when I am afraid I no longer exist in any relation to these things. I suppose because things are *not* afraid.’

‘I think we are only afraid of ourselves,’ the doctor said slowly.

‘No,’ Luke said. ‘Of seeing ourselves clearly and without disguise.’

‘Of knowing what we really want,’ Theodora said. She pressed her cheek against Eleanor’s hand and Eleanor, hating the touch of her, took her hand away quickly.

‘I am always afraid of being alone,’ Eleanor said, and wondered, Am *I* talking like this? Am I saying something I will regret bitterly tomorrow? Am I making more guilt for myself? ‘Those letters spelled out *my* name, and none of you know what that feels like — it’s so *familiar*.’ And she gestured to them, almost in appeal. ‘Try to *see*,’ she said. ‘It’s my own dear name, and it belongs to me, and something is using it and writing it and calling me with it and my own *name*...’ She stopped and said, looking from one of them to another, even down on to Theodora’s face looking up at her, ‘Look. There’s only one of me, and it’s all I’ve got. I *hate* seeing myself dissolve and slip and separate so that I’m living in one half, my mind, and I see the other half of me helpless and frantic and driven and I can’t stop it, but I know I’m not really going to be hurt and yet time is so long and even a second goes on and on and I could stand any of it if I could only surrender — —’

‘*Surrender?’* said the doctor sharply, and Eleanor stared.

‘Surrender?’ Luke repeated.

‘I don’t know,’ Eleanor said, perplexed. I was just talking along, she told herself, I was saying something — what was I just saying?

‘She has done this before,’ Luke said to the doctor.

‘I know,’ said the doctor gravely, and Eleanor could feel them all looking at her. ‘I’m sorry,’ she said. ‘Did I make a fool of myself? It’s probably because I’m afraid.’

‘Not at all,’ the doctor said, still grave. ‘Drink your brandy.’

‘Brandy?’ And Eleanor looked down, realising that she held a brandy glass. ‘What did I *say*?’ she asked them.

Theodora chuckled. ‘Drink,’ she said. ‘You need it, my Nell.’

Obediently Eleanor sipped at her brandy, feeling clearly its sharp burn, and then said to the doctor, ‘I must have said something silly, from the way you’re all staring at me.’

The doctor laughed. ‘Stop trying to be the centre of attention.’

‘Vanity,’ Luke said serenely.

‘Have to be in the limelight,’ Theodora said, and they smiled fondly, all looking at Eleanor.

4

Sitting up in the two beds beside each other, Eleanor and Theodora reached out between and held hands tight; the room was brutally cold and thickly dark. From the room next door, the room which until that morning had been Theodora’s, came the steady low sound of a voice babbling, too low for words to be understood, too steady for disbelief. Holding hands so hard that each of them could feel the other’s bones, Eleanor and Theodora listened, and the low, steady sound went on and on, the voice lifting sometimes for an emphasis on a mumbled word, falling sometimes to a breath, going on and on. Then, without warning, there was a little laugh, the small gurgling laugh that broke through the babbling, and rose as it laughed, on up and up the scale, and then broke off suddenly in a little painful gasp, and the voice went on.

Theodora’s grasp loosened, and tightened, and Eleanor, lulled for a minute by the sounds, started and looked across to where Theodora ought to be in the darkness, and then thought, screamingly, Why is it dark? *Why is it dark?* She rolled and clutched Theodora’s hand with both of hers, and tried to speak and could not, and held on, blindly, and frozen, trying to stand her mind on its feet, trying to reason again. We left the light on, she told herself, so why is it dark? Theodora, she tried to whisper, and her mouth could not move; Theodora, she tried to ask, why is it dark? and the voice went on, babbling, low and steady, a little liquid gloating sound. She thought she might be able to distinguish words if she lay perfectly still, if she lay perfectly still, and listened, and listened and heard the voice going on and on, never ceasing, and she hung desperately to Theodora’s hand and felt an answering weight on her own hand.

Then the little gurgling laugh came again, and the rising mad sound of it drowned out the voice, and then suddenly absolute silence. Eleanor took a breath, wondering if she could speak now, and then she heard a little soft cry which broke her heart, a little infinitely sad cry, a little sweet moan of wild sadness. It is a *child*, she thought with disbelief, a child is crying somewhere, and then, upon that thought, came the wild shrieking voice she had never heard before and yet knew she had heard always in her nightmares. ‘Go away!’ it screamed. ‘Go away, go away, don’t hurt me,’ and, after, sobbing, ‘Please don’t hurt me. Please let me go home,’ and then the little sad crying again.

I can’t stand it, Eleanor thought concretely. This is monstrous, this is cruel, they have been hurting a child and I won’t let anyone hurt a child, and the babbling went on, low and steady, on and on and on, the voice rising a little and falling a little, going on and on.

Now, Eleanor thought, perceiving that she was lying sideways on the bed in the black darkness, holding with both hands to Theodora’s hand, holding so tight she could feel the fine bones of Theodora’s fingers, now, I will not endure this. They think to scare me. Well, they have. I am scared, but more than that, I am a person, I am human, I am a walking reasoning humorous human being and I will take a lot from this lunatic filthy house but I will not go along with hurting a child, no, I will not; I will by God get my mouth to open right now and I will yell I will I will yell ‘STOP IT,’ she shouted, and the lights were on the way they had left them and Theodora was sitting up in bed, startled and dishevelled.

‘What?’ Theodora was saying. ‘What, Nell? What?’

‘God God,’ Eleanor said, flinging herself out of bed and across the room to stand shuddering in a corner, ‘God God — whose hand was I holding?’

SIX

I AM LEARNING the pathways of the heart, Eleanor thought quite seriously, and then wondered what she could have meant by thinking any such thing. It was afternoon, and she sat in the sunlight on the steps of the summerhouse beside Luke; these are the silent pathways of the heart, she thought. She knew that she was pale, and still shaken, with dark circles under her eyes, but the sun was warm and the leaves moved gently overhead, and Luke beside her lay lazily against the step. ‘Luke,’ she asked, going slowly for fear of ridicule, ‘why do people want to talk to each other? I mean, what are the things people always want to find out about other people?’

‘What do you want to know about me, for instance?’ He laughed. She thought, But why not ask what *he* wants to know about *me*; he is so extremely vain — and laughed in turn and said, ‘What can I *ever* know about you, beyond what I see?’ *See* was the least of the words she might have chosen, but the safest. Tell me something that only I will ever know, was perhaps what she wanted to ask him, or, What will you give me to remember you by? — or, even, Nothing of the least importance has ever belonged to me; can you help? Then she wondered if she had been foolish, or bold, amazed at her own thoughts, but he only stared down at the leaf he held in his hands and frowned a little, as one who devotes himself completely to an absorbing problem.

He is trying to phrase everything to make as good an impression as possible, she thought, and I will know how he holds me by what he answers; how is he anxious to appear to me? Does he think that I will be content with small mysticism, or will he exert himself to seem unique? Is he going to be gallant? That would be humiliating, because then he would show that he knows that gallantry enchants me; will he be mysterious? Mad? And how am I to receive this, which I perceive already will be a confidence, even if it is not true? Grant that Luke take me at my worth, she thought, or at least let me not see the difference. Let him be wise, or let me be blind; don't let me, she hoped concretely, don't let me know too surely what he thinks of me.

Then he looked at her briefly and smiled what she was coming to know as his self-deprecatory smile; did Theodora, she wondered, and the thought was unwelcome, did Theodora know him as well as this?

'I never had a mother,' he said, and the shock was enormous. Is *that* all he thinks of me, his estimate of what I want to hear of him; will I enlarge this into a confidence making me worthy of great confidences? Shall I sigh? Murmur? Walk away? 'No one ever loved me because I belonged,' he said. 'I suppose you can understand that?'

No, she thought, you are not going to catch me so cheaply; I do not understand words and will not accept them in trade for my feelings; this man is a parrot. I will tell him that I can never understand such a thing, that maudlin self-pity does not move directly at my heart; I will not make a fool of myself by encouraging him to mock me. 'I understand, yes,' she said.

'I thought you might,' he said, and she wanted, quite honestly, to slap his face. 'I think you must be a very fine person, Nell,' he said, and then spoiled it by adding, 'warm-hearted, and honest. Afterwards, when you go home...' His voice trailed off, and she thought, Either he is beginning to tell me something extremely important, or he is killing time until this conversation can gracefully be ended. He would not speak in this fashion without a reason; he does not willingly give himself away. Does he think that a human gesture of affection might seduce me into hurling myself madly at him? Is he afraid that I cannot behave like a lady? What does he know about me, about how I think and feel; does he feel sorry for me? ‘Journeys end in lovers meeting,’ she said.

‘Yes,’ he said. ‘I never had a mother, as I told you. Now I find that everyone else has had something that I missed.’ He smiled at her. ‘I am entirely selfish,’ he said ruefully, ‘and always hoping that someone will tell me to behave, someone will make herself responsible for me and make me be grown-up.’

He is altogether selfish, she thought in some surprise, the only man I have ever sat and talked to alone, and I am impatient; he is simply not very interesting. ‘Why don’t you grow up by yourself?’ she asked him, and wondered how many people — how many women — had already asked him that.

‘You’re clever.’ And how many times had he answered that way?

This conversation must be largely instinctive, she thought with amusement, and said gently, ‘You must be a very lonely person.’ All I want is to be cherished, she thought, and here I am talking gibberish with a selfish man. ‘You must be very lonely indeed.’

He touched her hand, and smiled again. ‘You were so lucky,’ he told her. ‘You had a mother.’

2

‘I found it in the library,’ Luke said. ‘I swear I found it in the library.’

‘Incredible,’ the doctor said.

‘Look,’ Luke said. He set the great book on the table and turned to the title page. ‘He made it himself — look, the title’s been lettered in ink: Memories, *for* Sophia Anne Lester Crain; *A Legacy for Her Education and*

Enlightenment During Her Lifetime From Her Affectionate and Devoted Father, Hugh Desmond Lester Crain; *Twenty-first June, 1881.*'

They pressed around the table, Theodora and Eleanor and the doctor, while Luke lifted and turned the first great page of the book. 'You see,' Luke said, 'his little girl is to learn humility. He has clearly cut up a number of fine old books to make this scrapbook, because I seem to recognise several of the pictures, and they are all glued in.'

'The vanity of human accomplishment,' the doctor said sadly. 'Think of the books Hugh Crain hacked apart to make this. Now here is a Goya etching; a horrible thing for a little girl to meditate upon.'

'Underneath he has written,' Luke said, 'under this ugly picture: "Honour thy father and thy mother, Daughter, authors of thy being, upon whom a heavy charge has been laid, that they lead their child in innocence and righteousness along the fearful narrow path to everlasting bliss, and render her up at last to her God a pious and a virtuous soul; reflect, Daughter, upon the joy in Heaven as the souls of these tiny creatures wing upward, released before they have learned aught of sin or faithlessness, and make it thine unceasing duty to remain as pure as these." '

'Poor baby,' Eleanor said, and gasped as Luke turned the page; Hugh Crain's second moral lesson derived from a colour plate of a snake pit, and vividly painted snakes writhed and twisted along the page, above the message, neatly printed, and touched with gold: 'Eternal damnation is the lot of mankind; neither tears, nor reparation, can undo Man's heritage of sin. Daughter, hold apart from this world, that its lusts and ingratitudes corrupt thee not; Daughter, preserve thyself.'

'Next comes hell,' Luke said. 'Don't look if you're squeamish.'

'I think I will skip hell,' Eleanor said, 'but read it to me.'

‘Wise of you,’ the doctor said. ‘An illustration from Foxe; one of the less attractive deaths, I have always thought, although who can fathom the ways of martyrs?’

‘See this, though,’ Luke said. ‘He’s burnt away a corner of the page, and here is what he says: “Daughter, could you but hear for a moment the agony, the screaming, the dreadful crying out and repentance, of those poor souls condemned to everlasting flame! Could thine eyes be seared, but for an instant, with the red glare of wasteland burning always! Alas, wretched beings, in undying pain! Daughter, your father has this minute touched the corner of his page to his candle, and seen the frail paper shrivel and curl in the flame; consider, Daughter, that the heat of this candle is to the everlasting fires of Hell as a grain of sand to the reaching desert, and, as this paper burns in its slight flame so shall your soul burn for ever, in fire a thousandfold more keen.” ’

‘I’ll bet he read it to her every night before she went to sleep,’ Theodora said.

‘Wait,’ Luke said. ‘You haven’t seen Heaven yet — even *you* can look at this one, Nell. It’s Blake, and a bit stern, I think, but obviously better than Hell. Listen— “Holy, holy, holy! In the pure light of heaven the angels praise Him and one another unendingly. Daughter, it is Here that I will seek thee.” ’

‘What a labour of love it is,’ the doctor said. ‘Hours of time just planning it, and the lettering is so dainty, and the gilt — —’

‘Now the seven deadly sins,’ Luke said, ‘and I think the old boy drew them himself.’

‘He really put his heart into gluttony,’ Theodora said. ‘I’m not sure I’ll ever be hungry again.’

‘Wait till lust,’ Luke told her. ‘The old fellow outdid himself.’

‘I don’t really want to look at any more of it, I think,’ Theodora said. ‘I’ll sit over here with Nell, and if you come across any particularly edifying moral precepts you think would do me good, read them aloud.’

‘*Here* is lust,’ Luke said. ‘Was ever woman in this humour wooed?’

‘Good heavens,’ said the doctor. ‘Good heavens.’

‘He *must* have drawn it himself,’ Luke said.

‘For a *child*?’ The doctor was outraged.

‘Her very own scrapbook. Note Pride, the very image of our Nell here.’

‘What?’ said Eleanor, starting up.

‘Teasing,’ the doctor said placatingly. ‘Don’t come to look, my dear; he’s teasing you.’

‘Sloth, now,’ Luke said.

‘Envy,’ said the doctor. ‘How the poor child dared transgress...’

‘The last page is the very nicest, I think. This, ladies, is Hugh Crain’s blood. Nell, do you want to see Hugh Crain’s blood?’

‘No, thank you.’

‘Theo? No? In any case, I insist, for the sake of your two consciences, in reading what Hugh Crain has to say in closing his book: “Daughter: sacred pacts are signed in blood, and I have here taken from my own wrist the vital fluid with which I bind you. Live virtuously, be meek, have faith in thy Redeemer, and in me, thy father, and I swear to thee that we will be joined together hereafter in unending bliss. Accept these precepts from thy devoted father, who in humbleness of spirit has made this book. May it serve its purpose well, my feeble effort, and preserve my Child from the pitfalls of this world and bring her safe to her father’s arms in Heaven.” And signed: “Thy everloving father, in this world and the next, author of thy being and guardian of thy virtue; in meekest love, Hugh Crain.” ’

Theodora shuddered. ‘How he must have enjoyed it,’ she said, ‘signing his name in his own blood; I can see him laughing his head off.’

‘Not healthy, not at all a healthy work for a man,’ the doctor said.

‘But she must have been very small when her father left the house,’ Eleanor said. ‘I wonder if he ever did read it to her.’

‘I’m sure he did, leaning over her cradle and spitting out the words so they would take root in her little mind. Hugh Crain,’ Theodora said, ‘you were a dirty old man, and you made a dirty old house and if you can still hear me from anywhere I would like to tell you to your face that I genuinely hope you will spend eternity in that foul horrible picture and never stop burning for a minute.’ She made a wild, derisive gesture around the room, and for a minute, still remembering, they were all silent, as though waiting for an answer, and then the coals in the fire fell with a little crash, and the doctor looked at his watch and Luke rose.

‘The sun is over the yard-arm,’ the doctor said happily.

3

Theodora curled by the fire, looking up wickedly at Eleanor; at the other end of the room the chessmen moved softly, jarring with little sounds against the table, and Theodora spoke gently, tormentingly. ‘Will you have him at your little apartment, Nell, and offer him to drink from your cup of stars?’

Eleanor looked into the fire, not answering. I have been so silly, she thought, I have been a fool.

‘Is there room enough for two? Would he come if you asked him?’

Nothing could be worse than this, Eleanor thought; I have been a fool.

‘Perhaps he has been longing for a tiny home — something smaller, of course, than Hill House; perhaps he will come home with you.’

A fool, a ludicrous fool.

‘Your white curtains — your tiny stone lions — —’

Eleanor looked down at her, almost gently. ‘But I *had* to come,’ she said, and stood up, turning blindly to get away. Not hearing the startled voices behind her, not seeing where or how she went, she blundered somehow to the great front door and out into the soft warm night. ‘I *had* to come,’ she said to the world outside.

Fear and guilt are sisters; Theodora caught her on the lawn. Silent, angry, hurt, they left Hill House side by side, walking together, each sorry for the other. A person angry, or laughing, or terrified, or jealous, will go stubbornly on into extremes of behaviour impossible at another time; neither Eleanor nor Theodora reflected for a minute that it was imprudent for them to walk far from Hill House after dark. Each was so bent upon her own despair that escape into darkness was vital, and, containing themselves in that tight, vulnerable, impossible cloak which is fury, they stamped along together, each achingly aware of the other, each determined to be the last to speak.

Eleanor spoke first, finally; she had hurt her foot against a rock and tried to be too proud to notice it, but after a minute, her foot paining, she said, in a voice tight with the attempt to sound level, ‘I can’t imagine why you think you have any right to interfere in my affairs,’ her language formal to prevent a flood of recrimination, or undeserved reproach (were they not strangers? cousins?). ‘I am sure that nothing I do is of any interest to you.’

That’s right,’ Theodora said grimly. ‘Nothing that you do is of any interest to me.’

We are walking on either side of a fence, Eleanor thought, but I have a right to live too, and I wasted an hour with Luke at the summerhouse trying to prove it. ‘I hurt my foot,’ she said.

‘I’m sorry.’ Theodora sounded genuinely grieved. ‘You know what a beast he is.’ She hesitated. ‘A rake,’ she said finally, with a touch of amusement.

‘I’m sure it’s nothing to me *what* he is.’ And then, because they were women quarrelling, ‘As if *you* cared, anyway.’

‘He shouldn’t be allowed to get away with it,’ Theodora said.

‘Get away with *what*?’ Eleanor asked daintily.

‘You’re making a fool of yourself,’ Theodora said.

‘Suppose I’m not, though? You’d mind terribly if you turned out to be wrong this time, wouldn’t you?’

Theodora’s voice was wearied, cynical. ‘If I’m wrong,’ she said, ‘I will bless you with all my heart. Fool that you are.’

‘You could hardly say anything else.’

They were moving along the path towards the brook. In the darkness their feet felt that they were going downhill, and each privately and perversely accused the other of taking, deliberately, a path they had followed together once before in happiness.

‘Anyway,’ Eleanor said, in a reasonable tone, ‘it doesn’t mean anything to you, no matter what happens. Why should you care whether I make a fool of myself?’

Theodora was silent for a minute, walking in the darkness, and Eleanor was suddenly absurdly sure that Theodora had put out a hand to her, unseen. ‘Theo,’ Eleanor said awkwardly, ‘I’m no good at talking to people and saying things.’

Theodora laughed. ‘What *are* you good at?’ she demanded. ‘Running away?’

Nothing irrevocable had yet been spoken, but there was only the barest margin of safety left them; each of them moving delicately along the outskirts of an open question, and, once spoken, such a question — as ‘Do you love me?’ — could never be answered or forgotten. They walked slowly, meditating, wondering, and the path sloped down from their feet and they followed, walking side by side in the most extreme intimacy of expectation; their feinting and hesitation done with, they could only wait passively for resolution. Each knew, almost within a breath, what the other was thinking and wanting to say; each of them almost wept for the other. They perceived at the same moment the change in the path and each knew then the other’s knowledge of it; Theodora took Eleanor’s arm and, afraid to stop, they moved on slowly, close together, and ahead of them the path widened and blackened and curved.

Eleanor caught her breath, and Theodora’s hand tightened, warning her to be quiet. On either side of them the trees, silent, relinquished the dark colour they had held, paled, grew transparent and stood white and ghastly against the black sky. The grass was colourless, the path wide and black; there was nothing else. Eleanor’s teeth were chattering, and the nausea of fear almost doubled her; her arm shivered under Theodora’s holding hand, now almost a clutch, and she felt every slow step as a willed act, a precise mad insistence upon the putting of one foot down after the other as the only sane choice. Her eyes hurt with tears against the screaming blackness of the path and the shuddering whiteness of the trees, and she thought, with a clear intelligent picture of the words in her mind, burning, Now I am really afraid.

They moved on, the path unrolling ahead of them, the white trees unchanging on either side and, above all, the black sky lying thick overhead; their feet were shimmering white where they touched the path; Theodora’s hand was pale and luminous. Ahead of them the path curved out of sight, and they walked slowly on, moving their feet precisely because it was the only physical act possible to them, the only thing left to keep them from sinking into the awful blackness and whiteness and luminous evil glow. Now I am really afraid, Eleanor thought in words of fire; remotely she could still feel Theodora’s hand on her arm, but Theodora was distant, locked away; it was bitterly cold, with no human warmth near. Now I am really afraid, Eleanor thought, and put her feet forward one after another, shivering as they touched the path, shivering with mindless cold.

The path unwound; perhaps it was taking them somewhere, wilfully, since neither of them could step off it and go knowingly into the annihilation of whiteness that was the grass on either side. The path curved, black and shining, and they followed. Theodora’s hand tightened, and Eleanor caught her breath on a little sob — had something moved, ahead, something whiter than the white trees, beckoning? Beckoning, fading into the trees, watching? Was there movement beside them, imperceptible in the soundless night; did some footstep go invisibly along with them in the white grass? Where were they?

The path led them to its destined end and died beneath their feet. Eleanor and Theodora looked into a garden, their eyes blinded with the light of sun and rich colour; incredibly, there was a picnic party on the grass in the garden. They could hear the laughter of the children and the affectionate, amused voices of the mother and father; the grass was richly, thickly green, the flowers were coloured red and orange and yellow, the sky was blue and gold, and one child wore a scarlet jumper and raised its voice again in laughter, tumbling after a puppy over the grass. There was a checked tablecloth spread out, and, smiling, the mother leaned over to take up a plate of bright fruit; then Theodora screamed.

‘Don’t look back,’ she cried out in a voice high with fear, ‘don’t look back — don’t look — run!’

Running, without knowing why she ran, Eleanor thought that she would catch her foot in the checked tablecloth; she was afraid she might stumble over the puppy; but as they ran across the garden there was nothing except weeds growing blackly in the darkness, and Theodora, screaming still, trampled over the bushes where there had been flowers and stumbled, sobbing, over half-buried stones and what might have been a broken cup. Then they were beating and scratching wildly at the white stone wall where vines grew blackly, screaming still and begging to be let out, until a rusted iron gate gave way and they ran, crying and gasping and somehow holding hands, across the kitchen garden of Hill House, and crashed through a back door into the kitchen to see Luke and the doctor hurrying to them. 'What happened?' Luke said, catching at Theodora. 'Are you all right?'

'We've been nearly crazy,' the doctor said, worn. 'We've been out looking for you for hours.'

'It was a picnic,' Eleanor said. She had fallen into a kitchen chair and she looked down at her hands, scratched and bleeding and shaking without her knowledge. 'We tried to get out,' she told them, holding her hands out for them to see. 'It was a picnic. The children...'

Theodora laughed in a little continuing cry, laughing on and on thinly, and said through her laughter, 'I looked back — I went and looked behind us...' and laughed on.

'The children... and a puppy...'

'Eleanor.' Theodora turned wildly and put her head against Eleanor. 'Eleanor,' she said. 'Eleanor.'

And, holding Theodora, Eleanor looked up at Luke and the doctor, and felt the room rock madly, and time, as she had always known time, stop.

SEVEN

ON THE AFTERNOON of the day when Mrs Montague was expected, Eleanor went alone into the hills above Hill House, not really intending to arrive at any place in particular, not even caring where or how she went, wanting only to be secret and out from under the heavy dark wood of the house. She found a small spot where the grass was soft and dry and lay down, wondering how many years it had been since she had lain on soft grass to be alone to think. Around her the trees and wild flowers, with that oddly courteous air of natural things suddenly interrupted in their pressing occupations of growing and dying, turned towards her with attention, as though, dull and imperceptive as she was, it was still necessary for them to be gentle to a creature so unfortunate as not to be rooted in the ground, forced to go from one place to another, heart-breakingly mobile. Idly Eleanor picked a wild daisy, which died in her fingers, and, lying on the grass, looked up into its dead face. There was nothing in her mind beyond an overwhelming wild happiness. She pulled at the daisy, and wondered, smiling at herself, What am I going to do? What *am* I going to do?

2

'Put the bags down in the hall, Arthur,' Mrs Montague said. 'Wouldn't you think there'd be someone here to help us with this door? They'll *have* to get someone to take the bags upstairs. John? John?'

'My dear, my dear.' Dr Montague hurried into the hallway, carrying his napkin, and kissed his wife obediently on the cheek she held out for him. 'How nice that you got here; we'd given you up.'

‘I *said* I’d be here today, didn’t I? Did you ever know me *not* to come when I said I would? I brought Arthur.’

‘Arthur,’ the doctor said without enthusiasm.

‘Well, *some*body had to drive,’ Mrs Montague said. ‘I imagine you expected that I would drive myself all the way out here? Because you know perfectly well that I get tired. How do you do.’

The doctor turned, smiling on Eleanor and Theodora, with Luke behind them, clustered uncertainly in the doorway. ‘My dear,’ he said, ‘these are my friends who have been staying in Hill House with me these past few days. Theodora. Eleanor Vance. Luke Sanderson.’

Theodora and Eleanor and Luke murmured civilly, and Mrs Montague nodded and said, ‘I see you didn’t bother to wait dinner for us.’

‘We’d given you up,’ the doctor said.

‘I believe that I told you that I would be here today. Of course, it is *perfectly* possible that I am mistaken, but it is *my* recollection that I said I would be here today. I’m sure I will get to know all your names very soon. This gentleman is Arthur Parker; he drove me here because I dislike driving myself. Arthur, these are John’s friends. Can anybody do something about our suitcases?’

The doctor and Luke approached, murmuring, and Mrs Montague went on, ‘I am to be in your most haunted room, of course. Arthur can go anywhere. That blue suitcase is mine, young man, and the small attaché case; they will go in your most haunted room.’

‘The nursery, I think,’ Dr Montague said when Luke looked at him inquiringly. ‘I believe the nursery is one source of disturbance,’ he told his wife, and she sighed irritably.

‘It does seem to me that you could be more methodical,’ she said. ‘You’ve been here nearly a week and I suppose you’ve done *nothing* with planchette? Automatic writing? I don't imagine either of these young women has mediumistic gifts? Those are Arthur's bags right there. He brought his golf clubs, just in case.'

'Just in case of what?' Theodora asked blankly, and Mrs Montague turned to regard her coldly.

'Please don't let me interrupt your dinner,' she said finally.

'There's a definite cold spot just outside the nursery door,' the doctor told his wife hopefully.

'Yes, dear, very nice. Isn't that young man going to take Arthur's bags upstairs? You do seem to be in a good deal of confusion here, don't you? After nearly a week I certainly thought you'd have things in some kind of order. Any figures materialise?'

'There have been decided manifestations — —'

'Well, I'm here now, and we'll get things going right. Where is Arthur to put the car?'

'There's an empty stable in back of the house where we have put our other cars. He can take it around in the morning.'

'Nonsense. I do not believe in putting things off, John, as you know perfectly well. Arthur will have plenty to do in the morning without adding tonight's work. He must move the car at once.'

'It's dark outside,' the doctor said hesitantly.

'John, you astound me. Is it your belief that I do not know whether it is dark outside at night? The car has lights, John, and that young man can go with Arthur to show him the way.'

'Thank you,' said Luke grimly, 'but we have a positive policy against going outside after dark. Arthur may, of course, if he cares to, but I will not.'

'The young ladies,' the doctor said, 'had a shocking — —'

‘Young man’s a coward,’ Arthur said. He had concluded his fetching of suitcases and golf bags and hampers from the car and now stood beside Mrs Montague, looking down on Luke; Arthur’s face was red and his hair was white, and now, scorning Luke, he bristled. ‘Ought to be ashamed of yourself, fellow, in front of the women.’

‘The women are just as much afraid as I am,’ Luke said primly.

‘Indeed, indeed.’ Dr Montague put his hand on Arthur’s arm soothingly. ‘After you’ve been here for a while, Arthur, you’ll understand that Luke’s attitude is sensible, not cowardly. We make a point of staying together after dark.’

‘I must say, John, I never expected to find you all so *nervous*,’ Mrs Montague said. ‘I deplore fear in these matters.’ She tapped her foot irritably. ‘You know perfectly well, John, that those who have passed beyond *expect* to see us happy and smiling; they *want* to know that we are thinking of them lovingly. The spirits dwelling in this house may be actually *suffering* because they are aware that you are afraid of them.’

‘We can talk about it later,’ the doctor said wearily. ‘Now, how about dinner?’

‘Of course.’ Mrs Montague glanced at Theodora and Eleanor. ‘What a pity that we had to interrupt you,’ she said.

‘Have you had dinner?’

‘Naturally we have not had dinner, John. I *said* we would be here for dinner, didn’t I? Or am I mistaken again?’

‘At any rate, I told Mrs Dudley that you would be here,’ the doctor said, opening the door which led to the game room and on into the dining-room. ‘She left us a splendid feast.’

Poor Dr Montague, Eleanor thought, standing aside to let the doctor take his wife into the dining-room; he is so uncomfortable; I wonder how long she is going to stay.

‘I wonder how long she is going to stay?’ Theodora whispered in her ear.

‘Maybe her suitcase is filled with ectoplasm,’ Eleanor said hopefully.

‘And how long will you be able to stay?’ Dr Montague asked, sitting at the head of the dinner-table with his wife cosily beside him.

‘Well, dear,’ Mrs Montague said, tasting daintily of Mrs Dudley’s caper sauce, ‘ — you have found a fair cook, have you not? — you *know* that Arthur has to get back to his school; Arthur is a headmaster,’ she explained down the table, ‘and he has generously cancelled his appointments for Monday. So we had better leave Monday afternoon and then Arthur can be there for classes on Tuesday.’

‘A lot of happy schoolboys Arthur no doubt left behind,’ Luke said softly to Theodora, and Theodora said, ‘But today is only Saturday.’

‘I do not mind this cooking at all,’ Mrs Montague said. ‘John, I will speak to your cook in the morning.’

‘Mrs Dudley is an admirable woman,’ the doctor said carefully.

‘Bit fancy for *my* taste,’ Arthur said. ‘I’m a meat-and-potatoes man, myself,’ he explained to Theodora. ‘Don’t drink, don’t smoke, don’t read trash. Bad example for the fellows at the school. They look up to one a bit, you know.’

‘I’m sure they must all model themselves on you,’ Theodora said soberly.

‘Get a bad hat now and then,’ Arthur said, shaking his head. ‘No taste for sports, you know. Moping in corners. Cry-babies. Knock *that* out of them fast enough.’ He reached for the butter.

Mrs Montague leaned forward to look down the table at Arthur. ‘Eat lightly, Arthur,’ she advised. ‘We have a busy night ahead of us.’

‘What on earth do you plan to do?’ the doctor asked.

‘I’m sure that *you* would never dream of going about these things with any system, but you will have to admit, John, that in this area I have simply more of an instinctive understanding; women do, you know, John, at least *some* women.’ She paused and regarded Eleanor and Theodora speculatively. ‘Neither of *them*, I dare say. Unless, of course, I am mistaken again? You are very fond of pointing out my errors, John.’

‘My dear — —’

‘I *cannot* abide a slipshod job in anything. Arthur will patrol, of course. I brought Arthur for that purpose. It is so rare,’ she explained to Luke, who sat on her other side, ‘to find persons in the educational field who are interested in the other world; you will find Arthur surprisingly well informed. I will recline in your haunted room with only a nightlight burning, and will endeavour to get in touch with the elements disturbing this house. I never sleep when there are troubled spirits about,’ she told Luke, who nodded, speechless.

‘Little sound common sense,’ Arthur said. ‘Got to go about these things in the right way. Never pays to aim too low. Tell my fellows that.’

‘I think perhaps after dinner we will have a little session with planchette,’ Mrs Montague said. ‘Just Arthur and I, of course; the rest of you, I can see, are not ready yet; you would only drive away the spirits. We will need a quiet room — —’

‘The library,’ Luke suggested politely.

‘The library? I think it might do; books are frequently very good carriers, you know. Materialisations are often best produced in rooms where there are books. I cannot think of any time when materialisation was in any way hampered by the presence of books. I suppose the library has been dusted? Arthur sometimes sneezes.’

‘Mrs Dudley keeps the entire house in perfect order,’ the doctor said.

'I really will speak to Mrs Dudley in the morning. You will show us the library, then, John, and that young man will bring down my case; not the large suitcase, mind, but the small attaché case. Bring it to me in the library. We will join you later; after a session with planchette I require a glass of milk and perhaps a small cake; crackers will do if they are not too heavily salted. A few minutes of quiet conversation with congenial people is also very helpful, particularly if I am to be receptive during the night; the mind is a precise instrument and cannot be tended too carefully. Arthur?' She bowed distantly to Eleanor and Theodora and went out, escorted by Arthur, Luke, and her husband.

After a minute Theodora said, 'I think I am going to be simply crazy about Mrs Montague.'

'I don't know,' Eleanor said. 'Arthur is rather more to my taste. And Luke *is* a coward, I think.'

'Poor Luke,' Theodora said. 'He never had a mother.' Looking up, Eleanor found that Theodora was regarding her with a curious smile, and she moved away from the table so quickly that a glass spilled.

'We shouldn't be alone,' she said, oddly breathless. 'We've got to find the others.' She left the table and almost ran from the room, and Theodora ran after her, laughing, down the corridor and into the little parlour, where Luke and the doctor stood before the fire.

'Please, sir,' Luke was saying meekly, 'who is planchette?'

The doctor sighed irritably. 'Imbeciles,' he said, and then, 'Sorry. The whole idea annoys me, but if *she* likes it...' He turned and poked the fire furiously. 'Planchette,' he went on after a moment, 'is a device similar to the Ouija Board, or perhaps I might explain better by saying that it is a form of automatic writing; a method of communicating with — ah — intangible beings, although to *my* way of thinking the only intangible beings who ever get in touch through one of those things are the imaginations of the people running it. Yes. Well. Planchette is a little piece of light wood, usually heart-shaped or triangular. A pencil is set into the narrow end, and at the other end is a pair of wheels, or feet which will slip easily over paper. Two people place fingers on it, ask it questions, and the object moves, pushed by what force we will not here discuss, and writes answers. The Ouija Board, as I say, is very similar, except that the object moves on a board pointing to separate letters. An ordinary wineglass will do the same thing; I have seen it tried with a child's wheeled toy, although I will admit that it looked silly. Each person uses the tips of the fingers of one hand, keeping the other hand free to note down questions and answers. The answers are invariably, I believe, meaningless, although of course my wife will tell you different. Balderdash.' And he went at the fire again. 'Schoolgirls,' he said. 'Superstition.'

3

'Planchette has been very kind tonight,' Mrs Montague said. 'John, there are definitely foreign elements present in this house.'

'Quite a splendid sitting, really,' Arthur said. He waved a sheaf of papers triumphantly.

'We've got a good deal of information for you,' Mrs Montague said. 'Now. Planchette was quite insistent about a nun. Have you learned anything about a nun, John?'

'In Hill House? Not likely.'

'Planchette felt very strongly about a nun, John. Perhaps something of the sort — a dark, vague figure, even — has been seen in the neighbourhood? Villagers terrified when staggering home late at night?'

'The figure of a nun is a fairly common — —'

‘John, *if* you please. I assume you are suggesting that I am mistaken. Or perhaps it is your intention to point out that *planchette* may be mistaken? I assure you — and you must believe planchette, even if *my* word is not good enough for you — that a nun was most specifically suggested.’

‘I am only trying to say, my dear, that the wraith of a nun is far and away the most common form of appearance. There has never been such a thing connected with Hill House, but in almost every — —’

‘John, *if* you *please*. I assume I may continue? Or is planchette to be dismissed without a hearing? Thank you.’ Mrs Montague composed herself. ‘Now, then. There is also a name, spelled variously as Helen, or Helene, or Elena. Who might that be?’

‘My dear, many people have lived — —’

‘Helen brought us a warning against a mysterious monk. Now when a monk and a nun *both* turn up in one house — —’

‘Except the place was built on an older site,’ Arthur said. ‘Influences prevailing, you know. Older influences hanging around,’ he explained more fully.

‘It sounds very much like broken vows, does it not? Very much.’

‘Had a lot of that back then, you know. Temptation, probably.’

‘I hardly think — —’ the doctor began.

‘I dare say she was walled up alive,’ Mrs Montague said. ‘The nun, I mean. They always did that, you know. You’ve no idea the messages I’ve had from nuns walled up alive.’

‘There is *no* case on record of *any* nun *ever* being — —’

‘John. May I point out to you once more that I *myself* have had messages from nuns walled up alive? Do you think I am telling you a fib, John? Or do you suppose that a nun would deliberately *pretend* to have been walled up alive when she was not? Is it possible that I am mistaken once more, John?’

‘Certainly not, my dear.’ Dr Montague sighed wearily.

‘With one candle and a crust of bread,’ Arthur told Theodora. ‘Horrible thing to do, when you think about it.’

‘No nun was ever walled up alive,’ the doctor said sullenly. He raised his voice slightly. ‘It is a legend. A story. A libel circulated — —’

‘All right, John. We won’t quarrel over it. You may believe whatever you choose. Just understand, however, that sometimes purely materialistic views must give way before *facts*. Now it is a proven fact that among the visitations troubling this house are a nun and a — —’

‘What else was there?’ Luke asked hastily. ‘I am *so* interested in hearing what — ah — planchette had to say.’

Mrs Montague waggled a finger roguishly. ‘Nothing about *you*, young man. Although one of the ladies present may hear something of interest.’

Impossible woman, Eleanor thought; impossible, vulgar, possessive woman. ‘Now, Helen,’ Mrs Montague went on, ‘wants us to search the cellar for an old well.’

‘Don’t tell me *Helen* was *buried* alive,’ the doctor said.

‘I hardly think so, John. I am sure that she would have mentioned it. As a matter of fact, Helen was most unclear about just what we *were* to find in the well. I doubt, however, that it will be treasure. One so rarely meets with *real* treasure in a case of this kind. More likely evidence of the missing nun.’

‘More likely eighty years of rubbish.’

‘John, I can*not* understand this scepticism in you, of all people. After all, you did come to this house to collect evidence of supernatural activity, and now, when I bring you a full account of the *causes*, and an indication of where to start looking, you are positively scornful.’

‘We have no authority to dig up the cellar.’

‘Arthur could — —’ Mrs Montague began hopefully, but the doctor said with firmness, ‘No. My lease of the house specifically forbids me to tamper with the house itself. There will be no digging of cellars, no tearing out of woodwork, no ripping up of floors. Hill House is still a valuable property, and we are students, not vandals.’

‘I should think you’d want to know the *truth*, John.’

‘There is nothing I should like to know more.’ Dr Montague stamped across the room to the chessboard and took up a knight and regarded it furiously. He looked as though he were doggedly counting to a hundred.

‘Dear me, how patient one must be sometimes.’ Mrs Montague sighed. ‘But I do want to read you the little passage we received towards the end. Arthur, do you have it?’

Arthur shuffled through his sheaf of papers. ‘It was just after the message about the flowers you are to send to your aunt,’ Mrs Montague said. ‘Planchette has a control named Merrigot,’ she explained, ‘and Merrigot takes a genuine personal interest in Arthur; brings him word from relatives, and so on.’

‘Not a fatal illness, you understand,’ Arthur said gravely. ‘Have to send flowers, of course, but Merrigot is most reassuring.’

‘Now.’ Mrs Montague selected several pages, and turned them over quickly; they were covered with loose, sprawling pencilled words, and Mrs Montague frowned, running down the pages with her finger. ‘Here,’ she said. ‘Arthur, you read the questions and I’ll read the answers; that way, it will sound more natural.’

‘Off we go,’ Arthur said brightly, and leaned over Mrs Montague’s shoulder. ‘Now — let me see — start right about here?’

‘With “Who are you?” ’

‘Righto. Who are you?’

'Nell,' Mrs Montague read in her sharp voice, and Eleanor and Theodora and Luke and the doctor turned, listening.

'Nell who?'

'Eleanor Nellie Nell Nell. They sometimes do that,' Mrs Montague broke off to explain. 'They repeat a word over and over to make sure it comes across all right.'

Arthur cleared his throat. 'What do you want?' he read.

'Home.'

'Do you want to go home?' And Theodora shrugged comically at Eleanor.

'Want to be home.'

'What are you doing here?'

'Waiting.'

'Waiting for what?'

'Home.' Arthur stopped, and nodded profoundly. 'There it is again,' he said. 'Like a word, and use it over and over, just for the sound of it.'

'Ordinarily we never ask *why*,' Mrs Montague said, 'because it tends to confuse planchette. However, this time we were bold, and came right out and asked. Arthur?'

'Why?' Arthur read.

'Mother,' Mrs Montague read. 'So you see, this time we were right to ask, because planchette was perfectly free with the answer.'

'Is Hill House your home?' Arthur read levelly.

'Home,' Mrs Montague responded, and the doctor sighed.

'Are you suffering?' Arthur read.

'No answer here.' Mrs Montague nodded reassuringly. 'Sometimes they dislike admitting to pain; it tends to discourage those of us left behind, you know. Just like Arthur's aunt, for instance, will *never* let on that she is sick, but Merrigot always lets us know, and it's even worse when they've passed over.'

'Stoical,' Arthur confirmed, and read, 'Can we help you?'

'No,' Mrs Montague read.

'Can we do anything at all for you?'

'No. Lost. Lost. Lost.' Mrs Montague looked up. 'You see?' she asked. 'One word, over and over again. They *love* to repeat themselves. I've had one word go on to cover a whole page sometimes.'

'What do you want?' Arthur read.

'Mother,' Mrs Montague read back.

'Why?'

'Child.'

'Where is your mother?'

'Home.'

'Where is your home?'

'Lost. Lost. Lost. And after that,' Mrs Montague said, folding the paper briskly, 'there was nothing but gibberish.'

'*Never* known planchette so co-operative,' Arthur said confidingly to Theodora. 'Quite an experience, really.'

'But why pick on Nell?' Theodora asked with annoyance. 'Your fool planchette has no right to send messages to people without permission or ——'

'You'll never get results by abusing planchette,' Arthur began, but Mrs Montague interrupted him, swinging to stare at Eleanor. '*You*'re Nell?' she demanded, and turned on Theodora. 'We thought *you* were Nell,' she said.

'So?' said Theodora impudently.

'It doesn't affect the messages, of course,' Mrs Montague said, tapping her paper irritably, 'although I *do* think we might have been correctly introduced. I am sure that *planchette* knew the difference between you, but I certainly do not care to be misled.'

'Don't feel neglected,' Luke said to Theodora. 'We will bury you alive.'

'When I get a message from that thing,' Theodora said, 'I expect it to be about hidden treasure. None of this nonsense about sending flowers to my aunt.'

They are all carefully avoiding looking at me, Eleanor thought; I have been singled out again, and they are kind enough to pretend it is nothing; 'Why do you think all that was sent to me?' she asked, helpless.

'Really, child,' Mrs Montague said, dropping the papers on the low table, 'I couldn't *begin* to say. Although you are rather more than a child, aren't you? Perhaps you are more receptive psychically than you realise, although' — and she turned away indifferently— 'how you *could* be, a week in this house and not picking up the simplest message from beyond... That fire wants stirring.'

'Nell doesn't want messages from beyond,' Theodora said comfortingly, moving to take Eleanor's cold hand in hers. 'Nell wants her warm bed and a little sleep.'

Peace, Eleanor thought concretely; what I want in all this world is peace, a quiet spot to lie and think, a quiet spot up among the flowers where I can dream and tell myself sweet stories.

4

'I,' Arthur said richly, 'shall make my headquarters in the small room just this side of the nursery, well within shouting distance. I shall have with me a drawn revolver — do not take alarm, ladies; I am an excellent shot — and a flashlight, in addition to a most piercing whistle. I shall have no difficulty summoning the rest of you in case I observe anything worth your notice, or I require — ah — company. You may all sleep quietly, I assure you.'

'Arthur,' Mrs Montague explained, 'will patrol the house. Every hour, regularly, he will make a round of the upstairs rooms; I think he need hardly bother with the downstairs rooms tonight, since *I* shall be up here. We have done this before, many times. Come along, everyone.' Silently they followed her up the staircase, watching her little affectionate dabs at the stair-rail and the carvings on the walls. 'It is such a blessing,' she said once, 'to know that the beings in this house are only waiting for an opportunity to tell their stories and free themselves from the burden of their sorrow. Now. Arthur will first of all inspect the bedrooms. Arthur?'

'With apologies, ladies, with apologies,' Arthur said, opening the door of the blue room, which Eleanor and Theodora shared. 'A dainty spot,' he said plummily, 'fit for two such charming ladies; I shall, if you like, save you the trouble of glancing into the closet and under the bed.' Solemnly they watched Arthur go down on to his hands and knees and look under the beds and then rise, dusting his hands. 'Perfectly safe,' he said.

'Now, where am I to be?' Mrs Montague asked. 'Where did that young man put my bags?'

'Directly at the end of the hall,' the doctor said. 'We call it the nursery.'

Mrs Montague, followed by Arthur, moved purposefully down the hall, passed the cold spot in the hall, and shivered. 'I will certainly need extra blankets,' she said. 'Have that young man bring extra blankets from one of the other rooms.' Opening the nursery door, she nodded and said, 'The bed looks quite fresh, I must admit, but has the room been aired?'

'I told Mrs Dudley,' the doctor said.

'It smells musty. Arthur, you will have to open that window, in spite of the cold.'

Drearily the animals on the nursery wall looked down on Mrs Montague. ‘Are you sure...’ The doctor hesitated, and glanced up apprehensively at the grinning faces over the nursery door. ‘I wonder if you ought to have someone in here with you,’ he said.

‘My dear.’ Mrs Montague, good-humoured now in the presence of those who had passed beyond, was amused. ‘How many hours — how many, *many* hours — have I sat in purest love and understanding, alone in a room and yet never alone? My dear, how can I make you perceive that there is no danger where there is nothing but love and sympathetic understanding? I am here to *help* these unfortunate beings — I am here to extend the hand of heartfelt fondness, and let them know that there are still *some* who remember, who will listen and weep for them; their loneliness is over, and I — —’

‘Yes,’ the doctor said, ‘but leave the door open.’

‘Unlocked, if you insist.’ Mrs Montague was positively magnanimous.

‘I shall be only down the hall,’ the doctor said. ‘I can hardly offer to patrol, since that will be Arthur’s occupation, but if you need anything I can hear you.’

Mrs Montague laughed and waved her hand at him. ‘These others need your protection so much more than I,’ she said. ‘I will do what I can, of course. But they are so very *very* vulnerable, with their hard hearts and their unseeing eyes.’

Arthur, followed by a Luke looking very much amused, returned from checking the other bedrooms on the floor and nodded briskly at the doctor. ‘All clear,’ he said. ‘Perfectly safe for you to go to bed now.’

‘Thank you,’ the doctor told him soberly and then said to his wife, ‘Good night. Be careful.’

‘Good night,’ Mrs Montague said, and smiled around at all of them. ‘Please don’t be afraid,’ she said. ‘No matter what happens, remember that I am here.’

‘Good night,’ Theodora said, and ‘Good night,’ said Luke, and with Arthur behind them assuring them that they might rest quietly, and not to worry if they heard shots, and he would start his first patrol at midnight, Eleanor and Theodora went into their own room, and Luke on down the hall to his. After a moment the doctor, turning reluctantly away from his wife’s closed door, followed.

‘Wait,’ Theodora said to Eleanor, once in their room. ‘Luke said they want us down the hall; don’t get undressed and be quiet.’ She opened the door a crack and whispered over her shoulder. ‘I swear that old biddy’s going to blow this house wide open with that perfect love business; if I ever saw a place that had no use for perfect love, it’s Hill House. Now. Arthur’s closed his door. Quick. Be quiet.’

Silently, making no sound on the hall carpeting, they hurried in their stockinged feet down the hall to the doctor’s room. ‘Hurry,’ the doctor said, opening the door just wide enough for them to come in, ‘be quiet.’

‘It’s not safe,’ Luke said, closing the door to a crack and coming back to sit on the floor, ‘that man’s going to shoot somebody.’

‘I don’t like it,’ the doctor said, worried. ‘Luke and I will stay up and watch, and I want you two ladies in here where we can keep an eye on you. Something’s going to happen,’ he said. ‘I don’t like it.’

‘I just hope she didn’t go and make anything mad, with her planchette,’ Theodora said. ‘Sorry, Doctor Montague. I don’t intend to speak rudely of your wife.’

The doctor laughed, but stayed with his eye to the door. ‘She originally planned to come for our entire stay,’ he said, ‘but she had enrolled in a course in yoga and could not miss her meetings. She is an excellent woman in most respects,' he added, looking earnestly around at them. 'She is a good wife, and takes very good care of me. She does things splendidly, really. Buttons on my shirts.' He smiled hopefully. 'This' — and he gestured in the direction of the hall— '*this* is practically her only vice.'

'Perhaps she feels she is helping you with your work,' Eleanor said.

The doctor grimaced, and shivered; at that moment the door swung wide and then crashed shut, and in the silence outside they could hear slow rushing movements as though a very steady, very strong wind were blowing the length of the hall. Glancing at one another, they tried to smile, tried to look courageous under the slow coming of the unreal cold and then, through the noise of wind, the knocking on the doors downstairs. Without a word Theodora took up the quilt from the foot of the doctor's bed and folded it around Eleanor and herself, and they moved close together, slowly in order not to make a sound. Eleanor, clinging to Theodora, deadly cold in spite of Theodora's arms around her, thought, It knows my name, it knows my name this time. The pounding came up the stairs, crashing on each step. The doctor was tense, standing by the door, and Luke moved over to stand beside him. 'It's nowhere near the nursery,' he said to the doctor, and put his hand out to stop the doctor from opening the door.

'How weary one gets of this constant pounding,' Theodora said ridiculously. 'Next summer, I must really go somewhere else.'

'There are disadvantages everywhere,' Luke told her. 'In the lake regions you get mosquitoes.'

'Could we have exhausted the repertoire of Hill House?' Theodora asked, her voice shaking in spite of her light tone. 'Seems like we've had this pounding act before; is it going to start everything all over again?' The crashing echoed along the hall, seeming to come from the far end, the farthest from the nursery, and the doctor, tense against the door, shook his head anxiously. ‘I’m going to have to go out there,’ he said. ‘She might be frightened,’ he told them.

Eleanor, rocking to the pounding, which seemed inside her head as much as in the hall, holding tight to Theodora, said, ‘They know where we are,’ and the others, assuming that she meant Arthur and Mrs Montague, nodded and listened. The knocking, Eleanor told herself, pressing her hands to her eyes and swaying with the noise, will go on down the hall, it will go on and on to the end of the hall and turn and come back again, it will just go on and on the way it did before and then it will stop and we will look at each other and laugh and try to remember how cold we were, and the little swimming curls of fear on our backs; after a while it will stop.

‘It will hurt *us*,’ Theodora was telling the doctor, across the noise of the pounding. ‘It won’t hurt *them*.’

‘I only hope she doesn’t try to *do* anything about it,’ the doctor said grimly; he was still at the door, but seemingly unable to open it against the volume of noise outside.

‘I feel positively like an old hand at this,’ Theodora said to Eleanor. ‘Come closer, Nell; keep warm,’ and she pulled Eleanor even nearer to her under the blanket, and the sickening, still cold surrounded them.

Then there came, suddenly, quiet, and the secret creeping silence they all remembered; holding their breaths, they looked at one another. The doctor held the door-knob with both hands, and Luke, although his face was white and his voice trembled, said lightly, ‘Brandy, anyone? My passion for spirits — —’

‘No.’ Theodora giggled wildly. ‘Not that pun,’ she said.

‘Sorry. You won’t believe me,’ Luke said, the brandy decanter rattling against the glass as he tried to pour, ‘but I no longer think of it as a pun.

That is what living in a haunted house does for a sense of humour.' Using both hands to carry the glass, he came to the bed where Theodora and Eleanor huddled under the blanket, and Theodora brought out one hand and took the glass. 'Here,' she said, holding it to Eleanor's mouth. 'Drink.'

Sipping, not warmed, Eleanor thought, We are in the eye of the storm; there is not much more time. She watched Luke carefully carry a glass of brandy over to the doctor and hold it out, and then, without comprehending, watched the glass slip through Luke's fingers to the floor as the door was shaken, violently and silently. Luke pulled the doctor back, and the door was attacked without sound, seeming almost to be pulling away from its hinges, almost ready to buckle and go down, leaving them exposed. Backing away, Luke and the doctor waited, tense and helpless.

'It can't get in,' Theodora was whispering over and over, her eyes on the door, 'it can't get in, don't let it get in, it can't get in — —' The shaking stopped, the door was quiet, and a little caressing touch began on the door-knob, feeling intimately and softly and then, because the door was locked, patting and fondling the door-frame, as though wheedling to be let in.

'It knows we're here,' Eleanor whispered, and Luke, looking back at her over his shoulder, gestured furiously for her to be quiet.

It is so cold, Eleanor thought childishly; I will never be able to sleep again with all this noise coming from inside my head; how can these others hear the noise when it is coming from inside my head? I am disappearing inch by inch into this house, I am going apart a little bit at a time because all this noise is breaking me; why are the *others* frightened?

She was aware, dully, that the pounding had begun again, the metallic overwhelming sound of it washed over her like waves; she put her cold hands to her mouth to feel if her face was still there; I have had enough, she thought, I am too cold.

‘At the nursery door,’ Luke said tensely, speaking clearly through the noise. ‘At the nursery door; don’t.’ And he put out a hand to stop the doctor.

‘Purest love,’ Theodora said madly, ‘purest love.’ And she began to giggle again.

‘If they don’t open the doors — —’ Luke said to the doctor. The doctor stood now with his head against the door, listening, with Luke holding his arm to keep him from moving.

Now we are going to have a new noise, Eleanor thought, listening to the inside of her head; it is changing. The pounding had stopped, as though it had proved ineffectual, and there was now a swift movement up and down the hall, as of an animal pacing back and forth with unbelievable impatience, watching first one door and then another, alert for a movement inside, and there was again the little babbling murmur which Eleanor remembered; Am I doing it? she wondered quickly, is that me? And heard the tiny laughter beyond the door, mocking her.

‘Fe-fi-fo-fum,’ Theodora said under her breath, and the laughter swelled and became a shouting; it’s inside my head, Eleanor thought, putting her hands over her face, it’s inside my head and it’s getting out, getting out, getting out ——

Now the house shivered and shook, the curtains dashing against the windows, the furniture swaying, and the noise in the hall became so great that it pushed against the walls; they could hear breaking glass as the pictures in the hall came down, and perhaps the smashing of windows. Luke and the doctor strained against the door, as though desperately holding it shut, and the floor moved under their feet. We’re going, we’re going, Eleanor thought, and heard Theodora say, far away, ‘The house is coming down.’ She sounded calm, and beyond fear. Holding to the bed, buffeted and shaken, Eleanor put her head down and closed her eyes and bit her lips against the cold and felt the sickening drop as the room fell away beneath her and then righted itself and then turned, slowly, swinging. ‘God almighty,’ Theodora said, and a mile away at the door Luke caught the doctor and held him upright.

‘Are you all right?’ Luke called, back braced against the door, holding the doctor by the shoulders. ‘Theo, are you all right?’

‘Hanging on,’ Theodora said. ‘I don’t know about Nell.’

‘Keep her warm,’ Luke said, far away. ‘We haven’t seen it all yet.’ His voice trailed away; Eleanor could hear and see him far away in the distant room where he and Theodora and the doctor still waited; in the churning darkness where she fell endlessly nothing was real except her own hands white around the bedpost. She could see them, very small, and see them tighten when the bed rocked and the wall leaned forward and the door turned sideways far away. Somewhere there was a great, shaking crash as some huge thing came headlong; it must be the tower, Eleanor thought, and I supposed it would stand for years; we are lost, lost; the house is destroying itself. She heard the laughter over all, coming thin and lunatic, rising in its little crazy tune, and thought, No; it is over for me. It is too much, she thought, I will relinquish my possession of this self of mine, abdicate, give over willingly what I never wanted at all; whatever it wants of me it can have.

‘I’ll come,’ she said aloud, and was speaking up to Theodora, who leaned over her. The room was perfectly quiet, and between the still curtains at the window she could see the sunlight. Luke sat in a chair by the window; his face was bruised and his shirt was torn, and he was still drinking brandy. The doctor sat back in another chair; his hair freshly combed, looking neat and dapper and self-possessed. Theodora, leaning over Eleanor, said, ‘She’s all right, I think,’ and Eleanor sat up and shook her head, staring. Composed and quiet, the house lifted itself primly around her, and nothing had been moved.

'How...' Eleanor said, and all three of them laughed.

'Another day,' the doctor said, and in spite of his appearance his voice was wan. 'Another night,' he said.

'As I tried to say earlier,' Luke remarked, 'living in a haunted house plays hell with a sense of humour; I really did not intend to make a forbidden pun,' he told Theodora.

'How — are they?' Eleanor asked, the words sounding unfamiliar and her mouth stiff.

'Both sleeping like babies,' the doctor said. 'Actually,' he said, as though continuing a conversation begun while Eleanor slept, 'I cannot believe that my wife stirred up that storm, but I do admit that one more word about pure love...'

'What happened?' Eleanor asked; I must have been gritting my teeth all night, she thought, the way my mouth feels.

'Hill House went dancing,' Theodora said, 'taking us along on a mad midnight fling. At least, I *think* it was dancing; it might have been turning somersaults.'

'It's almost nine,' the doctor said. 'When Eleanor is ready...'

'Come along, baby,' Theodora said. 'Theo will wash your face for you and make you all neat for breakfast.'

EIGHT

‘DID ANYONE TELL them that Mrs Dudley clears at ten?’ Theodora looked into the coffee pot speculatively.

The doctor hesitated. ‘I hate to wake them after such a night.’

‘But Mrs Dudley clears at ten.’

‘They’re coming,’ Eleanor said. ‘I can hear them on the stairs.’ I can hear everything, all over the house, she wanted to tell them.

Then, distantly, they could all hear Mrs Montague’s voice, raised in irritation and Luke, realising, said, ‘Oh, Lord — they can’t find the dining-room,’ and hurried out to open doors.

‘ — properly aired.’ Mrs Montague’s voice preceded her, and she swept into the dining-room, tapped the doctor curtly on the shoulder by way of greeting and seated herself with a general nod to the others. ‘I must say,’ she began at once, ‘that I think you might have called us for breakfast. I suppose everything is cold? Is the coffee bearable?’

‘Good morning,’ Arthur said sulkily, and sat down himself with an air of sullen ill temper. Theodora almost upset the coffee pot in her haste to set a cup of coffee before Mrs Montague.

‘It *seems* hot enough,’ Mrs Montague said. ‘I shall speak to your Mrs Dudley this morning in any case. That room must be aired.’

‘And your night?’ the doctor asked timidly. ‘Did you spend a — ah — profitable night?’

‘If by profitable you meant comfortable, John, I wish you would say so. No, in answer to your most civil inquiry, I did *not* spend a comfortable night. I did not sleep a wink. That room is unendurable.’

‘Noisy old house, isn’t it?’ Arthur said. ‘Branch kept tapping against my window all night; nearly drove me crazy, tapping and tapping.’

‘Even with the windows open that room is stuffy. Mrs Dudley’s coffee is not as poor as her housekeeping. Another cup, if you please. I am astonished, John, that you put me in a room not properly aired; if there is to be any communication with those beyond, the air circulation, at least, ought to be adequate. I smelled dust all night.’

‘Can’t understand *you*,’ Arthur said to the doctor, ‘letting yourself get all nervy about this place. Sat there all night long with my revolver and not a mouse stirred. Except for that infernal branch tapping on the window. Nearly drove me crazy,’ he confided to Theodora.

‘We will not give up hope, of course.’ Mrs Montague scowled at her husband. ‘Perhaps tonight there may be some manifestations.’

2

‘Theo?’ Eleanor put down her notepad, and Theodora, scribbling busily, looked up with a frown. ‘I’ve been thinking about something.’

‘I *hate* writing these notes; I feel like a damn fool trying to write this crazy stuff.’

‘I’ve been wondering.’

‘Well?’ Theodora smiled a little. ‘You look so serious,’ she said. ‘Are you coming to some great decision?’

‘Yes,’ Eleanor said, deciding. ‘About what I’m going to do afterwards. After we all leave Hill House.’

‘Well?’

‘I’m coming with you,’ Eleanor said.

‘Coming where with me?’

'Back with you, back home. I' — and Eleanor smiled wryly— 'am going to follow you home.'

Theodora stared. 'Why?' she asked blankly.

'I never had anyone to care about,' Eleanor said, wondering where she had heard someone say something like this before. 'I want to be some place where I belong.'

'I am not in the habit of taking home stray cats,' Theodora said lightly.

Eleanor laughed too. 'I *am* a kind of stray cat, aren't I?'

'Well.' Theodora took up her pencil again. 'You have your own home,' she said. 'You'll be glad enough to get back to it when the time comes, Nell my Nellie. I suppose we'll all be glad to get back home. What are you saying about those noises last night? *I* can't describe them.'

'I'll come, you know,' Eleanor said. 'I'll just come.'

'Nellie, Nellie.' Theodora laughed again. 'Look,' she said. 'This is just a summer, just a few weeks' visit to a lovely old summer resort in the country. You have your life back home, I have *my* life. When the summer is over, we go back. We'll write each other, of course, and maybe visit, but Hill House is not for ever, you know.'

'I can get a job; I won't be in your way.'

'I don't understand.' Theodora threw down her pencil in exasperation. 'Do you *always* go where you're not wanted?'

Eleanor smiled placidly. 'I've never been wanted *anywhere*,' she said.

3

'It's all so motherly,' Luke said. 'Everything so soft. Everything so padded. Great embracing chairs and sofas which turn out to be hard and unwelcoming when you sit down, and reject you at once — —'

‘Theo?’ Eleanor said softly, and Theodora looked at her and shook her head in bewilderment.

‘ — and hands everywhere. Little soft glass hands, curving out to you, beckoning — —’

‘Theo?’ Eleanor said.

‘No,’ Theodora said. ‘I won’t have you. And I don’t want to talk about it any more.’

‘Perhaps,’ Luke said, watching them, ‘the single most repulsive aspect is the emphasis upon the globe. I ask you to regard impartially the lampshade made of tiny pieces of broken glass glued together, or the great round balls of the lights upon the stairs or the fluted iridescent candy jar at Theo’s elbow. In the dining-room there is a bowl of particularly filthy yellow glass resting upon the cupped hands of a child, and an Easter egg of sugar with a vision of shepherds dancing inside. A bosomy lady supports the stair-rail on her head, and under glass in the drawing-room — —’

‘Nellie, leave me alone. Let’s walk down to the brook or something.’

‘ — a child’s face, done in cross-stitch. Nell, don’t look so apprehensive; Theo has only suggested that you walk down to the brook. If you like, I will go along.’

‘Anything,’ Theodora said.

‘To frighten away rabbits. If you like, I will carry a stick. If you like, I will not come at all. Theo has only to say the word.’

Theodora laughed. ‘Perhaps Nell would rather stay here and write on walls.’

‘So unkind,’ Luke said. ‘Callous of you, Theo.’

‘I want to hear more about the shepherds dancing in the Easter egg,’ Theodora said.

‘A world contained in sugar. Six very tiny shepherds dancing, and a shepherdess in pink and blue reclining upon a mossy bank enjoying them; there are flowers and trees and sheep, and an old goatherd playing pipes. I would like to have been a goatherd, I think.’

‘If you were not a bullfighter,’ Theodora said.

‘If I were not a bullfighter. Nell’s affairs are the talk of the cafés, you will recall.’

‘Pan,’ Theodora said. ‘You should live in a hollow tree, Luke.’

‘Nell,’ Luke said, ‘you are not listening.’

‘I think you frighten her, Luke.’

‘Because Hill House will be mine some day, with its untold treasures and its cushions? I am not gentle with a house, Nell; I might take a fit of restlessness and smash the sugar Easter egg, or shatter the little child hands or go stomping and shouting up and down the stairs striking at glued-glass lamps with a cane and slashing at the bosomy lady with the staircase on her head; I might — —’

‘You see? You do frighten her.’

‘I believe I do,’ Luke said. ‘Nell, I am *only* talking nonsense.’

‘I don’t think he even owns a cane,’ Theodora said.

‘As a matter of fact, I do. Nell, I am *only* talking nonsense. What is she thinking about, Theo?’

Theodora said carefully, ‘She wants me to take her home with me after we leave Hill House, and I won’t do it.’

Luke laughed. ‘Poor silly Nell,’ he said. ‘Journeys end in lovers meeting. Let’s go down to the brook.’

‘A mother house,’ Luke said, as they came down the steps from the verandah to the lawn, ‘a housemother, a headmistress, a housemistress. I am sure I will be a very poor housemaster, like our Arthur, when Hill House belongs to me.'

'I can't understand anyone wanting to own Hill House,' Theodora said, and Luke turned and looked back with amusement at the house.

'You never know what you are going to want until you see it clearly,' he said. 'If I never had a chance of owning it I might feel very differently. What do people really want with each other, as Nell asked me once; what use are other people?'

'It was my fault my mother died,' Eleanor said. 'She knocked on the wall and called me and called me and I never woke up. I ought to have brought her the medicine; I always did before. But this time she called me and I never woke up.'

'You should have forgotten all that by now,' Theodora said.

'I've wondered ever since if I did wake up. If I did wake up and hear her, and if I just went back to sleep. It would have been easy, and I've wondered about it.'

'Turn here,' Luke said. 'If we're going to the brook.'

'You worry too much, Nell. You probably just *like* thinking it was your fault.'

'It was going to happen sooner or later, in any case,' Eleanor said. 'But of course no matter when it happened, it was going to be my fault.'

'If it hadn't happened you would never have come to Hill House.'

'We go single file along here,' Luke said. 'Nell, go first.'

Smiling, Eleanor went on ahead, kicking her feet comfortably along the path. Now I know where I am going, she thought; I told her about my mother so *that's* all right; I will find a little house, or maybe an apartment like hers. I will see her every day, and we will go searching together for lovely things — gold-rimmed dishes, and a white cat, and a sugar Easter egg, and a cup of stars. I will not be frightened or alone any more; I will call myself just *Eleanor*. ‘Are you two talking about me?’ she asked over her shoulder.

After a minute Luke answered politely. ‘A struggle between good and evil for the soul of Nell. I suppose I will have to be God, however.’

‘But of course she can*not* trust either of us,’ Theodora said, amused.

‘Not me, certainly,’ Luke said.

‘Besides, Nell,’ Theodora said, ‘we were not talking about you at all. As though I were the games mistress,’ she said, half angry, to Luke.

I have waited such a long time, Eleanor was thinking; I have finally earned my happiness. She came, leading them, to the top of the hill and looked down to the slim line of trees they must pass through to get to the brook. They are lovely against the sky, she thought, so straight and free; Luke was wrong about the softness everywhere, because the trees are hard like wooden trees. They are still talking about me, talking about how I came to Hill House and found Theodora and now I will not let her go. Behind her she could hear the murmur of their voices, edged sometimes with malice, sometimes rising in mockery, sometimes touched with a laughter almost of kinship, and she walked on dreamily, hearing them come behind. She could tell when they entered the tall grass a minute after she did, because the grass moved hissingly beneath their feet and a startled grasshopper leaped wildly away.

I could help her in her shop, Eleanor thought; she loves beautiful things and I would go with her to find them. We could go anywhere we pleased, to the edge of the world if we liked, and come back when we wanted to. He is telling her now what he knows about me: that I am not easily taken in, that I had an oleander wall around me, and she is laughing because I am not going to be lonely any more. They are very much alike and they are very kind; I would not really have expected as much from them as they are giving me; I was very right to come because journeys end in lovers meeting.

She came under the hard branches of the trees and the shadows were pleasantly cool after the hot sun on the path; now she had to walk more carefully because the path led downhill and there were sometimes rocks and roots across her way. Behind her their voices went on, quick and sharp, and then more slowly and laughing; I will not look back, she thought happily, because then they would know what I am thinking; we will talk about it together some day, Theo and I, when we have plenty of time. How strange I feel, she thought, coming out of the trees on to the last steep part of the path going down to the brook; I am caught in a kind of wonder, I am still with joy. I will not look around until I am next to the brook, where she almost fell the day we came; I will remind her about the golden fish in the brook and about our picnic.

She sat down on the narrow green bank and put her chin on her knees; I will not forget this one moment in my life, she promised herself, listening to their voices and their footsteps coming slowly down the hill. 'Hurry up,' she said, turning her head to look for Theodora. 'I — —' and was silent. There was no one on the hill, nothing but the footsteps coming clearly along the path and the faint mocking laughter.

'Who ——?' she whispered. 'Who?'

She could see the grass go down under the weight of the footsteps. She saw another grasshopper leap wildly away, and a pebble jar and roll. She heard clearly the brush of footsteps on the path and then, standing back hard against the bank, heard the laughter very close; 'Eleanor, Eleanor,' and she heard it inside and outside her head; this was a call she had been listening for all her life. The footsteps stopped and she was caught in a movement of air so solid that she staggered and was held. 'Eleanor, Eleanor,' she heard through the rushing of air past her ears, ‘Eleanor, Eleanor,’ and she was held tight and safe. It is not cold at all, she thought, it is not cold at all. She closed her eyes and leaned back against the bank and thought, Don’t let me go, and then, Stay, stay, as the firmness which held her slipped away, leaving her and fading; ‘Eleanor, Eleanor,’ she heard once more and then she stood beside the brook, shivering as though the sun had gone, watching without surprise the vacant footsteps move across the water of the brook, sending small ripples going, and then over on to the grass on the other side, moving slowly and caressingly up and over the hill.

Come back, she almost said, standing shaking by the brook, and then she turned and ran madly up the hill, crying as she ran and calling, ‘Theo? Luke?’

She found them in the little group of trees, leaning against a tree trunk and talking softly and laughing; when she ran to them they turned, startled, and Theodora was almost angry. ‘What on earth do you want this time?’ she said.

‘I waited for you by the brook — —’

‘We decided to stay here where it was cool,’ Theodora said. ‘We thought you heard us calling you. Didn’t we, Luke?’

‘Oh, yes,’ said Luke, embarrassed. ‘We were sure you heard us calling.’

‘Anyway,’ Theodora said, ‘we were going to come along in a minute. Weren’t we, Luke?’

‘Yes,’ said Luke, grinning. ‘Oh, yes.’

4

‘Subterranean waters,’ the doctor said, waving his fork.

‘Nonsense. Does Mrs Dudley do all your cooking? The asparagus is more than passable. Arthur, let that young man help you to asparagus.’

‘My dear.’ The doctor looked fondly upon his wife. ‘It has become our custom to rest for an hour or so after lunch; if you — —’

‘Certainly not. I have far too much to do while I am here. I must speak to your cook, I must see that my room is aired, I must ready planchette for another session this evening; Arthur must clean his revolver.’

‘Mark of a fighting man,’ Arthur conceded. ‘Firearms always in good order.’

‘*You* and *these* young people may rest, of course. Perhaps you do not feel the urgency which I do, the terrible compulsion to aid whatever poor souls wander restlessly here; perhaps you find me foolish in my sympathy for them, perhaps I am even ludicrous in your eyes because I can spare a tear for a lost abandoned soul, left without any helping hand; pure love — —’

‘Croquet?’ Luke said hastily. ‘Croquet, perhaps?’ He looked eagerly from one to another. ‘Badminton?’ he suggested. ‘Croquet?’

‘Subterranean waters?’ Theodora added helpfully.

‘No fancy sauces for *me*,’ Arthur said firmly. ‘Tell my fellows it’s the mark of a cad.’ He looked thoughtfully at Luke. ‘Mark of a cad. Fancy sauces, women waiting on you. *My* fellows wait on themselves. Mark of a man,’ he said to Theodora.

‘And what else do you teach them?’ Theodora asked politely.

‘Teach? You mean — do they learn anything, my fellows? You mean — algebra, like? Latin? Certainly.’ Arthur sat back, pleased. ‘Leave all that kind of thing to the teachers,’ he explained.

‘And how many fellows are there in your school?’ Theodora leaned forward, courteous, interested, making conversation with a guest, and Arthur basked; at the head of the table Mrs Montague frowned and tapped her fingers impatiently.

‘How many? How many. Got a crack tennis team, you know.’ He beamed on Theodora. ‘Crack. Absolutely tophole. Not counting milksops?’

‘Not counting,’ said Theodora, ‘milksops.’

‘Oh. Tennis. Golf. Baseball. Track. Cricket.’ He smiled slyly. ‘Didn’t guess we played cricket, did you? Then there’s swimming, and volleyball. Some fellows go out for everything, though,’ he told her anxiously. ‘All-around types. Maybe seventy, altogether.’

‘Arthur?’ Mrs Montague could contain herself no longer. ‘No shop talk, now. You’re on vacation, remember.’

‘Yes, silly of me.’ Arthur smiled fondly. ‘Got to check the weapons,’ he explained.

‘It’s two o’clock,’ Mrs Dudley said in the doorway. ‘I clear off at two.’

5

Theodora laughed, and Eleanor, hidden deep in the shadows behind the summerhouse, put her hands over her mouth to keep from speaking to let them know she was there; I’ve got to find out, she was thinking, I’ve got to find out.

‘It’s called “The Grattan Murders,” ’ Luke was saying. ‘Lovely thing. I can even sing it if you prefer.’

‘Mark of a cad.’ Theodora laughed again. ‘Poor Luke; I would have said “scoundrel.” ’

‘If you would rather be spending this brief hour with Arthur...’

‘Of course I would rather be with Arthur. An educated man is always an enlivening companion.’

‘Cricket,’ Luke said. ‘Never would have thought we played cricket, would you?’

‘Sing, sing,’ Theodora said, laughing.

Luke sang, in a nasal monotone, emphasising each word distinctly:

‘The first was young Miss Grattan,
She tried not to let him in;
He stabbed her with a corn knife,
That’s how his crimes begin.
‘The next was Grandma Grattan,
So old and tired and grey;
She fit off her attacker
Until her strength give way.
‘The next was Grandpa Grattan,
A-settin’ by the fire;
He crept up close behind him
And strangled him with a wire.
‘The last was Baby Grattan
All in his trundle bed;
He stove him in the short ribs
Until that child was dead.
‘And spit tobacco juice
All on his golden head.’

When he finished there was a moment’s silence, and then Theodora said weakly, ‘It’s lovely, Luke. Perfectly beautiful. I will never hear it again without thinking of you.’

‘I plan to sing it to Arthur,’ Luke said. When are they going to talk about me? Eleanor wondered in the shadows. After a minute Luke went on idly, ‘I wonder what the doctor’s book will be like, when he writes it? Do you suppose he’ll put us in?’

‘You will probably turn up as an earnest young psychic researcher. And I will be a lady of undeniable gifts but dubious reputation.’

‘I wonder if Mrs Montague will have a chapter to herself.’

‘And Arthur. And Mrs Dudley. I hope he doesn’t reduce us all to figures on a graph.’

‘I wonder, I wonder,’ said Luke. ‘It’s warm this afternoon,’ he said. ‘What could we do that is cool?’

‘We could ask Mrs Dudley to make lemonade.’

‘You know what I want to do?’ Luke said. ‘I want to explore. Let’s follow the brook up into the hills and see where it comes from; maybe there’s a pond somewhere and we can go swimming.’

‘Or a waterfall; it looks like a brook that runs naturally from a waterfall.’

‘Come on, then.’ Listening behind the summerhouse, Eleanor heard their laughter and the sound of their feet running down the path to the house.

6

‘Here’s an interesting thing, here,’ Arthur’s voice said in the manner of one endeavouring valiantly to entertain, ‘here in this book. Says how to make candles out of ordinary children’s crayons.’

‘Interesting.’ The doctor sounded weary. ‘If you will excuse me, Arthur, I have all these notes to write up.’

‘Sure, Doctor. All got our work to do. Not a sound.’ Eleanor, listening outside the parlour door, heard the small irritating noises of Arthur settling down to be quiet. ‘Not much to do around here, is there?’ Arthur said. ‘How d’you pass the time generally?’

‘Working,’ the doctor said shortly.

‘You writing down what happens in the house?’

‘Yes.’

‘You got me in there?’

‘No.’

'Seems like you ought to put in our notes from planchette. What are you writing now?'

'Arthur. Can you read, or something?'

'Sure. Never meant to make a nuisance of myself.' Eleanor heard Arthur take up a book, and put it down, and light a cigarette, and sigh, and stir, and finally say, 'Listen, isn't there anything to *do* around here? Where *is* everybody?'

The doctor spoke patiently, but without interest. 'Theodora and Luke have gone to explore the brook, I think. And I suppose the others are around somewhere. As a matter of fact, I believe my wife was looking for Mrs Dudley.'

'Oh.' Arthur sighed again. 'Might as well read, I guess,' he said, and then, after a minute, 'Say, Doctor. I don't like to bother you, but listen to what it says here in this book....'

7

'No,' Mrs Montague said, 'I do *not* believe in throwing young people together promiscuously, Mrs Dudley. If my husband had consulted *me* before arranging this fantastic house party — —'

'Well, now.' It was Mrs Dudley's voice, and Eleanor, pressed against the dining-room door, stared and opened her mouth wide against the wooden panels of the door. 'I always say, Mrs Montague, that you're only young once. Those young people are enjoying themselves, and it's only natural for the young.'

'But living under one roof — —'

'It's not as though they weren't grown up enough to know right from wrong. That pretty Theodora lady is old enough to take care of herself, I'd think, no matter how gay Mr Luke.'

‘I need a dry dish-towel, Mrs Dudley, for the silverware. It’s a shame, I think, the way children grow up these days knowing everything. There should be more mysteries for them, more things that belong rightly to grown-ups, that they have to wait to find out.’

‘Then they find them out the hard way.’ Mrs Dudley’s voice was comfortable and easy. ‘Dudley brought in these tomatoes from the garden this morning,’ she said. ‘They did well this year.’

‘Shall I start on them?’

‘No, oh, no. You sit down over there and rest; you’ve done enough. I’ll put on the water and we’ll have a nice cup of tea.’

8

‘Journeys end in lovers meeting,’ Luke said, and smiled across the room at Eleanor. ‘Does that blue dress on Theo really belong to you? I’ve never seen it before.’

‘I am Eleanor,’ Theodora said wickedly, ‘because I have a beard.’

‘You were wise to bring clothes for two,’ Luke told Eleanor. ‘Theo would never have looked half so well in my old blazer.’

‘I am Eleanor,’ Theo said, ‘because I am wearing blue. I love my love with an E because she is ethereal. Her name is Eleanor, and she lives in expectation.’

She is being spiteful, Eleanor thought remotely; from a great distance, it seemed, she could watch these people and listen to them. Now she thought, Theo is being spiteful and Luke is trying to be nice; Luke is ashamed of himself for laughing at me and he is ashamed of Theo for being spiteful. ‘Luke,’ Theodora said, with a half-glance at Eleanor, ‘come and sing to me again.’

‘Later,’ Luke said uncomfortably. ‘The doctor has just set up the chessmen.’ He turned away in some haste.

Theodora, piqued, leaned her head against the back of her chair and closed her eyes, clearly determined not to speak. Eleanor sat, looking down at her hands, and listened to the sounds of the house. Somewhere upstairs a door swung quietly shut; a bird touched the tower briefly and flew off. In the kitchen the stove was settling and cooling, with little soft creakings. An animal — a rabbit? — moved through the bushes by the summerhouse. She could even hear, with her new awareness of the house, the dust drifting gently in the attics, the wood ageing. Only the library was closed to her; she could not hear the heavy breathing of Mrs Montague and Arthur over their planchette, nor their little excited questions; she could not hear the books rotting or rust seeping into the circular iron stairway to the tower. In the little parlour she could hear, without raising her eyes, Theodora’s small irritated tappings and the quiet sound of the chessmen being set down. She heard when the library door slammed open, and then the sharp angry sound of footsteps coming to the little parlour, and then all of them turned as Mrs Montague opened the door and marched in.

‘I must say,’ said Mrs Montague on a sharp, explosive breath, ‘I really must *say* that this is the most *infuriating* — —’

‘My dear.’ The doctor rose, but Mrs Montague waved him aside angrily. ‘If you had the *decency* — —’ she said.

Arthur, coming behind her sheepishly, moved past her and, almost slinking, settled in a chair by the fire. He shook his head warily when Theodora turned to him.

‘The common *decency*. After all, John, I *did* come all this way, and so did Arthur, just to help out, and I certainly must say that I never expected to meet with such cynicism and incredulity from *you*, of all people, and *these*

— —' She gestured at Eleanor and Theodora and Luke. 'All I ask, all I *ask*, is some small minimum of trust, just a little bit of sympathy for all I am trying to do, and instead you disbelieve, you scoff, you mock and jeer.' Breathing heavily, red-faced, she shook her finger at the doctor. Planchette,' she said bitterly, 'will not speak to me tonight. Not *one single word* have I had from planchette, as a direct result of your sneering and your scepticism; planchette may very possibly not speak to me for a matter of weeks — it has happened before, I can tell you; it has happened before, when I subjected it to the taunts of unbelievers; I have known planchette to be silent for weeks, and the very *least* I could have expected, coming here as I did with none but the finest motives, was a little respect.' She shook her finger at the doctor, wordless for the moment.

'My dear,' the doctor said, 'I am certain that none of us would knowingly have interfered.'

'Mocking and jeering, were you not? Sceptical, with planchette's very words before your eyes? Those young people pert and insolent?'

'Mrs Montague, really...' said Luke, but Mrs Montague brushed past him and sat herself down, her lips tight and her eyes blazing. The doctor sighed, started to speak, and then stopped. Turning away from his wife, he gestured Luke back to the chess table. Apprehensively, Luke followed, and Arthur, wriggling in his chair, said in a low voice to Theodora, 'Never seen her so upset, you know. Miserable experience, waiting for planchette. So easily offended, of course. Sensitive to atmosphere.' Seeming to believe that he had satisfactorily explained the situation, he sat back and smiled timidly.

Eleanor was hardly listening, wondering dimly at the movement in the room. Someone was walking around, she thought without interest; Luke was walking back and forth in the room, talking softly to himself; surely an odd way to play chess? Humming? Singing? Once or twice she almost made out a broken word, and then Luke spoke quietly; he was at the chess table where he belonged, and Eleanor turned and looked at the empty centre of the room, where someone was walking and singing softly, and then she heard it clearly:

Go walking through the valley,
Go walking through the valley,
Go walking through the valley,
As we have done before....

Why, I know that, she thought, listening, smiling, to the faint melody; we used to play that game; I remember that.

'It's simply that it's a most delicate and intricate piece of machinery,' Mrs Montague was saying to Theodora; she was still angry, but visibly softening under Theodora's sympathetic attention. 'The slightest air of disbelief offends it, naturally. How would *you* feel if people refused to believe in *you*?'

Go in and out the windows,
Go in and out the windows,
Go in and out the windows,
As we have done before....

The voice was light, perhaps only a child's voice, singing sweetly and thinly, on the barest breath, and Eleanor smiled and remembered, hearing the little song more clearly than Mrs Montague's voice continuing about planchette.

Go forth and face your lover,
Go forth and face your lover,
Go forth and face your lover,
As we have done before....

She heard the little melody fade, and felt the slight movement of air as the footsteps came close to her, and something almost brushed her face; perhaps there was a tiny sigh against her cheek, and she turned in surprise. Luke and the doctor bent over the chessboard, Arthur leaned confidingly close to Theodora, and Mrs Montague talked.

None of them heard it, she thought with joy; nobody heard it but me.

NINE

ELEANOR CLOSED THE bedroom door softly behind her, not wanting to awaken Theodora, although the noise of a door closing would hardly disturb anyone, she thought, who slept so soundly as Theodora; I learned to sleep very lightly, she told herself comfortingly, when I was listening for my mother. The hall was dim, lighted only by the small nightlight over the stairs, and all the doors were closed. Funny, Eleanor thought, going soundlessly on her bare feet along the hall carpet, it's the only house I ever knew where you don't have to worry about making noise at night, or at least about anyone knowing it's you. She had awakened with the thought of going down to the library, and her mind had supplied her with a reason: I cannot sleep, she explained to herself, and so I am going downstairs to get a book. If anyone asks me where I am going, it is down to the library to get a book because I cannot sleep.

It was warm, drowsily, luxuriously warm. She went barefoot and in silence down the great staircase and to the library door before she thought, But I can't go in there; I'm not allowed in there — and recoiled in the doorway before the odour of decay, which nauseated her. 'Mother,' she said aloud, and stepped quickly back. 'Come along,' a voice answered distinctly upstairs, and Eleanor turned, eager, and hurried to the staircase. 'Mother?' she said softly, and then again, 'Mother?' A little soft laugh floated down to her, and she ran, breathless, up the stairs and stopped at the top, looking to right and left along the hallway at the closed doors.

'You're here somewhere,' she said, and down the hall the little echo went, slipping in a whisper on the tiny currents of air. 'Somewhere,' it said.

‘Somewhere.’

Laughing, Eleanor followed, running soundlessly down the hall to the nursery doorway; the cold spot was gone, and she laughed up at the two grinning faces looking down at her. ‘Are you in here?’ she whispered outside the door, ‘are you in here?’ and knocked, pounding with her fists.

‘Yes?’ It was Mrs Montague, inside, clearly just awakened. ‘Yes? Come in, whatever you are.’

No, no, Eleanor thought, hugging herself and laughing silently, not in there, not with Mrs Montague, and slipped away down the hall, hearing Mrs Montague behind her calling, ‘I am your friend; I intend you no harm. Come in and tell me what is troubling you.’

She won’t open her door, Eleanor thought wisely; she is not afraid but she won’t open the door, and knocked, pounding, against Arthur’s door and heard Arthur’s awakening gasp.

Dancing, the carpet soft under her feet, she came to the door behind which Theodora slept; faithless Theo, she thought, cruel, laughing Theo, wake up, wake up, wake up, and pounded and slapped the door, laughing, and shook the door-knob and then ran swiftly down the hall to Luke’s door and pounded; wake up, she thought, wake up and be faithless. None of them will open their doors, she thought; they will sit inside, with the blankets pressed around them, shivering and wondering what is going to happen to them next; wake up, she thought, pounding on the doctor’s door; I dare you to open your door and come out to see me dancing in the hall of Hill House.

Then Theodora startled her by calling out wildly, ‘Nell? Nell? Doctor, Luke, Nell’s not here!’

Poor house, Eleanor thought, I had forgotten Eleanor; now they will have to open their doors, and she ran quickly down the stairs, hearing behind her the doctor’s voice raised anxiously, and Theodora calling, ‘Nell? Eleanor?’

What fools they are, she thought; now I will have to go into the library. ‘Mother, Mother,’ she whispered, ‘Mother,’ and stopped at the library door, sick. Behind her she could hear them talking upstairs in the hall; funny, she thought, I can feel the whole house, and heard even Mrs Montague protesting, and Arthur, and then the doctor, clearly, ‘We’ve got to look for her; everyone please hurry.’

Well, I can hurry too, she thought, and ran down the corridor to the little parlour, where the fire flickered briefly at her when she opened the door, and the chessmen sat where Luke and the doctor had left their game. The scarf Theodora had been wearing lay across the back of her chair; I can take care of *that* too, Eleanor thought, her maid’s pathetic finery, and put one end of it between her teeth and pulled, tearing, and then dropped it when she heard them behind her on the stairs. They were coming down all together, anxious, telling one another where to look first, now and then calling, ‘Eleanor? Nell?’

‘Coming? Coming?’ she heard far away, somewhere else in the house, and she heard the stairs shake under their feet and a cricket stir on the lawn. Daring, gay, she ran down the corridor again to the hall and peeked out at them from the doorway. They were moving purposefully, all together, straining to stay near one another, and the doctor’s flashlight swept the hall and stopped at the great front door, which was standing open wide. Then, in a rush, calling ‘Eleanor, *Eleanor*,’ they ran all together across the hall and out of the front door, looking and calling, the flashlight moving busily. Eleanor clung to the door and laughed until tears came into her eyes; what fools they are, she thought; we trick them so easily. They are so slow, and so deaf and so *heavy*; they trample over the house, poking and peering and rough. She ran across the hall and through the game room and into the dining-room and from there into the kitchen, with its doors. It’s good here, she thought, I can go in any direction when I hear them. When they came back into the front hall, blundering and calling her, she darted quickly out on to the verandah into the cool night. She stood with her back against the door, the little mists of Hill House curling around her ankles, and looked up at the pressing, heavy hills. Gathered comfortably into the hills, she thought, protected and warm; Hill House is lucky.

‘Eleanor?’ They were very close, and she ran along the verandah and darted into the drawing-room; ‘Hugh Crain,’ she said, ‘will you come and dance with me?’ She curtsied to the huge leaning statue, and its eyes flickered and shone at her; little reflected lights touched the figurines and the gilded chairs, and she danced gravely before Hugh Crain, who watched her, gleaming. ‘Go in and out the windows,’ she sang, and felt her hands taken as she danced. ‘Go in and out the windows,’ and she danced out on to the verandah and around the house. Going around and around and around the house, she thought, and none of them can see me. She touched a kitchen door as she passed, and six miles away Mrs Dudley shuddered in her sleep. She came to the tower, held so tightly in the embrace of the house, in the straining grip of the house, and walked slowly past its grey stones, not allowed to touch even the outside. Then she turned and stood before the great doorway; the door was closed again, and she put out her hand and opened it effortlessly. Thus I enter Hill House, she told herself, and stepped inside as though it were her own. ‘Here I am,’ she said aloud. ‘I’ve been all around the house, in and out the windows, and I danced — —’

‘Eleanor?’ It was Luke’s voice, and she thought, Of all of them I would least like to have Luke catch me; don’t let him see me, she thought beggingly, and turned and ran, without stopping, into the library.

And here I am, she thought. Here I am inside. It was not cold at all, but deliciously, fondly warm. It was light enough for her to see the iron stairway curving around and around up to the tower, and the little door at the top. Under her feet the stone floor moved caressingly, rubbing itself against the soles of her feet, and all around the soft air touched her, stirring her hair, drifting against her fingers, coming in a light breath across her mouth, and she danced in circles. No stone lions for me, she thought, no oleanders; I have broken the spell of Hill House and somehow come inside. I am home, she thought, and stopped in wonder at the thought. I am home, I am home, she thought; now to climb.

Climbing the narrow iron stairway was intoxicating — going higher and higher, around and around, looking down, clinging to the slim iron railing, looking far far down on to the stone floor. Climbing, looking down, she thought of the soft green grass outside and the rolling hills and the rich trees. Looking up, she thought of the tower of Hill House rising triumphantly between the trees, tall over the road which wound through Hillsdale and past a white house set in flowers and past the magic oleanders and past the stone lions and on, far, far away, to a little lady who was going to pray for her. Time is ended now, she thought, all *that* is gone and left behind, and that poor little lady, praying still, for me.

‘Eleanor!’

For a minute she could not remember who they were (had they been guests of hers in the house of the stone lions? Dining at her long table in the candlelight? Had she met them at the inn, over the tumbling stream? Had one of them come riding down a green hill, banners flying? Had one of them run beside her in the darkness? and then she remembered, and they fell into place where they belonged) and she hesitated, clinging to the railing. They were so small, so ineffectual. They stood far below on the stone floor and pointed at her; they called to her, and their voices were urgent and far away.

'Luke,' she said, remembering. They could hear her, because they were quiet when she spoke. 'Doctor Montague,' she said. 'Mrs Montague. Arthur.' She could not remember the other, who stood silent and a little apart.

'Eleanor,' Dr Montague called, 'turn around very carefully and come slowly down the steps. Move very, very slowly, Eleanor. Hold on to the railing all the time. Now turn and come down.'

'What on earth is the creature doing?' Mrs Montague demanded. Her hair was in curlers, and her bathrobe had a dragon on the stomach. 'Make her come down so we can go back to bed. Arthur, make her come down at once.'

'See here,' Arthur began, and Luke moved to the foot of the stairway and started up.

'For God's sake be careful,' the doctor said as Luke moved steadily on. 'The thing is rotted away from the wall.'

'It won't hold both of you,' Mrs Montague said positively. 'You'll have it down on our heads. Arthur, move over here near the door.'

'Eleanor,' the doctor called, 'can you turn around and start down slowly?'

Above her was only the little trapdoor leading out on to the turret; she stood on the little narrow platform at the top and pressed against the trapdoor, but it would not move. Futilely she hammered against it with her fists, thinking wildly, Make it open, make it open, or they'll catch me. Glancing over her shoulder, she could see Luke climbing steadily, around and around. 'Eleanor,' he said, 'stand still. Don't move,' and he sounded frightened.

I can't get away, she thought, and looked down; she saw one face clearly, and the name came into her mind. 'Theodora,' she said.

‘Nell, do as they tell you. Please.’

‘Theodora? I can’t get out; the door’s been nailed shut.’

‘Damn right it’s been nailed shut,’ Luke said. ‘And lucky for you, too, my girl.’ Climbing, coming very slowly, he had almost reached the narrow platform. ‘Stay perfectly still,’ he said.

‘Stay perfectly still, Eleanor,’ the doctor said.

‘Nell,’ Theodora said. ‘*Please* do what they say.’

‘Why?’ Eleanor looked down and saw the dizzy fall of the tower below her, the iron stairway clinging to the tower walls, shaking and straining under Luke’s feet, the cold stone floor, the distant, pale, staring faces. ‘How can I get down?’ she asked helplessly. ‘Doctor — how can I get down?’

‘Move very slowly,’ he said. ‘Do what Luke tells you.’

‘Nell,’ Theodora said, ‘don’t be frightened. It will be all right, really.’

‘Of course it will be all right,’ Luke said grimly. ‘Probably it will only be *my* neck that gets broken. Hold on, Nell; I’m coming on to the platform. I want to get past you so you can go down ahead of me.’ He seemed hardly out of breath, in spite of climbing, but his hand trembled as he reached out to take hold of the railing, and his face was wet. ‘Come on,’ he said sharply.

Eleanor hung back. ‘The last time you told me to go ahead you never followed,’ she said.

‘Perhaps I will just push you over the edge,’ Luke said. ‘Let you smash down there on the floor. Now behave yourself and move slowly; get past me and start down the stairs. And just hope,’ he added furiously, ‘that I can resist the temptation to give you a shove.’

Meekly she came along the platform and pressed herself against the hard stone wall while Luke moved cautiously past her. ‘Start down,’ he said. ‘I’ll be right behind you.’

Precariously, the iron stairway shaking and groaning with every step, she felt her way. She looked at her hand on the railing, white because she was holding so tight, and at her bare feet going one at a time, step by step, moving with extreme care, but never looked down again to the stone floor. Go down very slowly, she told herself over and over, not thinking of more than the steps which seemed almost to bend and buckle beneath her feet, go down very very very slowly. ‘Steady,’ Luke said behind her. ‘Take it easy, Nell, nothing to be afraid of, we’re almost there.’

Involuntarily, below her, the doctor and Theodora held out their arms, as though ready to catch her if she fell, and once when Eleanor stumbled and missed a step, the handrail wavering as she clung to it, Theodora gasped and ran to hold the end of the stairway. ‘It’s all right, my Nellie,’ she said over and over, ‘it’s all right, it’s all right.’

‘Only a little farther,’ the doctor said.

Creeping, Eleanor slid her feet down, one step after another, and at last, almost before she could believe it, stepped off on to the stone floor. Behind her the stairway rocked and clanged as Luke leaped down the last few steps and walked steadily across the room to fall against a chair and stop, head down and trembling still. Eleanor turned and looked up to the infinitely high little spot where she had been standing, at the iron stairway, warped and crooked and swaying against the tower wall, and said in a small voice, ‘I ran up. I ran up all the way.’

Mrs Montague moved purposefully forward from the doorway where she and Arthur had been sheltering against the probable collapse of the stairway. ‘Does anybody agree with me,’ she asked with great delicacy, ‘in thinking that this young woman has given us quite enough trouble tonight? *I*, for one, would like to go back to bed, and so would Arthur.’

‘Hill House — —’ the doctor began.

‘This childish nonsense has almost certainly destroyed any chance of manifestations *tonight*, I can tell you. I certainly do not look to see any of our friends from beyond after *this* ridiculous performance, so if you will all excuse me — and if you are *sure* that you are finished with your posturing and performing and waking up busy people — I will say good night. Arthur.’ Mrs Montague swept out, dragon rampant, quivering with indignation.

‘Luke was scared,’ Eleanor said, looking at the doctor and at Theodora.

‘Luke was most certainly scared,’ he agreed from behind her. ‘Luke was so scared he almost didn’t get himself down from there. Nell, what an imbecile you are.’

‘I would be inclined to agree with Luke.’ The doctor was displeased, and Eleanor looked away, looked at Theodora, and Theodora said, ‘I suppose you *had* to do it, Nell?’

‘I’m all right,’ Eleanor said, and could no longer look at any of them. She looked, surprised, down at her own bare feet, realising suddenly that they had carried her, unfeeling, down the iron stairway. She thought, looking at her feet, and then raised her head. ‘I came down to the library to get a book,’ she said.

2

It was humiliating, disastrous. Nothing was said at breakfast, and Eleanor was served coffee and eggs and rolls just like the others. She was allowed to linger over her coffee with the rest of them, observe the sunlight outside, comment upon the good day ahead; for a few minutes she might have been persuaded to believe that nothing had happened. Luke passed her the marmalade, Theodora smiled at her over Arthur’s head, the doctor bade her good morning. Then, after breakfast, after Mrs Dudley’s entrance at ten, they came without comment, following one another silently, to the little parlour, and the doctor took his position before the fireplace. Theodora was wearing Eleanor's red sweater.

'Luke will bring your car around,' the doctor said gently. In spite of what he was saying, his eyes were considerate and friendly. 'Theodora will go up and pack for you.'

Eleanor giggled. 'She can't. She won't have anything to wear.'

'Nell — —' Theodora began, and stopped and glanced at Mrs Montague, who shrugged her shoulders and said, 'I examined the room. *Naturally*. I can't imagine why none of *you* thought to do it.'

'I was going to,' the doctor said apologetically. 'But I thought — —'

'You *always* think, John, and that's your trouble. *Naturally* I examined the room at once.'

'Theodora's room?' Luke asked. 'I wouldn't like to go in there again.'

Mrs Montague sounded surprised. 'I can't think why not,' she said. 'There's nothing wrong with it.'

'I went in and looked at my clothes,' Theodora said to the doctor. 'They're perfectly fine.'

'The room needs dusting, *naturally*, but what can you expect if you lock the door and Mrs Dudley cannot — —'

The doctor's voice rose over his wife's. ' — cannot tell you how sorry I am,' he was saying. 'If there is ever anything I can do...'

Eleanor laughed. 'But I can't leave,' she said, wondering where to find words to explain.

'You have been here quite long enough,' the doctor said.

Theodora stared at her. 'I don't need your clothes,' she said patiently. 'Didn't you just hear Mrs Montague? I don't need your clothes, and even if I *did* I wouldn't wear them now; Nell, you've got to go away from here.'

‘But I can’t leave,’ Eleanor said, laughing still because it was so perfectly impossible to explain.

‘Madam,’ Luke said sombrely, ‘you are no longer welcome as my guest.’

‘Perhaps Arthur *had* better drive her back to the city. Arthur could see that she gets there safely.’

‘Gets where?’ Eleanor shook her head at them, feeling her lovely heavy hair around her face. ‘Gets where?’ she asked happily.

‘Why,’ the doctor said, ‘home, of course,’ and Theodora said, ‘Nell, your own little place, your own apartment, where all your things are,’ and Eleanor laughed.

‘I haven’t any apartment,’ she said to Theodora. ‘I made it up. I sleep on a cot at my sister’s, in the baby’s room. I haven’t any home, no place at all. And I can’t go back to my sister’s because I stole her car.’ She laughed, hearing her own words, so inadequate and so unutterably sad. ‘I haven’t any home,’ she said again, and regarded them hopefully. ‘No home. Everything in all the world that belongs to me is in a carton in the back of my car. That’s all I have, some books and things I had when I was a little girl, and a watch my mother gave me. So you see there’s no place you can send me.’

I could, of course, go on and on, she wanted to tell them, seeing always their frightened, staring faces. I could go on and on, leaving my clothes for Theodora; I could go wandering and homeless, errant, and I would always come back here. It would be simpler to let me stay, more sensible, she wanted to tell them, happier.

‘I want to stay here,’ she said to them.

‘I’ve already spoken to the sister,’ Mrs Montague said importantly. ‘I must say, she asked first about the car. A vulgar person; I told her she need have no fear. You were very wrong, John, to let her steal her sister’s car and come here.’

‘My dear,’ Dr Montague began, and stopped, spreading his hands helplessly.

‘At any rate, she is expected. The sister was most annoyed with me because they had planned to go off on their vacation today, although why she should be annoyed with *me*...’ Mrs Montague scowled at Eleanor. ‘I do think someone ought to see her safely into their hands,’ she said.

The doctor shook his head. ‘It would be a mistake,’ he said slowly. ‘It would be a mistake to send one of us with her. She must be allowed to forget everything about this house as soon as she can; we cannot prolong the association. Once away from here, she will be herself again; can you find your way home?’ he asked Eleanor, and Eleanor laughed.

‘I’ll go and get that packing done,’ Theodora said. ‘Luke, check her car and bring it around; she’s only got one suitcase.’

‘Walled up alive.’ Eleanor began to laugh again at their stone faces. ‘Walled up alive,’ she said. ‘I want to stay here.’

3

They made a solid line along the steps of Hill House, guarding the door. Beyond their heads she could see the windows looking down, and to one side the tower waited confidently. She might have cried if she could have thought of any way of telling them why; instead, she smiled brokenly up at the house, looking at her own window, at the amused, certain face of the house, watching her quietly. The house was waiting now, she thought, and it was waiting for her; no one else could satisfy it. ‘The house wants me to stay,’ she told the doctor, and he stared at her. He was standing very stiff and with great dignity, as though he expected her to choose him instead of the house, as though, having brought her here, he thought that by unwinding his directions he could send her back again. His back was squarely turned to the house, and, looking at him honestly, she said, ‘I’m sorry. I’m terribly sorry, really.’

‘You’ll go to Hillsdale,’ he said levelly; perhaps he was afraid of saying too much, perhaps he thought that a kind word, or a sympathetic one, might rebound upon himself and bring her back. The sun was shining on the hills and the house and the garden and the lawn and the trees and the brook; Eleanor took a deep breath and turned, seeing it all. ‘In Hillsdale turn on to Route Five going east; at Ashton you will meet Route Thirty-nine, and that will take you home. For your own safety,’ he added with a kind of urgency, ‘for your own safety, my dear; believe me, if I had foreseen this — —’

‘I’m really terribly sorry,’ she said.

‘We can’t take chances, you know, *any* chances. I am only beginning to perceive what a terrible risk I was asking of you all. Now...’ He sighed and shook his head. ‘You’ll remember?’ he asked. ‘To Hillsdale, and then Route Five — —’

‘Look.’ Eleanor was quiet for a minute, wanting to tell them all exactly how it was. ‘I wasn’t afraid,’ she said at last. ‘I really wasn’t afraid. I’m fine now. I was — happy.’ She looked earnestly at the doctor. ‘*Happy*,’ she said. ‘I don’t know what to say,’ she said, afraid again that she was going to cry. ‘I don’t want to go away from here.’

‘There might be a next time,’ the doctor said sternly. ‘Can’t you understand that we *cannot* take that chance?’

Eleanor faltered. ‘Someone is praying for me,’ she said foolishly. ‘A lady I met a long time ago.’

The doctor’s voice was gentle, but he tapped his foot impatiently. ‘You will forget all of this quite soon,’ he said. ‘You must forget everything about Hill House. I was so wrong to bring you here,’ he said.

‘How long *have* we been here?’ Eleanor asked suddenly.

‘A little over a week. Why?’

‘It’s the only time anything’s ever happened to me. I liked it.’

‘That,’ said the doctor, ’is why you are leaving in such a hurry.’

Eleanor closed her eyes and sighed, feeling and hearing and smelling the house; a flowering bush beyond the kitchen was heavy with scent, and the water in the brook moved sparkling over the stones. Far away, upstairs, perhaps in the nursery, a little eddy of wind gathered itself and swept along the floor, carrying dust. In the library the iron stairway swayed, and light glittered on the marble eyes of Hugh Crain; Theodora’s yellow shirt hung neat and unstained, Mrs Dudley was setting the lunch-table for five. Hill House watched, arrogant and patient. ‘I won’t go away,’ Eleanor said up to the high windows.

‘You *will* go away,’ the doctor said, showing his impatience at last. ‘Right now.’

Eleanor laughed, and turned, holding out her hand. ‘Luke,’ she said, and he came towards her, silent. ‘Thank you for bringing me down last night,’ she said. ‘That was wrong of me. I know it now, and you were very brave.’

‘I was indeed,’ Luke said. ‘It was an act of courage far surpassing any other in *my* life. And I am glad to see you going, Nell, because I would certainly never do it again.’

‘Well, it seems to *me*,’ Mrs Montague said, ‘if you’re going you’d better get on with it. I’ve no quarrel with saying good-bye, although I personally feel that you’ve all got an exaggerated view of this place, but I *do* think we’ve got better things to do than stand here arguing when we all know you’ve *got* to go. You’ll be a time as it is, getting back to the city, and your sister waiting to go on her vacation.’

Arthur nodded. ‘Tearful farewells,’ he said. ‘Don’t hold with them, myself.’

Far away, in the little parlour, the ash dropped softly in the fireplace. ‘John,’ Mrs Montague said, ‘possibly it *would* be better if Arthur — —’

‘No,’ the doctor said strongly. ‘Eleanor has to go back the way she came.’

‘And who do I thank for a lovely time?’ Eleanor asked.

The doctor took her by the arm and, with Luke beside her, led her to her car and opened the door for her. The carton was still on the back seat, her suitcase was on the floor, her coat and pocketbook on the seat; Luke had left the motor running. ‘Doctor,’ Eleanor said, clutching at him, ‘Doctor.’

‘I’m sorry,’ he said. ‘Good-bye.’

‘Drive carefully,’ Luke said politely.

‘You can’t just *make* me go,’ she said wildly. ‘You *brought* me here.’

‘And I am sending you away,’ the doctor said. ‘We won’t forget you, Eleanor. But right now the only important thing for *you* is to forget Hill House and all of us. Good-bye.’

‘Good-bye,’ Mrs Montague said firmly from the steps, and Arthur said, ‘Good-bye, have a good trip.’

Then Eleanor, her hand on the door of the car, stopped and turned. ‘Theo?’ she said inquiringly, and Theodora ran down the steps to her.

‘I thought you weren’t going to say good-bye to me,’ she said. ‘Oh, Nellie, my Nell — be happy; please be happy. Don’t *really* forget me; some day things really *will* be all right again, and you’ll write me letters and I’ll answer and we’ll visit each other and we’ll have fun talking over the crazy things we did and saw and heard in Hill House — oh, Nellie! I thought you weren’t going to say good-bye to me.’

‘Good-bye,’ Eleanor said to her.

‘Nellie,’ Theodora said timidly, and put out a hand to touch Eleanor’s cheek, ‘listen — maybe some day we can meet here again? And have our picnic by the brook? We never had our picnic,' she told the doctor, and he shook his head, looking at Eleanor.

'Good-bye,' Eleanor said to Mrs Montague, 'good-bye, Arthur. Good-bye, Doctor. I hope your book is very successful. Luke,' she said, 'good-bye. And good-bye.'

'Nell,' Theodora said, 'please be careful.'

'Good-bye,' Eleanor said, and slid into the car; it felt unfamiliar and awkward; I am too used already to the comforts of Hill House, she thought, and reminded herself to wave a hand from the car window. 'Good-bye,' she called, wondering if there had ever been another word for her to say, 'good-bye, good-bye.' Clumsily, her hands fumbling, she released the brake and let the car move slowly.

They waved back at her dutifully, standing still, watching her. They will watch me down the drive as far as they can see, she thought; it is only civil for them to look at me until I am out of sight; so now I am going. Journeys end in lovers meeting. But I *won't* go, she thought, and laughed aloud to herself; Hill House is not as easy as *they* are; just by telling me to go away they can't make me leave, not if Hill House means me to stay. 'Go away, Eleanor,' she chanted aloud, 'go away, Eleanor, we don't want you any more, not in *our* Hill House, go away, Eleanor, you can't stay *here*; but I can,' she sang, 'but I can; *they* don't make the rules around *here*. They can't turn me out or shut me out or laugh at me or hide from me; I won't go, and Hill House belongs to *me*.'

With what she perceived as quick cleverness she pressed her foot down hard on the accelerator; they can't run fast enough to catch me this time, she thought, but by now they must be beginning to realise; I wonder who notices first? Luke, almost certainly. I can hear them calling now, she thought, and the little footsteps running through Hill House and the soft sound of the hills pressing closer. I am really doing it, she thought, turning the wheel to send the car directly at the great tree at the curve of the driveway, I am really doing it, I am doing this all by myself, now, at last; this is me, I am really really really doing it by myself.

In the unending, crashing second before the car hurled into the tree she thought clearly, *Why* am I doing this? Why am I doing this? Why don't they stop me?

4

Mrs Sanderson was enormously relieved to hear that Dr Montague and his party had left Hill House; she would have turned them out, she told the family lawyer, if Dr Montague had shown any sign of wanting to stay. Theodora's friend, mollified and contrite, was delighted to see Theodora back so soon; Luke took himself off to Paris, where his aunt fervently hoped he would stay for a while. Dr Montague finally retired from active scholarly pursuits after the cool, almost contemptuous reception of his preliminary article analysing the psychic phenomena of Hill House. Hill House itself, not sane, stood against its hills, holding darkness within; it had stood so for eighty years and might stand for eighty more. Within, its walls continued upright, bricks met neatly, floors were firm, and doors were sensibly shut; silence lay steadily against the wood and stone of Hill House, and whatever walked there, walked alone.

We Have Always Lived in the Castle (1962)

Jackson wrote *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* during a period of declining physical and mental health, only a few years before her death at the premature age of forty-eight. She experienced chronic illness and health problems, such as joint pain, dizziness and acute anxiety that were exacerbated by her heavy smoking, drinking and addiction to amphetamines and tranquilisers. She had struggled with her weight since she was a child — she took amphetamines to try to suppress her appetite — and towards the end of her life, she developed severe agoraphobia becoming increasingly reluctant to leave her house and bedroom.

We Have Always Lived in the Castle centres on the unnerving relationship and dynamic between two sisters, eighteen-year-old Merricat Blackwood and her older sibling Constance, who live in isolation in a large house with their invalid uncle Julian. They are ostracised and abused by their fellow villagers because six years earlier Constance was charged, but acquitted of poisoning and killing four members of her family, including her parents. Merricat occasionally ventures out into the community to obtain supplies while Constance never leaves the grounds of their home due to debilitating agoraphobia. When their cousin Charles arrives at the house, the unhealthy and co-dependent, but fundamentally peaceful and content dynamic between the sisters is threatened, leading to a horrific event.

Jackson and her husband, close to the time of publication

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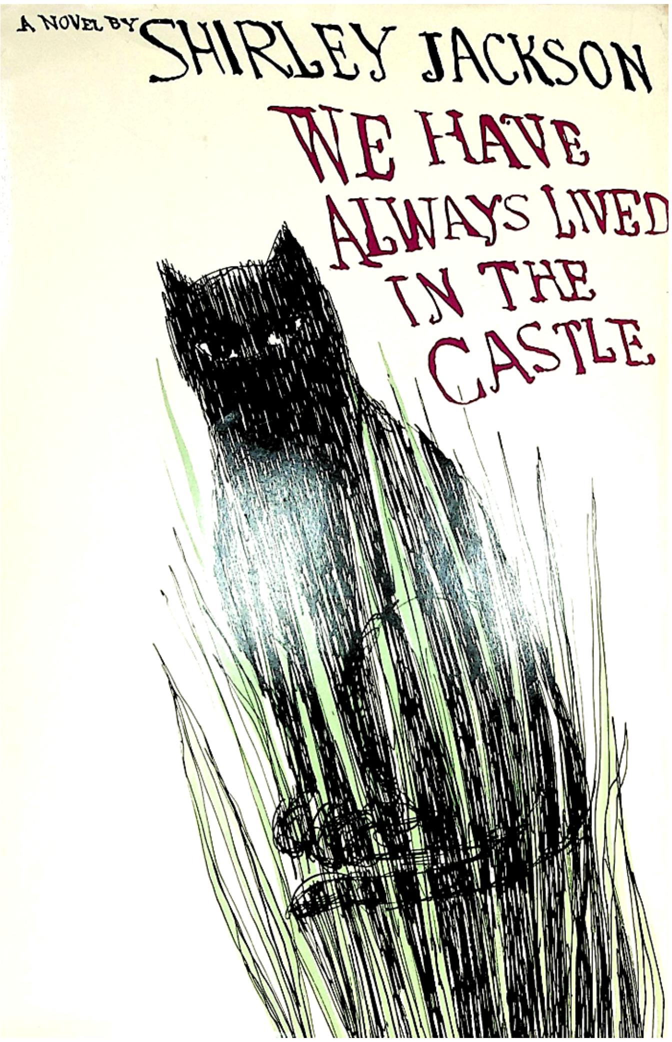

A NOVEL BY SHIRLEY JACKSON
WE HAVE ALWAYS LIVED IN THE CASTLE

The first edition

PART I

MY NAME IS Mary Katherine Blackwood. I am eighteen years old, and I live with my sister Constance. I have often thought that with any luck at all I could have been born a werewolf, because the two middle fingers on both my hands are the same length, but I have had to be content with what I had. I dislike washing myself, and dogs, and noise. I like my sister Constance, and Richard Plantagenet, and Amanita phalloides, the death-cup mushroom. Everyone else in my family is dead.

The last time I glanced at the library books on the kitchen shelf they were more than five months overdue, and I wondered whether I would have chosen differently if I had known that these were the last books, the ones which would stand forever on our kitchen shelf. We rarely moved things; the Blackwood's were never much of a family for restlessness and stirring. We dealt with the small surface transient objects, the books and the flowers and the spoons, but underneath we had always a solid foundation of stable possessions. We always put things back where they belonged. We dusted and swept under tables and chairs and beds and pictures and rugs and lamps, but we left them where they were; the tortoise-shell toilet set on our mother's dressing table was never off place by so much as a fraction of an inch. Blackwood's had always lived in our house, and kept their things in order; as soon as a new Blackwood wife moved in, a place was found for her belongings, and so our house was built up with layers of Blackwood property weighting it, and keeping it steady against the world.

It was on a Friday in late April that I brought the library books into our house. Fridays and Tuesdays were terrible days, because I had to go into the village. Someone had to go to the library, and the grocery; Constance never went past her own garden, and Uncle Julian could not. Therefore it was not pride that took me into the village twice a week, or even stubbornness, but only the simple need for books and food. It may have been pride that brought me into Stella's for a cup of coffee before I started home; I told myself it was pride and would not avoid going into Stella's no matter how much I wanted to be at home, but I knew, too, that Stella would see me pass if I did not go in, and perhaps think I was afraid, and that thought I could not endure.

"Good morning, Mary Katherine," Stella always said, reaching over to wipe the counter with a damp rag, "how are you today?"

"Very well, thank you."

"And Constance Blackwood, is she well?"

"Very well, thank you."

"And how is he?"

"As well as can be expected. Black coffee, please."

If anyone else came in and sat down at the counter I would leave my coffee without seeming hurried, and leave, nodding goodbye to Stella. "Keep well," she always said automatically as I went out.

I chose the library books with care. There were books in our house, of course; our father's study had books covering two walls, but I liked fairy tales and books of history, and Constance liked books about food. Although Uncle Julian never took up a book, he liked to see Constance reading in the evenings while he worked at his papers, and sometimes he turned his head to look at her and nod.

"What are you reading, my dear? A pretty sight, a lady with a book."

"I'm reading something called The Art of Cooking, Uncle Julian."

"Admirable."

We never sat quietly for long, of course, with Uncle Julian in the room, but I do not recall that Constance and I have ever opened the library books which are still on our kitchen shelf. It was a fine April morning when I came out of the library; the sun was shining and the false glorious promises of spring were everywhere, showing oddly through the village grime. I remember that I stood on the library steps holding my books and looking for a minute at the soft hinted green in the branches against the sky and wishing, as I always did, that I could walk home across the sky instead of through the village. From the library steps I could cross the street directly and walk on the other side along to the grocery, but that meant that I must pass the general store and the men sitting in front. In this village the men stayed young and did the gossiping and the women aged with grey evil weariness and stood silently waiting for the men to get up and come home. I could leave the library and walk up the street on this side until I was opposite the grocery and then cross; that was preferable, although it took me past the post office and the Rochester house with the piles of rusted tin and the broken automobiles and the empty gas tins and the old mattresses and plumbing fixtures and wash tubs that the Harler family brought home and — I genuinely believe — loved.

The Rochester house was the loveliest in town and had once had a walnut panelled library and a second floor ballroom and a profusion of roses along the veranda; our mother had been born there and by rights it should have belonged to Constance. I decided as I always did that it would be safer to go past the post office and the Rochester house, although I disliked seeing the house where our mother was born. This side of the street was generally deserted in the morning, since it was shady, and after I went into the grocery I would in any case have to pass the general store to get home, and passing it going and coming was more than I could bear.

Outside the village, on Hill Road and River Road and Old Mountain, people like the Clarke's and the Carrington's had built new lovely homes. They had to come through the village to get to Hill Road and River Road because the main street of the village was also the main highway across the state, but the Clarke children and the Carrington boys went to private schools and the food in the Hill Road kitchens came from the towns and the city; mail was taken from the village post office by car along the River Road and up to Old (Mountain, but the Mountain people mailed their letters in the towns and the River Road people had their hair cut in the city.

I was always puzzled that the people of the village, living in their dirty little houses on the main highway or out on Creek Road, smiled and nodded and waved when the Clarke's and the Carrington's drove by; if Helen Clarke came into Elbert's Grocery to pick up a can of tomato sauce or a pound of coffee her cook had forgotten everyone told her "Good morning," and said the weather was better today. The Clarke's' house is newer but no finer than the Blackwood house. Our father brought home the first piano ever seen in the village. The Carrington's own the paper mill but the Blackwood's own all the land between the highway and the river. The Shepherds of Old Mountain gave the village its town hall, which is white and peaked and set in a green lawn with a cannon in front. There was some talk once of putting in zoning laws in the village and tearing down the shacks on Creek Road and building up the whole village to match the town hall, but no one ever lifted a finger; maybe they thought the Blackwood's might take to attending town meetings if they did. The villagers get their hunting and fishing licenses in the town hall, and once a year the Clarke's and the Carrington's and the Shepherds attend town meeting and solemnly vote to get the Harler junk yard off Main Street and take away the benches in front of the general store, and each year the villagers gleefully outvote them. Past the town hall, bearing to the left, is Blackwood Road, which is the way home. Blackwood Road goes in a great circle around the Blackwood land and along every inch of Blackwood Road is a wire fence built by our father. Not far past the town hall is the big black rock which marks the entrance to the path where I unlock the gate and lock it behind me and go through the woods and am home.

The people of the village have always hated us.

I played a game when I did the shopping. I thought about the children's games where the board is marked into little spaces and each player moves according to a throw of the dice; there were always dangers, like "lose one turn" and "go back four spaces" and "return to start," and little helps, like "advance three spaces" and "take an extra turn." The library was my start and the black rock was my goal. I had to move down one side of Main Street, cross, and then move up the other side until I reached the black rock, when I would win. I began well, with a good safe turn along the empty side of Main Street, and perhaps this would turn out to be one of the very good days; it was like that sometimes, but not often on spring mornings. If it was a very good day I would later make an offering of jewelry out of gratitude.

I walked quickly when I started, taking a deep breath to go on with and not looking around; I had the library books and my shopping bag to carry and I watched my feet moving one after the other; two feet in our mother's old brown shoes. I felt someone watching me from inside the post office — we did not accept mail, and we did not have a telephone; both had become unbearable six years before — but I could bear a quick stare from the office; that was old Miss Dutton, who never did her staring out in the open like other folks, but only looked out between blinds or from behind curtains. I never looked at the Rochester house. I could not bear to think of our mother being born there. I wondered sometimes if the Harler people knew that they lived in a house which should have belonged to Constance; there was always so much noise of crashing tinware in their yard that they could not hear me walking. Perhaps the Harler’s thought that the unending noise drove away demons, or perhaps they were musical and found it agreeable; perhaps the Harler’s lived inside the way they did outside, sitting in old bathtubs and eating their dinner off broken plates set on the skeleton of an old Ford car, rattling cans as they ate, and talking in bellows. A spray of dirt always lay across the sidewalk where the Harler’s lived.

Crossing the street (lose one turn) came next, to get to the grocery directly opposite. I always hesitated, vulnerable and exposed, on the side of the road while the traffic went by. Most Main Street traffic was going through, cars and trucks passing through the village because the highway did, so the drivers hardly glanced at me; I could tell a local car by the quick ugly glance from the driver and I wondered, always, what would happen if I stepped down from the curb onto the road; would there be a quick, almost unintended swerve toward me? Just to scare me, perhaps, just to see me jump? And then the laughter, coming from all sides, from behind the blinds in the post office, from the men in front of the general store, from the women peering out of the grocery doorway, all of them watching and gloating, to see Mary Katherine Blackwood scurrying out of the way of a car. I sometimes lost two or even three turns because I waited so carefully for the road to clear in both directions before I crossed.

In the middle of the street I came out of the shade and into the bright, misleading sunshine of April; by July the surface of the road would be soft in the heat and my feet would stick, making the crossing more perilous (Mary Katherine Blackwood, her foot caught in the tar, cringing as a car bore down on her; go back, all the way, and start over), and the buildings would be uglier. All of the village was of a piece, a time, and a style; it was as though the people needed the ugliness of the village, and fed on it. The houses and the stores seemed to have been set up in contemptuous haste to provide shelter for the drab and the unpleasant, and the Rochester house and the Blackwood house and even the town hall had been brought here perhaps accidentally from some far lovely country where people lived with grace. Perhaps the fine houses had been captured — perhaps as punishment for the Rochester's and the Blackwood's and their secret bad hearts? — and were held prisoner in the village; perhaps their slow rot was a sign of the ugliness of the villagers. The row of stores along Main Street was unchangingly grey. The people who owned the stores lived above them, in a row of second story apartments, and the curtains in the regular line of second story windows were pale and without life; whatever planned to be colorful lost its heart quickly in the village. The blight on the village never came from the Blackwood's; the villagers belonged here and the village was the only proper place for them.

I always thought about rot when I came toward the row of stores; I thought about burning black painful rot that ate away from inside, hurting dreadfully. I wished it on the village.

I had a shopping list for the grocery; Constance made it out for me every Tuesday and Friday before I left home. The people of the village disliked the fact that we always had plenty of money to pay for whatever we wanted; we had taken our money out of the bank, of course, and I knew they talked about the money hidden in our house, as though it were great heaps of golden coins and Constance and Uncle Julian and I sat in the evenings, our library books forgotten, and played with it, running our hands through it and counting and stacking and tumbling it, jeering and mocking behind locked doors. I imagine that there were plenty of rotting hearts in the village coveting our heaps of golden coins but they were cowards and they were afraid of Blackwood’s. When I took my grocery list out of my shopping bag I took out the purse too so that Elbert in the grocery would know that I had brought money and he could not refuse to sell to me. It never mattered who was in the grocery. I was always served at once; Mr Elbert or his pale greedy wife always came right away from wherever they were in the store to get me what I wanted. Sometimes, if their older boy was helping out in school vacation, they hurried to make sure that he was not the one who waited on me and once when a little girl — a child strange to the village, of course — came close to me in the grocery Mrs Elbert pulled her back so roughly that she screamed and then there was a long still minute while everyone waited before Mrs Elbert took a breath and said, “Anything else?” I always stood perfectly straight and stiff when the children came close, because I was afraid of them. I was afraid that they might touch me and the mothers would come at me like a flock of taloned hawks; that was always the picture I had in my mind — birds descending, striking, gashing with razor claws. Today I had a great many things to buy for Constance, and it was a relief to see that there were no children in the store and not many women; take an extra turn, I thought, and said to Mr Elbert, “Good morning.”

He nodded to me; he could not go entirely without greeting me and yet the women in the store were watching. I turned my back to them, but I could feel them standing behind me, holding a can or a half-filled bag of cookies or a head of lettuce, not willing to move until I had gone out through the door again and the wave of talk began and they were swept back into their own lives. Mrs Donell was back there somewhere; I had seen her as I came in, and I wondered as I had before if she came on purpose when she knew I was coming, because she always tried to say something; she was one of the few who spoke.

“A roasting chicken,” I said to Mr Elbert, and across the store his greedy wife opened the refrigerated case and took out a chicken and began to wrap it. “A small leg of lamb,” I said, “my Uncle Julian always fancies a roasted lamb in the first spring days.” I should not have said it, I knew, and a little gasp went around the store like a scream. I could make them run like rabbits, I thought, if I said to them what I really wanted to, but they would only gather again outside and watch for me there. “Onions,” I said politely to Mr Elbert, “coffee, bread, flour. Walnuts,” I said, “and sugar; we are very low on sugar.” Somewhere behind me there was a little horrified laugh, and Mr Elbert glanced past me, briefly, and then to the items he was arranging on the counter. In a minute Mrs Elbert would bring my chicken and my meat, wrapped, and set them down by the other things; I need not turn around until I was ready to go. “Two quarts of milk,” I said. “A half pint of cream, a pound of butter.” The Harrises had stopped delivering dairy goods to us six years ago and I brought milk and butter home from the grocery now. “And a dozen eggs.” Constance had forgotten to put eggs on the list, but there had been only two at home. “A box of peanut brittle,” I said; Uncle Julian would clatter and crunch over his papers tonight, and go to bed sticky.

“The Blackwood’s always did set a fine table.” That was Mrs Donell, speaking clearly from somewhere behind me, and someone giggled and someone else said “Shh.” I never turned; it was enough to feel them all there in back of me without looking into their flat grey faces with the hating eyes. I wish you were all dead, I thought, and longed to say it out loud. Constance said, “Never let them see that you care,” and “If you pay any attention they’ll only get worse,” and probably it was true, but I wished they were dead. I would have liked to come into the grocery some morning and see them all, even the Elbert’s and the children, lying there crying with the pain and dying. I would then help myself to groceries, I thought, stepping over their bodies, taking whatever I fancied from the shelves, and go home, with perhaps a kick for Mrs Donell while she lay there. I was never sorry when I had thoughts like this; I only wished they would come true. “It’s wrong to hate them,” Constance said, “it only weakens you,” but I hated them anyway, and wondered why it had been worth while creating them in the first place.

Mr Elbert put all my groceries together on the counter and waited, looking past me into the distance. “That’s all I want today,” I told him, and without looking at me he wrote the prices on a slip and added, then passed the slip to me so I could make sure he had not cheated me. I always made a point of checking his figures carefully, although he never made a mistake; there were not many things I could do to get back at them, but I did what I could. The groceries filled my shopping bag and another bag besides, but there was no way of getting them home except by carrying them. No one would ever offer to help me, of course, even if I would let them.

Lose two turns. With my library books and my groceries, going slowly, I had to walk down the sidewalk past the general store and into Stella’s. I stopped in the doorway of the grocery, feeling around inside myself for some thought to make me safe. Behind me the little stirrings and coughings began. They were getting ready to talk again, and across the width of the store the Elbert’s were probably rolling their eyes at each other in relief. I froze my face hard. Today I was going to think about taking our lunch out into the garden, and while I kept my eyes open just enough to see where I was walking — our mother’s brown shoes going up and down — in my mind I was setting the table with a green cloth and bringing out yellow dishes and strawberries in a white bowl. Yellow dishes, I thought, feeling the eyes of the men looking at me as I went by, and Uncle Julian shall have a nice soft egg with toast broken into it, and I will remember to ask Constance to put a shawl across his shoulders because it is still very early spring. Without looking I could see the grinning and the gesturing; I wished they were all dead and I was walking on their bodies. They rarely spoke directly to me, but only to each other. “That’s one of the Blackwood girls,” I heard one of them say in a high mocking voice, “one of the Blackwood girls from Blackwood Farm.” “Too bad about the Blackwood’s,” someone else said, just loud enough, “too bad about those poor girls.” “Nice farm out there,” they said, “nice land to farm. Man could get rich, farming the Blackwood land. If he had a million years and three heads, and didn’t care what grew, a man could get rich. Keep their land pretty well locked up, the Blackwood’s do.” “Man could get rich.” “Too bad about the Blackwood girls.” “Never can tell what’ll grow on Blackwood land.”

I am walking on their bodies, I thought, we are having lunch in the garden and Uncle Julian is wearing his shawl. I always held my groceries carefully along here, because one terrible morning I had dropped the shopping bag and the eggs broke and the milk spilled and I gathered up what I could while they shouted, telling myself that whatever I did I would not run away, shovelling cans and boxes and spilled sugar wildly back into the shopping bag, telling myself not to run away.

In front of Stella’s there was a crack in the sidewalk that looked like a finger pointing; the crack had always been there. Other landmarks, like the handprint Johnny Harris made in the concrete foundation of the town hall and the Mueller boy’s initials on the library porch, had been put in in times that I remembered; I was in the third grade at the school when the town hall was built. But the crack in the sidewalk in front of Stella’s had always been there, just as Stella’s had always been there. I remember roller-skating across the crack, and being careful not to step on it or it would break our mother’s back, and riding a bicycle past here with my hair flying behind; the villagers had not openly disliked us then although our father said they were trash. Our mother told me once that the crack was here when she was a girl in the Rochester house, so it must have been here when she married our father and went to live on Blackwood Farm, and I suppose the crack was there, like a finger pointing, from the time when the village was first put together out of old grey wood and the ugly people with their evil faces were brought from some impossible place and set down in the houses to live.

Stella bought the coffee urn and put in the marble counter with the insurance money when her husband died, but otherwise there had been no change in Stella’s since I could remember; Constance and I had come in here to spend pennies after school and every afternoon we picked up the newspaper to take home for our father to read in the evening; we no longer bought newspapers, but Stella still sold them, along with magazines and penny candy and grey postcards of the town hall.

“Good morning, Mary Katherine,” Stella said when I sat down at the counter and put my groceries on the floor; I sometimes thought when I wished all the village people dead that I might spare Stella because she was the closest to kind that any of them could be, and the only one who managed to keep hold of any color at all. She was round and pink and when she put on a bright print dress it stayed looking bright for a little while before it merged into the dirty grey of the rest. “How are you today?” she asked.

“Very well, thank you.”

“And Constance Blackwood, is she well?”

“Very well, thank you.”

“And how is he?”

“As well as can be expected. Black coffee, please.” I really preferred sugar and cream in my coffee, because it is such bitter stuff, but since I only came here out of pride I needed to accept only the barest minimum for token.

If anyone came into Stella’s while I was there I got up and left quietly, but some days I had bad luck. This morning she had only set my coffee down on the counter when there was a shadow against the doorway, and Stella looked up, and said, “Good morning, Jim.” She went down to the other end of the counter and waited, expecting him to sit down there so I could leave without being noticed, but it was Jim Donell and I knew at once that today I had bad luck. Some of the people in the village had real faces that I knew and could hate individually; Jim Donell and his wife were among these, because they were deliberate instead of just hating dully and from habit like the others. Most people would have stayed down at the end of the counter where Stella waited, but Jim Donell came right to the end where I was sitting and took the stool next to me, as close to me as he could come because, I knew, he wanted this morning to be bad luck for me.

“They tell me,” he said, swinging to sit sideways on his stool and look at me directly, “they tell me you’re moving away.”

I wished he would not sit so close to me; Stella came toward us on the inside of the counter and I wished she would ask him to move so I could get up and leave without having to struggle around him. “They tell me you’re moving away,” he said solemnly. “No,” I said, because he was waiting. “Funny,” he said, looking from me to Stella and then back. “I could have swore someone told me you’d be going soon.” “No,” I said.

“Coffee, Jim?” Stella asked.

“Who do you think would of started a story like that, Stella? Who do you think would want to tell me they’re moving away when they’re not doing any such thing?” Stella shook her head at him, but she was trying not to smile. I saw that my hands were tearing at the paper napkin in my lap, ripping off a little corner, and I forced my hands to be still and made a rule for myself: Whenever I saw a tiny scrap of paper I was to remember to be kinder to Uncle Julian.

“Can’t ever tell how gossip gets around,” Jim Donnell said. Perhaps someday soon Jim Donnell would die; perhaps there was already a rot growing inside him that was going to kill him. “Did you ever hear anything like the gossip in this town?” he asked Stella.

“Leave her alone, Jim,” Stella said.

Uncle Julian was an old man and he was dying, dying regrettably, more surely than Jim Donell and Stella and anyone else. The poor old Uncle Julian was dying and I made a firm rule to be kinder to him. We would have a picnic lunch on the lawn. Constance would bring his shawl and put it over his shoulders, and I would lie on the grass.

“I’m not bothering anybody, Stell. Am I bothering anybody? I’m just asking Miss Mary Katherine Blackwood here how it happens everyone in town is saying she and her big sister are going to be leaving us soon. Moving away. Going somewheres else to live.” He stirred his coffee; from the corner of my eye I could see the spoon going around and around and around, and I wanted to laugh. There was something so simple and silly about the spoon going around while Jim Donell talked; I wondered if he would stop talking if I reached out and took hold of the spoon. Very likely he would, I told myself wisely, very likely he would throw the coffee in my face.

“Going somewheres else,” he said sadly.

“Cut it out,” Stella said.

I would listen more carefully when Uncle Julian told his story. I was already bringing peanut brittle; that was good.

"Here I was all upset," Jim Donell said, "thinking the town would be losing one of its fine old families. That would be really too bad." He swung the other way around on the stool because someone else was coming through the doorway; I was looking at my hands in my lap and of course would not turn around to see who was coming, but then Jim Donell said "Joe," and I knew it was Dunham, the carpenter; "Joe, you ever hear anything like this? Here all over town they're saying that the Blackwood's are moving away, and now Miss Mary Katherine Blackwood sits right here and speaks up and tells me they're not."

There was a little silence. I knew that Dunham was scowling, looking at Jim Donell and at Stella and at me, thinking over what he had heard, sorting out the words and deciding what each one meant. "That so?" he said at last.

"Listen, you two," Stella said, but Jim Donell went right on, talking with his back to me, and his legs stretched out so I could not get past him and outside. "I was saying to people only this morning it's too bad when the old families go. Although you could rightly say a good number of the Blackwood's are gone already." He laughed, and slapped the counter with his hand. "Gone already," he said again. The spoon in his cup was still, but he was talking on. "A village loses a lot of style when the fine old people go. Anyone would think," he said slowly, "that they wasn't wanted."

"That's right," Dunham said, and he laughed.

"The way they live up in their fine old private estate, with their fences and their private path and their stylish way of living." He always went on until he was tired. When Jim Donell thought of something to say he said it as often and in as many ways as possible, perhaps because he had very few ideas and had to wring each one dry. Besides, each time he repeated himself he thought it was funnier; I knew he might go on like this until he was really sure that no one was listening any more, and I made a rule for myself: Never think anything more than once, and I put my hands quietly in my lap. I am living on the moon, I told myself, I have a little house all by myself on the moon.

"Well," Jim Donell said; he smelled, too. "I can always tell people I used to know the Blackwood's. They never did anything to me that I can remember, always perfectly polite to me. Not," he said, and laughed, "that I ever got invited to take my dinner with them, nothing like that."

"That's enough right there," Stella said, and her voice was sharp. "You go pick on someone else, Jim Donell."

"Was I picking on anyone? You think I wanted to be asked to dinner? You think I'm crazy?"

"Me," Dunham said, "I can always tell people I fixed their broken step once and never got paid for it." That was true. Constance had sent me out to tell him that we wouldn't pay carpenter's prices for a raw board nailed crookedly across the step when what he was supposed to do was build it trim and new. When I went out and told him we wouldn't pay he grinned at me and spat, and picked up his hammer and pried the board loose and threw it on the ground. "Do it yourself," he said to me, and got into his truck and drove away. "Never did get paid for it," he said now.

"That must of been an oversight, Joe. You just go right up and speak to Miss Constance Blackwood and she'll see you get what's coming to you. Just if you get invited to dinner, Joe, you just be sure and say no thank you to Miss Blackwood."

Dunham laughed. "Not me," he said. "I fixed their step for them and never did get paid for it."

"Funny," Jim Donell said, "them getting the house fixed up and all, and planning to move away all the time."

"Mary Katherine," Stella said, coming down inside the counter to where I was sitting, "you go along home. Just get up off that stool and go along home. There won't be any peace around here until you go."

"Now, that's the truth," Jim Donell said. Stella looked at him, and he moved his legs and let me pass. "You just say the word, Miss Mary Katherine, and we'll all come out and help you pack. Just you say the word, Merricat."

"And you can't tell your sister from me –" Dunham started to say, but I hurried, and by the time I got outside all I could hear was the laughter, the two of them and Stella.

I liked my house on the moon, and I put a fireplace in it and a garden outside (what would flourish, growing on the moon? I must ask Constance) and I was going to have lunch outside in my garden on the moon. Things on the moon were very bright, and odd colors; my little house would be blue. I watched my small brown feet go in and out, and let the shopping bag swing a little by my side; I had been to Stella's and now I needed only to pass the town hall, which would be empty except for the people who made out dog licenses and the people who counted traffic fines from the drivers who followed the highway into the village and on through, and the people who sent out notices about water and sewage and garbage and forbade other people to burn leaves or to fish; these would all be buried somewhere deep inside the town hall, working busily together; I had nothing to fear from them unless I fished out of season. I thought of catching scarlet fish in the rivers on the moon and saw that the Harris boys were in their front yard, clamoring and quarrelling with half a dozen other boys. I had not been able to see them until I came past the corner by the town hall, and I could still have turned back and gone the other way, up the main highway to the creek, and then across the creek and home along the other half of the path to our house, but it was late, and I had the groceries, and the creek was nasty to wade in our mother's brown shoes, and I thought, I am living on the moon, and I walked quickly. They saw me at once, and I thought of them rotting away and curling in pain and crying out loud; I wanted them doubled up and crying on the ground in front of me.

"Merricat," they called, "Merricat, Merricat," and moved all together to stand in a line by the fence.

I wondered if their parents taught them, Jim Donell and Dunham and dirty Harris leading regular drills of their children, teaching them with loving care, making sure they pitched their voices right; how else could so many children learn so thoroughly?

Merricat, said Connie, would you like a cup of tea?

Oh no, said Merricat, you'll poison me.

Merricat, said Connie, would you like to go to sleep?

Down in the boneyard ten feet deep!

I was pretending that I did not speak their language; on the moon we spoke a soft, liquid tongue, and sang in the starlight, looking down on the dead dried world; I was almost halfway past the fence.

"Merricat, Merricat!"

"Where's old Connie — home cooking dinner?"

"Would you like a cup of tea?"

It was strange to be inside myself, walking steadily and rigidly past the fence, putting my feet down strongly but without haste that they might have noticed, to be inside and know that they were looking at me; I was hiding very far inside but I could hear them and see them still from one corner of my eye. I wished they were all lying there dead on the ground.

"Down in the boneyard ten feet deep."

"Merricat!"

Once when I was going past, the Harris boys' mother came out onto the porch, perhaps to see what they were all yelling so about. She stood there for a minute watching and listening and I stopped and looked at her, looking into her flat dull eyes and knowing I must not speak to her and knowing I would. "Can't you make them stop?" I asked her that day, wondering if there was anything in this woman I could speak to, if she had ever run joyfully over grass, or had watched flowers, or known delight or love. "Can't you make them stop?"

"Kids," she said, not changing her voice or her look or her air of dull enjoyment, "don't call the lady names."

'Yes, ma," one of the boys said soberly. "Don't go near no fence. Don't call no lady names." And I walked on, while they shrieked and shouted and the woman stood on the porch and laughed.

Merricat, said Connie, would you like a cup of tea?

Oh, no, said Merricat, you'll poison me.

Their tongues will burn, I thought, as though they had eaten fire. Their throats will burn when the words come out, and in their bellies they will feel a torment hotter than a thousand fires.

"Goodbye, Merricat," they called as I went by the end of the fence, "don't hurry back."

"Goodbye, Merricat, give our love to Connie."

"Goodbye, Merricat," but I was at the black rock and there was the gate to our path.

2

I had to put down the shopping bag to open the lock on the gate; it was a simple padlock and any child could have broken it, but on the gate was a sign saying private no trespassing and no one could go past that. Our father had put up the signs and the gates and the locks when he closed off the path; before, everyone used the path as a short-cut from the village to the highway four-corners where the bus stopped; it saved them perhaps a quarter of a mile to use our path and walk past our front door. Our mother disliked the sight of anyone who wanted to walking past our front door, and when our father brought her to live in the Blackwood house, one of the first things he had to do was close off the path and fence in the entire Blackwood property, from the highway to the creek. There was another gate at the other end of the path, although I rarely went that way, and that gate too had a padlock and a sign saying private no trespassing. "The highway's built for common people," our mother said, "and my front door is private."

Anyone who came to see us, properly invited, came up the main drive which led straight from the gateposts on the highway up to our front door. When I was small I used to lie in my bedroom at the back of the house and imagine the driveway and the path as a crossroad meeting before our front door, and up and down the driveway went the good people, the clean and rich ones dressed in satin and lace, who came rightfully to visit, and back and forth along the path, sneaking and weaving and sidestepping servilely, went the people from the village. They can't get in, I used to tell myself over and over, lying in my dark room with the trees patterned in shadow on the ceiling, they can't ever get in any more; the path is closed forever. Sometimes I stood inside the fence, hidden by the bushes, and watched people walking on the highway to get from the village to the four corners. As far as I knew, no one from the village had ever tried to use the path since our father locked the gates.

When I had moved the shopping bag inside, I carefully locked the gate again, and tested the padlock to make sure it held. Once the padlock was securely fastened behind me I was safe. The path was dark, because once our father had given up any idea of putting his land to profitable use he had let the trees and bushes and small flowers grow as they chose, and except for one great meadow and the gardens our land was heavily wooded, and no one knew its secret ways but me. When I went along the path, going easily now because I was home, I knew each step and every turn. Constance could put names to all the growing things, but I was content to know them by their way and place of growing, and their unfailing offers of refuge. The only prints on the path were my own, going in and out to the village. Past the turn I might find a mark of Constance's foot, because she sometimes came that far to wait for me, but most of Constance's prints were in the garden and in the house. Today she had come to the end of the garden, and I saw her as soon as I came around the turn; she was standing with the house behind her, in the sunlight, and I ran to meet her.

"Merricat," she said, smiling at me, "look how far I came today."

"It's too far," I said. "First thing I know you'll be following me into the village."

"I might, at that," she said.

Even though I knew she was teasing me I was chilled, but I laughed. "You wouldn't like it much," I told her. "Here, lazy, take some of these packages. Where's my cat?"

"He went off chasing butterflies because you were late. Did you remember eggs? I forgot to tell you."

"Of course. Let's have lunch on the lawn."

When I was small I thought Constance was a fairy princess. I used to try to draw her picture, with long golden hair and eyes as blue as the crayon could make them, and a bright pink spot on either cheek; the pictures always surprised me, because she did look like that; even at the worst time she was pink and white and golden, and nothing had ever seemed to dim the brightness of her. She was the most precious person in my world, always. I followed her across the soft grass, past the flowers she tended, into our house, and Jonas, my cat, came out of the flowers and followed me.

Constance waited inside the tall front door while I came up the steps behind her, and then I put my packages down on the table in the hall and locked the door. We would not use it again until afternoon, because almost all of our life was lived toward the back of the house, on the lawn and the garden where no one else ever came. We left the front of the house turned toward the highway and the village, and went our own ways behind its stern, unwelcoming face. Although we kept the house well, the rooms we used together were the back ones, the kitchen and the back bedrooms and the little warm room off the kitchen where Uncle Julian lived; outside was Constance's chestnut tree and the wide, lovely reach of lawn and Constance's flowers and then, beyond, the vegetable garden Constance tended and, past that, the trees which shaded the creek. When we sat on the back lawn no one could see us from anywhere.

I remembered that I was to be kinder to Uncle Julian when I saw him sitting at his great old desk in the kitchen corner playing with his papers. "Will you let Uncle Julian have peanut brittle?" I asked Constance.

"After his lunch," Constance said. She took the groceries carefully from the bags; food of any kind was precious to Constance, and she always touched foodstuffs with quiet respect. I was not allowed to help; I was not allowed to prepare food, nor was I allowed to gather mushrooms, although I sometimes carried vegetables in from the garden, or apples from the old trees. "We'll have muffins," Constance said, almost singing because she was sorting and putting away the food. "Uncle Julian will have an egg, done soft and buttery, and a muffin and a little pudding."

“Pap,” said Uncle Julian.

“Merricat will have something lean and rich and salty.”

“Jonas will catch me a mouse,” I said to my cat on my knee.

“I’m always so happy when you come home from the village,” Constance said; she stopped to look and smile at me. “Partly because you bring home food, of course. But partly because I miss you.”

“I’m always happy to get home from the village,” I told her.

“Was it very bad?” She touched my cheek quickly with one finger.

“You don’t want to know about it.”

“Someday I’ll go.” It was the second time she had spoken of going outside, and I was chilled.

“Constance,” Uncle Julian said. He lifted a small scrap of paper from his desk and studied it, frowning. “I do not seem to have any information on whether your father took his cigar in the garden as usual that morning.”

“I’m sure he did,” Constance said. “That cat’s been fishing in the creek,” she told me. “He came in all mud.” She folded the grocery bag and put it with the others in the drawer, and set the library books on the shelf where they were going to stay forever. Jonas and I were expected to stay in our corner, out of the way, while Constance worked in the kitchen, and it was a joy to watch her, moving beautifully in the sunlight, touching foods so softly. “It’s Helen Clarke’s day,” I said. “Are you frightened?” She turned to smile at me. “Not a bit,” she said. “I’m getting better all the time, I think. And today I’m going to make little rum cakes.”

“And Helen Clarke will scream and gobble them.”

Even now, Constance and I still saw some small society, visiting acquaintances who drove up the driveway to call. Helen Clarke took her tea with us on Fridays, and Mrs Shepherd or Mrs Rice or old Mrs Crowley stopped by occasionally on a Sunday after church to tell us we would have enjoyed the sermon. They came dutifully, although we never returned their calls, and stayed a proper few minutes and sometimes brought flowers from their gardens, or books, or a song that Constance might care to try over on her harp; they spoke politely and with little runs of laughter, and never failed to invite us to their houses although they knew we would never come. They were civil to Uncle Julian, and patient with his talk, they offered to take us for drives in their cars, they referred to themselves as our friends. Constance and I always spoke well of them to each other, because they believed that their visits brought us pleasure. They never walked on the path. If Constance offered them a cutting from a rose bush, or invited them to see a happy new arrangement of colors, they went into the garden, but they never offered to step beyond their defined areas; they walked along the garden and got into their cars by the front door and drove away down the driveway and out through the big gates. Several times Mr and Mrs Carrington had come to see how we were getting along, because Mr Carrington had been a very good friend of our father's. They never came inside or took any refreshment, but they drove to the front steps and sat in their car and talked for a few minutes. "How are you getting along?" they always asked, looking from Constance to me and back; "how are you managing all by yourselves? Is there anything you need, anything we can do? How are you getting along?" Constance always invited them in, because we had been brought up to believe that it was discourteous to keep guests talking outside, but the Carrington's never came into the house. "I wonder," I said, thinking about them, "whether the Carrington's would bring me a horse if I asked them. I could ride it in the long meadow."

Constance turned and looked at me for a minute, frowning a little. "You will not ask them," she said at last. "We do not ask from anyone. Remember that."

“I was teasing,” I said, and she smiled again. “I really only want a winged horse, anyway. We could fly you to the moon and back, my horse and I.”

“I remember when you used to want a griffin,” she said. “Now, Miss Idleness, run out and set the table.”

“They quarrelled hatefully that last night,” Uncle Julian said. “ ‘I won’t have it,’ she said, ‘I won’t stand for it, John Blackwood,’ and ‘We have no choice,’ he said. I listened at the door, of course, but I came too late to hear what they quarrelled about; I suppose it was money.”

“They didn’t often quarrel,” Constance said.

“They were almost invariably civil to one another, Niece, if that is what you mean by not quarrelling; a most unsatisfactory example for the rest of us. My wife and I preferred to shout.”

“It hardly seems like six years, sometimes,” Constance said. I took the yellow tablecloth and went outside to the lawn to start the table; behind me I heard her saying to Uncle Julian, “Sometimes I feel I would give anything to have them all back again.” When I was a child I used to believe that someday I would grow up and be tall enough to touch the tops of the windows in our mother’s drawing room. They were summer windows, because the house was really intended to be only a summer house and our father had only put in a heating system because there was no other house for our family to move to in the winters; by rights we should have had the Rochester house in the village, but that was long lost to us. The windows in the drawing room of our house reached from the floor to the ceiling, and I could never touch the top; our mother used to tell visitors that the light blue silk drapes on the windows had been made up fourteen feet long. There were two tall windows in the drawing room and two tall windows in the dining room across the hall, and from the outside they looked narrow and thin and gave the house a gaunt high look. Inside, however, the drawing room was lovely. Our mother had brought golden-legged chairs from the Rochester house, and her harp was here, and the room shone in reflections from mirrors and sparkling glass. Constance and I only used the room when Helen Clarke came for tea, but we kept it perfectly. Constance stood on a stepladder to wash the tops of the windows, and we dusted the Dresden figurines on the mantel, and with a cloth on the end of a broom I went around the wedding-cake trim at the tops of the walls, staring up into the white fruit and leaves, brushing away at cupids and ribbon knots, dizzy always from looking up and walking backward, and laughing at Constance when she caught me. We polished the floors and mended tiny tears in the rose brocade on the sofas and chairs. There was a golden valance over each high window, and golden scrollwork around the fireplace, and our mother's portrait hung in the drawing room; "I cannot bear to see my lovely room untidy," our mother used to say, and so Constance and I had never been allowed in here, but now we kept it shining and silky.

Our mother had always served tea to her friends from a low table at one side of the fireplace, so that was where Constance always set her table. She sat on the rose sofa with our mother's portrait looking down on her, and I sat in my small chair in the corner and watched. I was allowed to carry cups and saucers and pass sandwiches and cakes, but not to pour tea. I disliked eating anything while people were looking at me, so I had my tea afterwards, in the kitchen. That day, which was the last time Helen Clarke ever came for tea, Constance had set the table as usual, with the lovely thin rose colored cups our mother had always used, and two silver dishes, one with small sandwiches and one with the very special rum cakes; two rum cakes were waiting for me in the kitchen, in case Helen Clarke ate all of these. Constance sat quietly on the sofa; she never fidgeted, and her hands were neatly in her lap. I waited by the window, watching for Helen Clarke, who was always precisely on time. “Are you frightened?” I asked Constance once, and she said, “No, not at all.” Without turning I could hear from her voice that she was quiet.

I saw the car turn into the driveway and then saw that there were two people in it instead of one; “Constance,” I said, “she’s brought someone else.”

Constance was still for a minute, and then she said quite firmly, “I think it will be all right.”

I turned to look at her, and she was quiet. “I’ll send them away,” I said. “She knows better than this.”

“No,” Constance said. “I really think it will be all right. You watch me.”

“But I won’t have you frightened.”

“Sooner or later,” she said, “sooner or later I will have to take a first step.”

I was chilled. “I want to send them away.”

“No,” Constance said. “Absolutely not.”

The car stopped in front of the house, and I went into the hall to open the front door, which I had unlocked earlier because it was not courteous to unlock the door in a guest’s face. When I came onto the porch I saw that it was not quite as bad as I had expected; it was not a stranger Helen Clarke had with her, but little Mrs Wright, who had come once before and been more frightened than anyone else. She would not be too much for Constance, but Helen Clarke ought not to have brought her without telling me.

“Good afternoon, Mary Katherine,” Helen Clarke said, coming around the car and to the steps, “isn’t this a lovely spring day? How is dear Constance? I brought Lucille.” She was going to handle it brazenly, as though people brought almost-strangers every day to see Constance, and I disliked having to smile at her. “You re-member Lucille Wright?” she asked me, and poor little Mrs Wright said in a small voice that she had so wanted to come again. I held the front door open and they came into the hall. They had not worn coats because it was such a fine day, but Helen Clarke had the common sense to delay a minute anyway; “Tell dear Constance we’ve come,” she said to me, and I knew she was giving me time to tell Constance who was here, so I slipped into the drawing room, where Constance sat quietly, and said, “It’s Mrs Wright, the frightened one.”

Constance smiled. “Kind of a weak first step,” she said. “It’s going to be fine, Merricat.”

In the hall Helen Clarke was showing off the staircase to Mrs Wright, telling the familiar story about the carving and the wood brought from Italy; when I came out of the drawing room she glanced at me and then said, “This staircase is one of the wonders of the county, Mary Katherine. Shame to keep it hidden from the world. Lucille?” They moved into the drawing room.

PART II

Constance was perfectly composed. She rose and smiled and said she was glad to see them. Because Helen Clarke was ungraceful by nature, she managed to make the simple act of moving into a room and sitting down a complex ballet for three people; before Constance had quite finished speaking Helen Clarke jostled Mrs Wright and sent Mrs Wright sideways like a careening croquet ball off into the far corner of the room where she sat abruptly and clearly without intention upon a small and uncomfortable chair. Helen Clarke made for the sofa where Constance sat, nearly upsetting the tea table, and although there were enough chairs in the room and another sofa, she sat finally uncomfortably close to Constance, who detested having anyone near her but me. “Now,” Helen Clarke said, spreading, “it’s good to see you again.”

“So kind of you to have us,” Airs. Wright said, leaning forward. “Such a lovely staircase.”

“You look well, Constance. Have you been working in the garden?”

“I couldn’t help it, on a day like this.” Constance laughed; she was doing very well. “It’s so exciting,” she said across to Mrs Wright. “Perhaps you’re a gardener, too? These first bright days are so exciting for a gardener.”

She was talking a little too much and a little too fast, but no one noticed it except me.

“I do love a garden,” Mrs Wright said in a little burst. “I do so love a garden.”

“How is Julian?” Helen Clarke asked before Mrs Wright had quite finished speaking. “How is old Julian?”

“Very well, thank you. He is expecting to join us for a cup of tea this afternoon.”

“Have you met Julian Blackwood?” Helen Clarke asked Mrs Wright, and Mrs Wright, shaking her head, began, “I would love to meet him, of course; I have heard so much –” and stopped.

“He’s a touch... eccentric,” Helen Clarke said, smiling at Constance as though it had been a secret until now. I was thinking that if eccentric meant, as the dictionary said it did, deviating from regularity, it was Helen Clarke who was far more eccentric than Uncle Julian, with her awkward movements and her unexpected questions, and her bringing strangers here to tea; Uncle Julian lived smoothly, in a perfectly planned pattern, rounded and sleek. She ought not to call people things they’re not, I thought, remembering that I was to be kinder to Uncle Julian.

“Constance, you’ve always been one of my closest friends,” she was saving now, and I wondered at her; she really could not see how Constance withdrew from such words. “I’m going to give you just a word of advice, and remember, it comes from a friend.”

I must have known what she was going to say, because I was chilled; all this day had been building up to what Helen Clarke was going to say right now. I sat low in my chair and looked hard at Constance, wanting her to get up and run away, wanting her not to hear what was just about to be said, but Helen Clarke went on, “It’s spring, you’re young, you’re lovely, you have a right to be happy. Come back into the world.”

Once, even a month ago when it was still winter, words like that would have made Constance draw back and run away; now, I saw that she was listening and smiling, although she shook her head.

“You’ve done penance long enough,” Helen Clarke said.

“I would so like to give a little luncheon –” Mrs Wright began.

"You've forgotten the milk; I'll get it." I stood up and spoke directly to Constance and she looked around at me, almost surprised.

"Thank you, dear," she said.

I went out of the drawing room and into the hall and started toward the kitchen; this morning the kitchen had been bright and happy and now, chilled, I saw that it was dreary. Constance had looked as though suddenly, after all this time of refusing and denying, she had come to see that it might be possible, after all, to go outside. I realized now that this was the third time in one day that the subject had been touched, and three times makes it real. I could not breathe; I was tied with wire, and my head was huge and going to explode; I ran to the back door and opened it to breathe. I wanted to run; if I could have run to the end of our land and back I would have been all right, but Constance was alone with them in the drawing room and I had to hurry back. I had to content myself with smashing the milk pitcher which waited on the table; it had been our mother's and I left the pieces on the floor so Constance would see them. I took down the second-best milk pitcher, which did not match the cups; I was allowed to pour milk, so I filled it and took it to the drawing room.

"– do with Mary Katherine?" Constance was saying, and then she turned and smiled at me in the doorway. "Thank you, dear," she said, and glanced at the milk pitcher and at me. "Thank you," she said again, and I put the pitcher down on the tray.

"Not too much at first," Helen Clarke said. "That would look odd, I grant you. But a call or two on old friends, perhaps a day in the city shopping — no one would recognize you in the city, you know."

"A little luncheon?" Mrs Wright said hopefully.

"I'll have to think." Constance made a little, laughing, bewildered gesture, and Helen Clarke nodded.

“You’ll need some clothes,” she said.

I came from my place in the corner to take a cup of tea from Constance and carry it over to Mrs Wright, whose hand trembled when she took it. “Thank you, my dear,” she said. I could see the tea trembling in the cup; it was only her second visit here, after all.

“Sugar?” I asked her; I couldn’t help it, and besides, it was polite.

“Oh, no,” she said. “No, thank you. No sugar.”

I thought, looking at her, that she had dressed to come here today; Constance and I never wore black but Mrs Wright had perhaps thought it was appropriate, and today she wore a plain black dress with a necklace of pearls. She had worn black the other time, too, I recalled; always in good taste, I thought, except in our mother’s drawing room. I went back to Constance and took up the plate of rum cakes and brought them to Mrs Wright; that was not kind either, and she should have had the sandwiches first, but I wanted her to be unhappy, dressed in black in our mother’s drawing room. “My sister made these this morning,” I said.

“Thank you,” she said. Her hand hesitated over the plate and then she took a rum cake and set it carefully on the edge of her saucer. I thought that Mrs Wright was being almost hysterically polite, and I said, “Do take two. Everything my sister cooks is delicious.”

“No,” she said. “Oh, no. Thank you.”

Helen Clarke was eating sandwiches, reaching down past Constance to take one after another. She wouldn’t behave like this anywhere else, I thought, only here. She never cares what Constance thinks or I think of her manners; she only supposes we are so very glad to see her. Go away, I told her in my mind. Go away, go away. I wondered if Helen Clarke saved particular costumes for her visits to our house. “This,” I could imagine her saying, turning out her closet, “no sense in throwing this away, I can keep it for visiting dear Constance.” I began dressing Helen Clarke in my mind, putting her in a bathing suit on a snow bank, setting her high in the hard branches of a tree in a dress of flimsy pink ruffles that caught and pulled and tore; she was tangled in the tree and screaming and I almost laughed.

“Why not ask some people here?” Helen Clarke was saying to Constance. “A few old friends — there are many people who have wanted to keep in touch with you, Constance dear — a few old friends some evening. For dinner? No,” she said, “perhaps not for dinner. Perhaps not, not at first.”

“I myself –” Mrs Wright began again; she had set her cup of tea and the little rum cake carefully on the table next to her.

“Although why not for dinner?” Helen Clarke said. “After all, you have to take the plunge sometime.”

I was going to have to say something. Constance was not looking at me, but only at Helen Clarke. “Why not invite some good people from the village?” I asked loudly.

“Good heavens, Mary Katherine,” Helen Clarke said. “You really startled me.” She laughed. “I don’t recall that the Blackwood’s ever mingled socially with the villagers,” she said.

“They hate us,” I said.

“I don’t listen to their gossip, and I hope you don’t. And, Mary Katherine, you know as well as I do that nine tenths of that feeling is nothing but your imagination, and if you’d go halfway to be friendly there’d never be a word said against you. Good heavens. I grant you there might have been a little feeling once, but on your side it’s just been exaggerated out of all proportion.”

“People will gossip,” Mrs Wright said reassuringly. “I’ve been saying right along that I was a close friend of the Blackwood’s and not the least bit ashamed of it, either. You want to come to people of your own kind, Constance. They don’t talk about us.”

I wished they would be more amusing; I thought that now Constance was looking a little tired. If they would leave soon I would brush Constance’s hair until she fell asleep.

“Uncle Julian is coming,” I said to Constance. I could hear the soft sound of the wheel chair in the hall and I got up to open the door.

Helen Clarke said, “Do you suppose that people would really be afraid to visit here?” and Uncle Julian stopped in the doorway. He had put on his dandyish tie for company at tea, and washed his face until it was pink. “Afraid?” he said. “To visit here?” He bowed to Mrs Wright from his chair and then to Helen Clarke. “Madam,” he said, and “Madam.” I knew that he could not remember either of their names, or whether he had ever seen them before.

“You look well, Julian,” Helen Clarke said.

“Afraid to visit here? I apologize for repeating your words, madam, but I am astonished. My niece, after all, was acquitted of murder. There could be no possible danger in visiting here now.”

Mrs Wright made a little convulsive gesture toward her cup of tea and then set her hands firmly in her lap.

“It could be said that there is danger everywhere,” Uncle Julian said. “Danger of poison, certainly. My niece can’t tell you of the most unlikely perils — garden plants more deadly than snakes and simple herbs that slash like knives through the lining of your belly, madam. My niece –”

“Such a lovely garden,” Mrs Wright said earnestly to Constance. “I’m sure I don’t know how you do it.”

Helen Clarke said firmly, “Now, that’s all been forgotten long ago, Julian. No one ever thinks about it any more.”

“Regrettable,” Uncle Julian said. “A most fascinating case, one of the few genuine mysteries of our time. Of my time, particularly. My life work,” he told Mrs Wright.

“Julian,” Helen Clarke said quickly; Mrs Wright seemed mesmerized. “There is such a thing as good taste, Julian.”

“Taste, madam? Have you ever tasted arsenic? I assure you that there is one moment of utter incredulity before the mind can accept—”

A moment ago poor little Mrs Wright would probably have bitten her tongue out before she mentioned the subject, but now she said, hardly breathing, “You mean you remember?”

“Remember.” Uncle Julian sighed, shaking his head happily. “Perhaps,” he said with eagerness, “perhaps you are not familiar with the story? Perhaps I might –”

“Julian,” Helen Clarke said, “Lucille does not want to hear it. You should be ashamed to ask her.”

I thought that Mrs Wright very much did want to hear it, and I looked at Constance just as she glanced at me; we were both very sober, to suit the subject, but I knew she was as full of merriment as I; it was good to hear Uncle Julian, who was so lonely most of the time.

And poor, poor Mrs Wright, tempted at last beyond endurance, was not able to hold it back any longer. She blushed deeply, and faltered, but Uncle Julian was a tempter and Mrs Wright’s human discipline could not resist forever. “It happened right in this house,” she said like a prayer.

We were all silent, regarding her courteously, and she whispered, “I do beg your pardon.”

“Naturally, in this house,” Constance said. “In the dining room. We were having dinner.”

“A family gathering for the evening meal,” Uncle Julian said, caressing his words. “Never supposing it was to be our last.”

“Arsenic in the sugar,” Mrs Wright said, carried away, hopelessly lost to all decorum.

“I used that sugar.” Uncle Julian shook his finger at her. “I used that sugar myself, on my blackberries. Luckily,” and he smiled blandly, “fate intervened. Some of us, that day, she led inexorably through the gates of death. Some of us, innocent and unsuspecting, took, unwillingly, that one last step to oblivion. Some of us took very little sugar.”

“I never touch berries,” Constance said; she looked directly at Mrs Wright and said soberly, “I rarely take sugar on anything. Even now.”

“It counted strongly against her at the trial,” Uncle Julian said. “That she used no sugar, I mean. But my niece has never cared for berries. Even as a child it was her custom to refuse berries.”

“Please,” Helen Clarke said loudly, “it’s outrageous, it really is; I can’t bear to hear it talked about. Constance — Julian — what will Lucille think of you?”

“No, really,” Mrs Wright said, lifting her hands.

“I won’t sit here and listen to another word,” Helen Clarke said. “Constance must start thinking about the future; this dwelling on the past is not wholesome; the poor darling has suffered enough.”

“Well, I miss them all, of course,” Constance said. “Things have been much different with all of them gone, but I’m sure I don’t think of myself as suffering.”

“In some ways,” Uncle Julian sailed on, “a piece of extraordinarily good fortune for me. I am a survivor of the most sensational poisoning case of the century. I have all the newspaper clippings. I knew the victims, the accused, intimately, as only a relative living in the very house could know them. I have exhaustive notes on all that happened. I have never been well since."

"I said I didn't want to talk about it," Helen Clarke said.

Uncle Julian stopped. He looked at Helen Clarke, and then at Constance. "Didn't it really happen?" he asked after a minute, fingers at his mouth.

"Of course it really happened." Constance smiled at him.

"I have the newspaper clippings," Uncle Julian said uncertainly. "I have my notes," he told Helen Clarke, "I have written down everything."

"It was a terrible thing." Mrs Wright was leaning forward earnestly and Uncle Julian turned to her.

"Dreadful," he agreed. "Frightful, madam." He manoeuvred his wheel chair so his back was to Helen Clarke. "Would you like to view the dining room?" he asked. "The fatal board? I did not give evidence at the trial, you understand; my health was not equal, then or now, to the rude questions of strangers." He gave a little flick of his head in Helen Clarke's direction. "I wanted badly to take the witness stand. I flatter myself that I would not have appeared to disadvantage. But of course she was acquitted after all."

"Certainly she was acquitted," Helen Clarke said vehemently. She reached for her huge pocketbook and took it up onto her lap and felt in it for her gloves. "No one ever thinks about it any more." She caught Mrs Wright's eye and prepared to rise.

"The dining room...?" Mrs Wright said timidly. "Just a glance?"

"Madam." Uncle Julian contrived a bow from his wheel chair, and Mrs Wright hurried to reach the door and open it for him. "Directly across the hall," Uncle Julian said, and she followed. "I admire a decently curious woman, madam; I could see at once that you were devoured with a passion to view the scene of the tragedy; it happened in this very room, and we still have our dinner in here every night."

We could hear him clearly; he was apparently moving around our dining room table while Mrs Wright watched him from the doorway. “You will perceive that our table is round. It is overlarge now for the pitiful remnant of our family, but we have been reluctant to disturb what is, after all, a monument of sorts; at one time, a picture of this room would have commanded a large price from any of the newspapers. We were a large family once, you recall, a large and happy family. We had small disagreements, of course, we were not all of us over blessed with patience; I might almost say that there were quarrels. Nothing serious; husband and wife, brother and sister, did not always see eye to eye.”

“Then why did she—”

“Yes,” Uncle Julian said, “that is perplexing, is it not? My brother, as head of the family, sat naturally at the head of the table, there, with the windows at his back and the decanter before him. John Blackwood took pride in his table, his family, his position in the world.”

“She never even met him,” Helen Clarke said. She looked angrily at Constance. “I remember your father well.”

Faces fade away out of memory, I thought. I wondered if I would recognize Mrs Wright if I saw her in the village. I wondered if Mrs Wright in the village would walk past me, not seeing; perhaps Mrs Wright was so timid that she never looked up at faces at all. Her cup of tea and her little rum cake still sat on the table, untouched.

“And I was a good friend of your mother’s, Constance. That’s why I feel able to speak to you openly, for your own good. Your mother would have wanted—”

“– my sister-in-law, who was, madam, a delicate woman. You will have noticed her portrait in the drawing room, and the exquisite line of the jawbone under the skin. A woman born for tragedy, perhaps, although inclined to be a little silly. On her right at this table, myself, younger then, and not an invalid; I have only been helpless since that night. Across from me, the boy Thomas — did you know I once had a nephew, that my brother had a son? Certainly, you would have read about him. He was ten years old and possessed many of his father's more forceful traits of character."

"He used the most sugar," Mrs Wright said.

"Alas," Uncle Julian said. "Then, on either side of my brother, his daughter Constance and my wife Dorothy, who had done me the honor of casting in her lot with mine, although I do not think that she anticipated anything so severe as arsenic on her blackberries. Another child, my niece Mary Katherine, was not at table."

"She was in her room," Mrs Wright said.

"A great child of twelve, sent to bed without her supper. But she need not concern us."

I laughed, and Constance said to Helen Clarke, "Merricat was always in disgrace. I used to go up the back stairs with a tray of dinner for her after my father had left the dining room. She was a wicked, disobedient child," and she smiled at me.

"An unhealthy environment," Helen Clarke said. "A child should be punished for wrongdoing, but she should be made to feel that she is still loved. I would never have tolerated the child's wildness. And now we really must..." She began to put on her gloves again.

"– spring lamb roasted, with a mint jelly made from Constance's garden mint. Spring potatoes, new peas, a salad, again from Constance's garden. I remember it perfectly, madam. It is still one of my favorite meals. I have also, of course, made very thorough notes of everything about that meal and, in fact, that entire day. You will see at once how the dinner revolves around my niece. It was early summer, her garden was doing well — the weather was lovely that year, I recall; we have not seen such another summer since, or perhaps I am only getting older. We relied upon Constance for various small delicacies which only she could provide; I am of course not referring to arsenic."

"Well, the blackberries were the important part." Mrs Wright sounded a little hoarse.

"What a mind you have, madam! So precise, so unerring. I can see that you are going to ask me why she should conceivably have used arsenic. My niece is not capable of such subtlety, and her lawyer luckily said so at the trial. Constance can put her hand upon a bewildering array of deadly substances without ever leaving home; she could feed you a sauce of poison hemlock, a member of the parsley family which produces immediate paralysis and death when eaten. She might have made a marmalade of the lovely thorn apple or the baneberry, she might have tossed the salad with Holcus lanatus, called velvet grass, and rich in hydrocyanic acid. I have notes on all these, madam. Deadly nightshade is a relative of the tomato; would we, any of us, have had the prescience to decline if Constance served it to us, spiced and made into pickle? Or consider just the mushroom family, rich as that is in tradition and deception. We were all fond of mushrooms — my niece makes a mushroom omelette you must taste to believe, madam — and the common death cup—"

"She should not have been doing the cooking," said Mrs Wright strongly.

"Well, of course, there is the root of our trouble. Certainly she should not have been doing the cooking if her intention was to destroy all of us with poison; we would have been blindly unselfish to encourage her to cook under such circumstances. But she was acquitted. Not only of the deed, but of the intention."

"What was wrong with Mrs Blackwood doing her own cooking?"

“Please.” Uncle Julian’s voice had a little shudder in it, and I knew the gesture he was using with it even though he was out of my sight. He would have raised one hand, fingers spread, and he would be smiling at her over his ringers; it was a gallant, Uncle Julian, gesture; I had seen him use it with Constance. “I personally preferred to chance the arsenic,” Uncle Julian said.

“We must go home,” Helen Clarke said. “I don’t know what’s come over Lucille. I told her before we came not to mention this subject.”

“I am going to put up wild strawberries this year,” Constance said to me. “I noticed a considerable patch of them near the end of the garden.”

“It’s terribly tactless of her, and she’s keeping me waiting.”

“– the sugar bowl on the sideboard, the heavy silver sugar bowl. It is a family heirloom; my brother prized it highly. You will be wondering about that sugar bowl, I imagine. Is it still in use? you are wondering; has it been cleaned? you may very well ask; was it thoroughly washed? I can reassure you at once. My niece Constance washed it before the doctor or the police had come, and you will allow that it was not a felicitous moment to wash a sugar bowl. The other dishes used at dinner were still on the table, but my niece took the sugar bowl to the kitchen, emptied it, and scrubbed it thoroughly with boiling water. It was a curious act.”

“There was a spider in it,” Constance said to the teapot. We used a little rose-covered sugar bowl for the lump sugar for tea.

“– there was a spider in it, she said. That was what she told the police. That was why she washed it.”

“Well,” Mrs Wright said, “it does seem as though she might have thought of a better reason. Even if it was a real spider — I mean, you don’t wash — I mean, you just take the spider out.”

“What reason would you have given, madam?”

"Well, I've never killed anybody, so I don't know — I mean, I don't know what I'd say. The first thing that came into my head, I suppose. I mean, she must have been upset."

"I assure you the pangs were fearful; you say you have never tasted arsenic? It is not agreeable. I am extremely sorry for all of them. I myself lingered on in great pain for several days; Constance would, I am sure, have demonstrated only the deepest sympathy for me, but by then, of course, she was largely unavailable. They arrested her at once."

Mrs Wright sounded more forceful, almost unwillingly eager. "I've always thought, ever since we moved up here, that it would be a wonderful chance to meet you people and really find out what happened, because of course there's always that one question, the one nobody has ever been able to answer; of course I hardly expected to talk to you about it, but look." There was the sound of a dining room chair being moved; Mrs Wright had clearly decided to settle down. "First," she said, "she bought the arsenic." "To kill rats," Constance said to the teapot, and then turned and smiled at me.

"To kill rats," Uncle Julian said. "The only other popular use for arsenic is in taxidermy, and my niece could hardly pretend a working knowledge of that subject."

"She cooked the dinner, she set the table."

"I confess I am surprised at that woman," Helen Clarke said. "She seems such a quiet little body."

"It was Constance who saw them dying around her like flies — I do beg your pardon — and never called a doctor until it was too late. She washed the sugar bowl." "There was a spider in it," Constance said. "She told the police those people deserved to die." "She was excited, madam. Perhaps the remark was misconstrued. My niece is not hard-hearted; besides, she thought at the time that I was among them and although I deserve to die — we all do, do we not? — I hardly think that my niece is the one to point it out." "She told the police that it was all her fault." "Now there," Uncle Julian said, "I think she made a mistake. It was certainly true that she thought at first that her cooking had caused all this, but in taking full blame I think that she was over-eager. I would have advised her against any such attitude had I been consulted; it smacks of self-pity."

"But the great, the unanswered question, is why? Why did she do it? I mean, unless we agree that Constance was a homicidal maniac –"

"You have met her, madam."

"I have what? Oh, my goodness yes. I completely forgot. I cannot seem to remember that that pretty young girl is actually — well. Your mass murderer must have a reason, Mr Blackwood, even if it is only some perverted, twisted — oh, dear. She is such a charming girl, your niece; I cannot remember when I have taken to anyone as I have to her. But if she is a homicidal maniac—"

"I'm leaving." Helen Clarke stood up and slammed her pocketbook emphatically under her arm. "Lucille," she said, "I am leaving. We have overstayed all limits of decency; it's after five o'clock."

Mrs Wright scurried out of the dining room, distraught. "I'm so sorry," she said. "We were chatting and I lost track of time. Oh, dear." She ran to her chair to gather up her pocketbook.

"You haven't even touched your tea," I said, wanting to see her blush.

"Thank you," she said; she looked down at her teacup and blushed. "It was delicious."

Uncle Julian stopped his wheel chair in the center of the room and folded his hands happily before him. He looked at Constance and then raised his eyes to gaze on a corner of the ceiling, sober and demure.

“Julian, goodbye,” Helen Clark said shortly. “Constance, I’m sorry we stayed so long; it was inexcusable. Lucille?”

Mrs Wright looked like a child who knows it is going to be punished, but she had not forgotten her manners. “Thank you,” she said to Constance, putting her hand out and then taking it back again quickly. “I had a very nice time. Goodbye,” she said to Uncle Julian. They went into the hall and I followed, to lock the door after they had gone. Helen Clarke started the car before poor Mrs Wright had quite finished getting herself inside, and the last I heard of Mrs Wright was a little shriek as the car started down the driveway. I was laughing when I came back into the drawing room, and I went over and kissed Constance. “A very nice tea party,” I said.

“That impossible woman.” Constance put her head back against the couch and laughed. “Ill bred, pretentious, stupid. Why she keeps coming I’ll never know,”

“She wants to reform you.” I took up Mrs Wright’s teacup and her rum cake and brought them over to the tea tray. “Poor little Mrs Wright,” I said.

“You were teasing her, Merricat.”

“A little bit, maybe. I can’t help it when people are frightened; I always want to frighten them more.”

“Constance?” Uncle Julian turned his wheel chair to face her. “How was I?”

“Superb, Uncle Julian.” Constance stood up and went over to him and touched his old head lightly. “You didn’t need your notes at all.”

“It really happened?” he asked her.

“It certainly did. I’ll take you in to your room and you can look at your newspaper clippings.”

“I think not right now. It has been a superlative afternoon, but I think I am a little tired. I will rest till dinner.”

Constance pushed the wheel chair down the hall and I followed with the tea tray. I was allowed to carry dirty dishes but not to wash them, so I set the tray on the kitchen table and watched while Constance stacked the dishes by the sink to wash later, swept up the broken milk pitcher on the floor, and took out the potatoes to start for dinner. Finally I had to ask her; the thought had been chilling me all afternoon. “Are you going to do what she said?” I asked her. “What Helen Clarke said?”

She did not pretend not to understand. She stood there looking down at her hands working, and smiled a little. “I don’t know,” she said.

3

A change was coming, and nobody knew it but me. Constance suspected, perhaps; I noticed that she stood occasionally in her garden and looked not down at the plants she was tending, and not back at our house, but outward, toward the trees which hid the fence, and sometimes she looked long and curiously down the length of the driveway, as though wondering how it would feel to walk along it to the gates. I watched her. On Saturday morning, after Helen Clarke had come to tea, Constance looked at the driveway three times. Uncle Julian was not well on Saturday morning, after tiring himself at tea, and stayed in his bed in his warm room next to the kitchen, looking out of the window beside his pillow, calling now and then to make Constance notice him. Even Jonas was fretful — he was running up a storm, our mother used to say — and could not sleep quietly; all during those days when the change was coming Jonas stayed restless. From a deep sleep he would start suddenly, lifting his head as though listening, and then, on his feet and moving in one quick ripple, he ran up the stairs and across the beds and around through the doors in and out and then down the stairs and across the hall and over the chair in the dining room and around the table and through the kitchen and out into the garden where he would slow, sauntering, and then pause to lick a paw and flick an ear and take a look at the day. At night we could hear him running, feel him cross our feet as we lay in bed, running up a storm.

All the omens spoke of change. I woke up on Saturday morning and thought I heard them calling me; they want me to get up, I thought before I came fully awake and remembered that they were dead; Constance never called me to wake up. When I dressed and came downstairs that morning she was waiting to make my breakfast, and I told her, “I thought I heard them calling me this morning.”

“Hurry with your breakfast,” she said. “It’s another lovely day.”

After breakfast on the good mornings when I did not have to go into the village I had my work to do. Always on Wednesday mornings I went around the fence. It was necessary for me to check constantly to be sure that the wires were not broken and the gates were securely locked. I could make the repairs myself, winding the wire back together where it had torn, tightening loose strands, and it was a pleasure to know, every Wednesday morning, that we were safe for another week.

On Sunday mornings I examined my safeguards, the box of silver dollars I had buried by the creek, and the doll buried in the long field, and the book nailed to the tree in the pine woods; so long as they were where I had put them nothing could get in to harm us. I had always buried things, even when I was small; I remember that once I quartered the long field and buried something in each quarter to make the grass grow higher as I grew taller, so I would always be able to hide there. I once buried six blue marbles in the creek bed to make the river beyond run dry. “Here is treasure for you to bury,” Constance used to say to me when I was small, giving me a penny, or a bright ribbon; I had buried all my baby teeth as they came out one by one and perhaps someday they would grow as dragons. All our land was enriched with my treasures buried in it, thickly inhabited just below the surface with my marbles and my teeth and my colored stones, all perhaps turned to jewels by now, held together under the ground in a powerful taut web which never loosened, but held fast to guard us.

On Tuesdays and Fridays I went into the village, and on Thursday, which was my most powerful day, I went into the big attic and dressed in their clothes.

Mondays we neatened the house, Constance and I, going into every room with mops and dust cloths, carefully setting the little things back after we had dusted, never altering the perfect line of our mother's tortoise-shell comb. Every spring we washed and polished the house for another year, but on Mondays we neatened; very little dust fell in their rooms, but even that little could not be permitted to stay. Sometimes Constance tried to neaten Uncle Julian's room, but Uncle Julian disliked being disturbed and kept his things in their own places, and Constance had to be content with washing his medicine glasses and changing his bed. I was not allowed in Uncle Julian's room.

On Saturday mornings I helped Constance. I was not allowed to handle knives, but when she worked in the garden I cared for her tools, keeping them bright and clean, and I carried great baskets of flowers, sometimes, or vegetables which Constance picked to make into food. The entire cellar of our house was filled with food. All the Blackwood women had made food and had taken pride in adding to the great supply of food in our cellar. There were jars of jam made by great-grandmothers, with labels in thin pale writing, almost unreadable by now, and pickles made by great-aunts and vegetables put up by our grandmother, and even our mother had left behind her six jars of apple jelly. Constance had worked all her life at adding to the food in the cellar, and her rows and rows of jars were easily the handsomest, and shone among the others. “You bury food the way I bury treasure,” I told her sometimes, and she answered me once: “The food comes from the ground and can’t be permitted to stay there and rot; something has to be done with it.” All the Blackwood women had taken the food that came from the ground and preserved it, and the deeply colored rows of jellies and pickles and bottled vegetables and fruit, maroon and amber and dark rich green stood side by side in our cellar and would stand there forever, a poem by the Blackwood women. Each year Constance and Uncle Julian and I had jam or preserve or pickle that Constance had made, but we never touched what belonged to the others; Constance said it would kill us if we ate it.

This Saturday morning I had apricot jam on my toast, and I thought of Constance making it and putting it away carefully for me to eat on some bright morning, never dreaming that a change would be coming before the jar was finished.

“Lazy Merricat,” Constance said to me, “stop dreaming over your toast; I want you in the garden on this lovely day.”

She was arranging Uncle Julian’s tray, putting his hot milk into a jug painted with yellow daisies, and trimming his toast so it would be tiny and hot and square; if anything looked large, or difficult to eat, Uncle Julian would leave it on the plate. Constance always took Uncle Julian’s tray in to him in the morning because he slept painfully and sometimes lay awake in the darkness waiting for the first light and the comfort of Constance with his tray. Some nights, when his heart hurt him badly, he might take one more pill than usual, and then lie all morning drowsy and dull, unwilling to sip from his hot milk, but wanting to know that Constance was busy in the kitchen next door to his bedroom, or in the garden where he could see her from his pillow. On his very good mornings she brought him into the kitchen for his breakfast, and he would sit at his old desk in the corner, spilling crumbs among his notes, studying his papers while he ate. “If I am spared,” he always said to Constance, “I will write the book myself. If not, see that my notes are entrusted to some worthy cynic who will not be too concerned with the truth.”

I wanted to be kinder to Uncle Julian, so this morning I hoped he would enjoy his breakfast and later come out into the garden in his wheel chair and sit in the sun. “Maybe there will be a tulip open today,” I said, looking out through the open kitchen door into the bright sunlight.

“Not until tomorrow, I think,” said Constance, who always knew. “Wear your boots if you wander today; it will still be quite wet in the woods.”

“There’s a change coming,” I said.

“It’s spring, silly,” she said, and took up Uncle Julian’s tray. “Don’t run off while I’m gone; there’s work to be done.”

She opened Uncle Julian’s door and I heard her say good morning to him. When he said good morning back his voice was old and I knew that he was not well. Constance would have to stay near him all day.

“Is your father home yet, child?” he asked her.

“No, not today,” Constance said. “Let me get your other pillow. It’s a lovely day.”

“He’s a busy man,” Uncle Julian said. “Bring me a pencil, my dear; I want to make a note of that. He’s a very busy man.”

“Take some hot milk; it will make you warm.”

“You’re not Dorothy. You’re my niece Constance.”

“Drink.”

“Good morning, Constance.”

“Good morning, Uncle Julian.”

I decided that I would choose three powerful words, words of strong protection, and so long as these great words were never spoken aloud no change would come. I wrote the first word — melody — in the apricot jam on my toast with the handle of a spoon and then put the toast in my mouth and ate it very quickly. I was one third safe. Constance came out of Uncle Julian's room carrying the tray.

"He's not well this morning," she said. "He left most of his breakfast and he's very tired."

"If I had a winged horse I could fly him to the moon; he would be more comfortable there."

"Later I'll take him out into the sunshine, and perhaps make him a little eggnog."

"Everything's safe on the moon."

She looked at me distantly. "Dandelion greens," she said. "And radishes. I thought of working in the vegetable garden this morning, but I don't want to leave Uncle Julian. I hope that the carrots... " She tapped her fingers on the table, thinking. "Rhubarb," she said.

I carried my breakfast dishes over to the sink and set them down; I was deciding on my second magic word, which I thought might very well be Gloucester. It was strong, and I thought it would do, although Uncle Julian might take it into his head to say almost anything and no word was truly safe when Uncle Julian was talking.

"Why not make a pie for Uncle Julian?"

Constance smiled. "You mean, why not make a pie for Merricat? Shall I make a rhubarb pie?"

"Jonas and I dislike rhubarb."

"But it has the prettiest colors of all; nothing is so pretty on the shelves as rhubarb jam."

"Make it for the shelves, then. Make me a dandelion pie."

"Silly Merricat," Constance said. She was wearing her blue dress, the sunlight was patterned on the kitchen floor, and color was beginning to show in the garden outside. Jonas sat on the step, washing, and Constance began to sing as she turned to wash the dishes. I was two thirds safe, with only one magic word to find.

Later Uncle Julian still slept and Constance thought to take five minutes and run down to the vegetable garden to gather what she could; I sat at the kitchen table listening for Uncle Julian so I could call Constance if he awakened, but when she came back he was still quiet. I ate tiny sweet raw carrots while Constance washed the vegetables and put them away. "We will have a spring salad," she said.

"We eat the year away. We eat the spring and the summer and the fall. We wait for something to grow and then we eat it."

"Silly Merricat," Constance said.

At twenty minutes after eleven by the kitchen clock she took off her apron, glanced in at Uncle Julian, and went, as she always did, upstairs to her room to wait until I called her. I went to the front door and unlocked it and opened it just as the doctor's car turned into the drive. He was in a hurry, always, and he stopped his car quickly and ran up the steps; "Good morning, Miss Blackwood," he said, going past me and down the hall, and by the time he had reached the kitchen he had his coat off and was ready to put it over the back of one of the kitchen chairs. He went directly to Uncle Julian's room without a glance at me or at the kitchen, and then when he opened Uncle Julian's door he was suddenly still, and gentle. "Good morning, Mr Blackwood," he said, his voice easy, "how are things today?"

"Where's the old fool?" Uncle Julian said, as he always did. "Why didn't Jack Mason come?"

Dr Mason was the one Constance called the night they all died.

"Dr Mason couldn't make it today," the doctor said, as he always did. "I'm Dr Levy. I've come to see you instead."

"Rather have Jack Mason."

"I'll do the best I can."

"Mr Blackwood," the doctor said, "it is a pleasure to have you as a patient." He closed the door very quietly. I thought of using digitalis as my third magic word, but it was too easy for someone to say, and at last I decided on Pegasus. I took a glass from the cabinet, and said the word very distinctly into the glass, then filled it with water and drank. Uncle Julian's door opened, and the doctor stood in the doorway for a minute.

"Remember, now," he said. "And I'll see you next Saturday."

"Quack," Uncle Julian said.

The doctor turned, smiling, and then the smile disappeared and he began to hurry again. He took up his coat and went off down the hall. I followed him and by the time I came to the front door he was already going down the steps. "Goodbye, Miss Blackwood," he said, not looking around, and got into his car and started at once, going faster and faster until he reached the gates and turned onto the highway. I locked the front door and went to the foot of the stairs. "Constance?" I called.

"Coming," she said from upstairs. "Coming, Merricat.

Uncle Julian was better later in the day, and sat out in the warm afternoon sun, hands folded in his lap, half-dreaming. I lay near him on the marble bench our mother had liked to sit on, and Constance knelt in the dirt, both hands buried as though she were growing, kneading the dirt and turning it, touching the plants on their roots.

"It was a fine morning," Uncle Julian said, his voice going on and on, "a fine bright morning, and none of them knew it was their last. She was downstairs first, my niece Constance. I woke up and heard her moving in the kitchen — I slept upstairs then, I could still go upstairs, and I slept with my wife in our room — and I thought, this is a fine morning, never dreaming then that it was their last. Then I heard my nephew — no, it was my brother; my brother came downstairs first after Constance. I heard him whistling. Constance?”

“Yes?”

“What was the tune my brother used to whistle, and always off-key?”

Constance thought, her hands in the ground, and hummed softly, and I shivered.

“Of course. I never had a head for music; I could remember what people looked like and what they said and what they did but I could never remember what they sang. It was my brother who came downstairs after Constance, never caring of course if he woke people with his noise and his whistling, never thinking that perhaps I might still be asleep, although as it happened I was already awake.” Uncle Julian sighed, and lifted his head to look curiously, once, around the garden. “He never knew it was his last morning on earth. He might have been quieter, I think, if he did know. I heard him in the kitchen with Constance and I said to my wife — she was awake, too; his noise had awakened her — I said to my wife, you had better get dressed; we live here with my brother and his wife, after all, and we must remember to show them that we are friendly and eager to help out wherever we can; dress and go down to Constance in the kitchen. She did as she was told; our wives always did as they were told, although my sister-in-law lay in bed late that morning; perhaps she had a premonition and wanted to take her earthly rest while she could. I heard them all. I heard the boy go downstairs. I thought of dressing; Constance?

“Yes, Uncle Julian?

"I could still dress myself in those days, you know, although that was the last day. I could still walk around by myself, and dress myself, and feed myself, and I had no pain. I slept well in those days as a strong man should. I was not young, but I was strong and I slept well and I could still dress myself."

"Would you like a rug over your knees?"

"No, my dear, I thank you. You have been a good niece to me, although there are some grounds for supposing you an undutiful daughter. My sister-in-law came downstairs before I did. We had pancakes for breakfast, tiny thin hot pancakes, and my brother had two fried eggs and my wife — although I did not encourage her to eat heavily, since we were living with my brother — took largely of sausage. Homemade sausage, made by Constance. Constance?"

"Yes, Uncle Julian?"

"I think if I had known it was her last breakfast I would have permitted her more sausage. I am surprised, now I think of it, that no one suspected it was their last morning; they might not have grudged my wife more sausage then. My brother sometimes remarked upon what we ate, my wife and I; he was a just man, and never stinted his food, so long as we did not take too much. He watched my wife take sausage that morning, Constance. I saw him watching her. We took little enough from him, Constance. He had pancakes and fried eggs and sausage but I felt that he was going to speak to my wife; the boy ate hugely. I am pleased that the breakfast was particularly good that day."

"I could make you sausage next week, Uncle Julian; I think homemade sausage would not disagree with you if you had very little."

"My brother never grudged our food if we did not take too much. My wife helped to wash the dishes."

"I was very grateful to her."

"She might have done more, I think now. She entertained my sister-in-law, and she saw to our clothes, and she helped with the dishes in the mornings, but I believe that my brother thought that she might have done more. He went off after breakfast to see a man on business."

"He wanted an arbor built; it was his plan to start a grape arbor."

"I am sorry about that; we might now be eating jam from our own grapes. I was always better able to chat after he was gone; I recall that I entertained the ladies that morning, and we sat here in the garden. We talked about music; my wife was quite musical although she had never learned to play. My sister-in-law had a delicate touch; it was always said of her that she had a delicate touch, and she played in the evenings usually. Not that evening, of course. She was not able to play that evening. In the morning we thought she would play in the evening as usual. Do you recall that I was very entertaining in the garden that morning, Constance?"

"I was weeding the vegetables," Constance said. "I could hear you all laughing.

"I was quite entertaining; I am happy for that now." He was quiet for a minute, folding and refolding his hands. I wanted to be kinder to him, but I could not fold his hands for him, and there was nothing I could bring him, so I lay still and listened to him talk. Constance frowned, staring at a leaf, and the shadows moved softly across the lawn.

The boy was off somewhere, Uncle Julian said at last in his sad old voice. "The boy had gone off somewhere — was he fishing, Constance?"

"He was climbing the chestnut tree."

"I remember. Of course. I remember all of it very clearly, my dear, and I have it all down in my notes. It was the last morning of all and I would not like to forget. He was climbing the chestnut tree, shouting down to us from very high in the tree, and dropping twigs until my sister-in-law spoke sharply to him. She disliked the twigs falling into her hair, and my wife disliked it too, although she would never have been the first to speak. I think my wife was civil to your mother, Constance. I would hate to think not; we lived in my brother's house and ate his food. I know my brother was home for lunch."

"We had a rarebit," Constance said. "I had been working with the vegetables all morning and I had to make something quickly for lunch."

"It was a rarebit we had. I have often wondered why the arsenic was never put into the rarebit. It is an interesting point, and one I shall bring out forcefully in my book. Why was the arsenic not put into the rarebit? They would have lost some hours of life on that last day, but it would all have been over with that much sooner. Constance, if there is one dish you prepare which I strongly dislike, it is a rarebit. I have never cared for rarebit."

"I know, Uncle Julian. I never serve it to you."

"It would have been most suitable for the arsenic. I had a salad instead, I recall. There was an apple pudding for dessert, left over from the night before."

"The sun is going down." Constance rose and brushed the dirt from her hands. "You'll be chilly unless I take you indoors."

"It would have been far more suitable in the rarebit, Constance. Odd that the point was never brought out at the time. Arsenic is tasteless, you know, although I swear a rarebit is not. Where am I going?"

"You are going indoors. You will rest in your room for an hour until your dinner, and after dinner I will play for you, if you like."

I cannot afford the time, my dear. I have a thousand details to remember and note down, and not a minute to waste. I would hate to lose any small thing from their last day; my book must be complete. I think, on the whole, it was a pleasant day for all of them, and of course it is much better that they never supposed it was to be their last. I think I am chilly, Constance."

"You will be tucked away in your room in a minute." I came slowly behind them, unwilling to leave the darkening garden; Jonas came after me, moving toward the light in the house. When Jonas and I came inside Constance was just closing the door to Uncle Julian's room, and she smiled at me. "He's practically asleep already," she said softly.

"When I'm as old as Uncle Julian will you take care of me?" I asked her.

"If I'm still around," she said, and I was chilled. I sat in my corner holding Jonas and watched her move quickly and silently around our bright kitchen. In a few minutes she would ask me to set the table for the three of us in the dining room, and then after dinner it would be night and we would sit warmly together in the kitchen where we were guarded by the house and no one from outside could see so much as a light.

4

ON Sunday morning the change was one day nearer. I was resolute about not thinking my three magic words and would not let them into my mind, but the air of change was so strong that there was no avoiding it; change lay over the stairs and the kitchen and the garden like fog. I would not forget my magic words; they were MELODY GLOUCESTER PEGASUS, but I refused to let them into my mind. The weather was uneasy on Sunday morning and I thought that perhaps Jonas would succeed after all in running up a storm; the sun shone into the kitchen but there were clouds moving quickly across the sky and a sharp little breeze that came in and out of the kitchen while I had my breakfast.

"Wear your boots if you wander today," Constance told me.

PART III

“I don’t expect that Uncle Julian will sit outdoors today; it will be far too cool for him.”

“Pure spring weather, Constance said, and smiled out at her garden.

“I love you, Constance,” I said.

“I love you too, silly Merricat.”

“Is Uncle Julian better?”

“I don’t think so. He had his tray while you were still asleep, and I thought he seemed very tired. He said he had an extra pill during the night. I think perhaps he is getting worse.”

“Are you worried about him?

“Yes. Very.”

“Will he die?”

“Do you know what he said to me this morning?” Constance turned, leaning against the sink, and looked at me with sadness. “He thought I was Aunt Dorothy, and he held my hand and said, It’s terrible to be old, and just lie here wondering when it will happen. He almost frightened me.”

“You should have let me take him to the moon,” I said.

“I gave him his hot milk and then he remembered who I was.”

I thought that Uncle Julian was probably really very happy, with both Constance and Aunt Dorothy to take care of him, and I told myself that long thin things would remind me to be kinder to Uncle Julian; this was to be a day of long thin things, since there had already been a hair in my toothbrush, and a fragment of a string was caught on the side of my chair and I could see a splinter broken off the back step. Make him a little pudding," I said.

"Perhaps I will." She took out the long thin slicing knife and set it on the sink. "Or a cup of cocoa. And dumplings with his chicken tonight.

"Do you need me?"

"No, my Merricat. Run along and wear your boots."

The day outside was full of changing light, and Jonas danced in and out of shadows as he followed me. When I ran Jonas ran, and when I stopped and stood still he stopped and glanced at me and then went briskly off in another direction, as though we were not acquainted, and then he sat down and waited for me to run again. We were going to the long field which today looked like an ocean, although I had never seen an ocean; the grass was moving in the breeze and the cloud shadows passed back and forth and the trees in the distance moved. Jonas disappeared into the grass, which was tall enough for me to touch with my hands while I walked, and he made small crooked movements of his own; for a minute the grass would all bend together under the breeze and then there would be a hurrying pattern across it where Jonas was running. I started at one corner and walked diagonally across the long field toward the opposite corner, and in the middle I came directly to the rock covering the spot where the doll was buried; I could always find it although much of my buried treasure was forever lost. The rock was undisturbed and so the doll was safe. I am walking on buried treasure, I thought, with the grass brushing against my hands and nothing around me but the reach of the long field with the grass blowing and the pine woods at the end; behind me was the house, and far off to my left, hidden by trees and almost out of sight, was the wire fence our father had built to keep people out.

When I left the long field I went between the four apple trees we called our orchard, and along the path toward the creek. My box of silver dollars buried by the creek was safe. Near the creek, well hidden, was one of my hiding places, which I had made carefully and used often. I had torn away two or three low bushes and smoothed the ground; all around were more bushes and tree branches, and the entrance was covered by a branch which almost touched the ground. It was not really necessary to be so secret, since no one ever came looking for me here, but I liked to lie inside with Jonas and know that I could never be found. I used leaves and branches for a bed, and Constance had given me a blanket. The trees around and overhead were so thick that it was always dry inside and on Sunday morning I lay there with Jonas, listening to his stories. All cat stories start with the statement: “My mother, who was the first cat, told me this, and I lay with my head close to Jonas and listened. There was no change coming, I thought here, only spring; I was wrong to be so frightened. The days would get warmer, and Uncle Julian would sit in the sun, and Constance would laugh when she worked in the garden, and it would always be the same. Jonas went on and on (“And then we sang! And then we sang!”) and the leaves moved overhead and it would always be the same.

I found a nest of baby snakes near the creek and killed them all; I dislike snakes and Constance had never asked me not to. I was on my way back to the house when I found a very bad omen, one of the worst. My book nailed to a tree in the pine woods had fallen down. I decided that the nail had rusted away and the book — it was a little notebook of our father’s, where he used to record the names of people who owed him money, and people who ought, he thought, to do favors for him — was useless now as protection. I had wrapped it very thoroughly in heavy paper before nailing it to the tree, but the nail had rusted and it had fallen. I thought I had better destroy it, in case it was now actively bad, and bring something else out to the tree, perhaps a scarf of our mother's, or a glove. It was really too late, although I did not know it then; he was already on his way to the house. By the time I found the book he had probably already left his suitcase in the post office and was asking directions. All Jonas and I knew then was that we were hungry, and we ran together back to the house, and came with the breeze into the kitchen.

"Did you really forget your boots?" Constance said. She tried to frown and then laughed. "Silly Merricat."

"Jonas had no boots. "It's a wonderful day."

"Perhaps tomorrow we'll go to gather mushrooms. Jonas and I are hungry today."

By then he was already walking through the village toward the black rock, with all of them watching him and wondering and whispering as he passed.

It was the last of our slow lovely days, although, as Uncle Julian would have pointed out, we never suspected it then. Constance and I had lunch, giggling and never knowing that while we were happy he was trying the locked gate, and peering down the path, and wandering the woods, shut out for a time by our father's fence. The rain started while we sat in the kitchen, and we left the kitchen door open so we could watch the rain slanting past the doorway and washing the garden; Constance was pleased, the way any good gardener is pleased with rain. "We'll see color out there soon," she said.

"We'll always be here together, won't we, Constance?"

"Don't you ever want to leave here, Merricat?"

"Where could we go?" I asked her. "What place would be better for us than this? Who wants us, outside? The world is full of terrible people."

"I wonder sometimes." She was very serious for a minute, and then she turned and smiled at me. "Don't you worry, my Merricat. Nothing bad will happen."

That must have been just about the minute he found the entrance and started up the driveway, hurrying in the rain, because I had only a minute or two left before I saw him. I might have used that minute or two for so many things: I might have warned Constance, somehow, or I might have thought of a new, safer, magic word, or I might have pushed the table across the kitchen doorway; as it happened, I played with my spoon, and looked at Jonas, and when Constance shivered I said, "I'll get your sweater for you." That was what brought me into the hall as he was coming up the steps. I saw him through the dining room window and for a minute, chilled, I could not breathe. I knew the front door was locked; I thought of that first. "Constance," I said softly, not moving, there's one outside. The kitchen door, quickly." I thought she had heard me, because I heard her move in the kitchen, but Uncle Julian had called at that moment, and she went in to him, leaving the heart of our house unguarded. I ran to the front door and leaned against it and heard his steps outside. He knocked, quietly at first and then firmly, and I leaned against the door, feeling the knocks hit at me, knowing how close he was. I knew already that he was one of the bad ones; I had seen his face briefly and he was one of the bad ones, who go around and around the house, trying to get in, looking in the windows, pulling and poking and stealing souvenirs.

He knocked again, and then called out, "Constance? Constance?"

Well, they always knew her name. They knew her name and Uncle Julian's name and how she wore her hair and the color of the three dresses she had to wear in court and how old she was and how she talked and moved and when they could they looked close in her face to see if she was crying. I want to talk to Constance, he said outside, the way they always did.

It had been a long time since any of them came, but I had not forgotten how they made me feel. At first, they were always there, waiting for Constance, just wanting to see her. “Look,” they said, nudging each other and pointing, “there she is, that one, that’s the one, Constance.” “Doesn’t look like a murderess, does she?” they told each other; “listen, see if you can get a picture of her when she shows again.” “Let’s just take some of these flowers,” they said comfortably to each other; “get a rock or something out of the garden, we can’t take it home to show the kids.”

““Constance? he said outside. “Constance?” He knocked again. “I want to talk to Constance, he said, “I have something important to say to her.”

They always had something important they wanted to tell Constance, whether they were pushing at the door or yelling outside or calling on the telephone or writing the terrible, terrible letters. Sometimes they wanted Julian Blackwood, but they never asked for me. I had been sent to bed without my supper, I had not been allowed in the courtroom, no one had taken my picture. While they were looking at Constance in the courtroom I had been lying on the cot at the orphanage, staring at the ceiling, wishing they were all dead, waiting for Constance to come and take me home.

“Constance, can you hear me?” he called outside. “Please listen for just a minute.”

I wondered if he could hear me breathing on the inside of the door; I knew what he would do next. First he would back away from the house, sheltering his eyes from the rain, and look up at the windows upstairs, hoping to see a face looking down. Then he would start toward the side of the house, following the walk which was only supposed to be used by Constance and me. When he found the side door, which we never opened, he would knock there, calling Constance. Sometimes they went away when no one answered at either the front door or the side; the ones who were faintly embarrassed at being here at all and wished they had not bothered to come in the first place because there was really nothing to see and they could have saved their time or gone somewhere else — they usually hurried off when they found they were not going to get in to see Constance, but the stubborn ones, the ones I wished would die and lie there dead on the driveway, went around and around the house, trying every door and tapping on the windows. “We got a right to see her,” they used to shout, “she killed all those people, didn’t she?” They drove cars up to the steps and parked there. Most of them locked their cars carefully, making sure all the windows were shut, before they came to pound at the house and call to Constance. They had picnics on the lawn and took pictures of each other standing in front of the house and let their dogs run in the garden. They wrote their names on the walls and on the front door.

“Look,” he said outside, “you’ve got to let me in.”

I heard him go down the steps and knew he was looking up. The windows were all locked. The side door was locked. I knew better than to try to look out through the narrow glass panels on either side of the door; they always noticed even the slightest movement, and if I had even barely touched the dining room drapes he would have been running at the house, shouting, “There she is, there she is.” I leaned against the front door and thought about opening it and finding him dead on the driveway.

He was looking up at a blank face of a house looking down because we always kept the shades drawn on the upstairs windows; he would get no answer there and I had to find Constance a sweater before she shivered any more. It was safe to go upstairs, but I wanted to be back with Constance while he was waiting outside, so I ran up the stairs and snatched a sweater from the chair in Constance’s room and ran downstairs and down the hall into the kitchen and he was sitting at the table in my chair.

“I had three magic words,” I said, holding the sweater. Their names were MELODY GLOUCESTER PEGASUS,” and we were safe until they were said out loud.”

“Merricat,” Constance said; she turned and looked at me, smiling. “It’s our cousin, our cousin Charles Blackwood. I knew him at once; he looks like Father.”

“Well, Mary,” he said. He stood up; he was taller now that he was inside, bigger and bigger as he came closer to me. “Got a kiss for your cousin Charles?”

Behind him the kitchen door was open wide; he was the first one who had ever gotten inside and Constance had let him in. Constance stood up; she knew better than to touch me but she said “Merricat, Merricat” gently and held out her arms to me. I was held tight, wound round with wire, I couldn’t breathe, and I had to run. I threw the sweater on the floor and went out the door and down to the creek where I always went. Jonas found me after a while and we lay there together, protected from the rain by the trees crowding overhead, dim and rich in the kind of knowing, possessive way trees have of pressing closer. I looked back at the trees and listened to the soft sound of the water. There was no cousin, no Charles Blackwood, no intruder inside. It was because the book had fallen from the tree; I had neglected to replace it at once and our wall of safety had cracked. Tomorrow I would find some powerful thing and nail it to the tree. I fell asleep listening to Jonas, just as the shadows were coming down. Sometime during the night Jonas left me to go hunting, and I woke a little when he came back, pressing against me to get warm. “Jonas,” I said, and he purred comfortably. When I woke up the early morning mists were wandering lightly along the creek, curling around my face and touching me. I lay there laughing, feeling the almost imaginary brush of the mist across my eyes, and looking up into the trees.

5

When I came into the kitchen, still trailing mist from the creek, Constance was arranging Uncle Julian’s breakfast tray. Uncle Julian was clearly feeling well this morning, since Constance was giving him tea instead of hot milk; he must have awakened early and asked for tea. I went to her and put my arms around her and she turned and hugged me.

“Good morning, my Merricat,” she said.

“Good morning, my Constance. Is Uncle Julian better today?”

“Much, much better. And the sun is going to shine after yesterday’s rain. And I am going to make a chocolate mousse for your dinner, my Merricat.”

“I love you, Constance.”

“And I love you. Now what will you have for breakfast?”

“Pancakes. Little tiny hot ones. And two fried eggs. Today my winged horse is coming and I am carrying you off to the moon and on the moon we will eat rose petals.”

“Some rose petals are poisonous.”

“Not on the moon. Is it true that you can plant a leaf?”

“Some leaves. Furred leaves. You can put them in water and they grow roots and then you plant them and they grow into a plant. The kind of a plant they were when they started, of course, not just any plant.”

“I’m sorry about that. Good morning, Jonas. You are a furred leaf, I think.”

“Silly Merricat.”

“I like a leaf that grows into a different plant. All furry.”

Constance was laughing. “Uncle Julian will never get his breakfast if I listen to you,” she said. She took up the tray and went into Uncle Julian’s room. Hot tea coming,” she said.

“Constance, my dear. A glorious morning, I think. A splendid day to work.”

“And to sit in the sun.”

Jonas sat in the sunlit doorway, washing his face. I was hungry; perhaps it would be kind to Uncle Julian today if I put a feather on the lawn at the spot where Uncle Julian’s chair would go; I was not allowed to bury things in the lawn. On the moon we wore feathers in our hair, and rubies on our hands. On the moon we had gold spoons.

“Perhaps today is a good day to begin a new chapter. Constance?”

“Yes, Uncle Julian?”

“Do you think I should begin chapter forty four today?”

“Of course.”

“Some of the early pages need a little brushing up. A work like this is never done.”

“Shall I brush your hair?”

“I think I will brush it myself this morning, thank you. A man’s head should be his own responsibility, after all. I have no jam.”

“Shall I get you some?”

“No, because I see that I have somehow eaten all my toast. I fancy a broiled liver for my lunch, Constance.”

“You shall have it. Shall I take your tray?”

“Yes, thank you. And I will brush my hair.”

Constance came back into the kitchen and set down the tray. “And now for you, my Merricat,” she said.

“And Jonas.”

"Jonas had his breakfast long ago."

"Will you plant a leaf for me?"

" One of these days." She turned her head and listened. "He is still asleep," she said.

"Who is still asleep? Will I watch it grow?

"Cousin Charles is still asleep," she said, and the day fell apart around me. I saw Jonas in the doorway and Constance by the stove but they had no color. I could not breathe, I was tied around tight, everything was cold.

"He was a ghost," I said.

Constance laughed, and it was a sound very far away. "Then a ghost is sleeping in Father's bed," she said. "And ate a very hearty dinner last night. While you were gone," she said.

"I dreamed that he came. I fell asleep on the ground and dreamed that he came, but then I dreamed him away." I was held tight; when Constance believed me I could breathe again.

"We talked for a long time last night."

"Go and look," I said, not breathing, "go and look; he isn't there."

"Silly Merricat," she said.

I could not run; I had to help Constance. I took my glass and smashed it on the floor. "Now he'll go away, I said.

Constance came to the table and sat down across from me, looking very serious. I wanted to go around the table and hug her, but she still had no color. "My Merricat, she said slowly, "Cousin Charles is here. He is our cousin. As long as his father was alive — that was Arthur Blackwood, Father's brother — Cousin Charles could not come to us, or try to help us, because his father would not allow him. His father," she said, and smiled a little, "thought very badly of us. He refused to take care of you during the trial, did you know that? And he never let our names be mentioned in his house."

"Then why do you mention his name in our house?"

"Because I am trying to explain. As soon as his father died Cousin Charles hurried here to help us."

"How can he help us? We're very happy, aren't we, Constance?"

"Very happy, Merricat. But please be pleasant to Cousin Charles."

I could breathe a little; it was going to be all right. Cousin Charles was a ghost, but a ghost that could be driven away. "He'll go away," I said.

"I don't suppose he plans to stay forever," Constance said. "He only came for a visit, after all."

I would have to find something, a device, to use against him. "Has Uncle Julian seen him?"

"Uncle Julian knows he is here, but Uncle Julian was too unwell last night to leave his room. He had his dinner on a tray, only a little soup. I was glad he asked for tea this morning."

"Today we neaten the house."

"Later, after Cousin Charles is awake. And I'd better sweep up that broken glass before he comes down."

I watched her while she swept up the glass; today would be a glittering day, full of tiny sparkling things. There was no point in hurrying with my breakfast, because today I could not go out until we had neatened the house, so I lingered, drinking milk slowly and watching Jonas. Before I was finished Uncle Julian called Constance to come and help him into his chair, and she brought him into the kitchen and put him by his table and his papers.

"I really think I shall commence chapter forty four," he said, patting his hands together. "I shall commence, I think, with a slight exaggeration and go on from there into an outright lie. Constance, my dear?"

"Yes, Uncle Julian?"

"I am going to say that my wife was beautiful."

Then we were all silent for a minute, puzzled by the sound of a foot stepping upstairs where there had always been silence before. It was unpleasant, this walking overhead. Constance always stepped lightly, and Uncle Julian never walked; this footstep was heavy and even and bad.

"That is Cousin Charles," Constance said, looking up.

"Indeed," said Uncle Julian. He carefully arranged a paper before him and took up a pencil. "I am anticipating considerable pleasure from the society of my brother's son," he said. "Perhaps he can fill in some details on the behavior of his family during the trial. Although, I confess, I have somewhere set down notes on a possible conversation they might have had... " He turned to one of his notebooks. "This will delay chapter forty four, I suspect."

I took Jonas and went to my corner, and Constance went into the hall to meet Charles when he came down the stairs. "Good morning, Cousin Charles," she said.

"Good morning, Connie." It was the same voice as he had used last night. I got further into my corner as she brought him into the kitchen, and Uncle Julian touched his papers and turned to face the doorway.

"Uncle Julian. I am pleased to meet you at last.

"Charles. You are Arthur's son, but you resemble my brother John, who is dead."

"Arthur's dead, too. That's why I'm here."

"He died wealthy, I trust? I was the only brother with no knack for money."

"As a matter of fact, Uncle Julian, my father left nothing."

"A pity. His father left a considerable sum. It came to a considerable sum, even divided among the three of us. I always knew my share would melt away, but I had not suspected it of my brother Arthur. Perhaps your mother was an extravagant woman? I do not remember her very clearly. I recall that when my niece Constance wrote to her uncle during the trial, it was his wife who answered, requesting that the family connection be severed."

"I wanted to come before, Uncle Julian."

"I daresay. Youth is always curious. And a woman of such notoriety as your cousin Constance would present a romantic figure to a young man. Constance?"

"Yes, Uncle Julian?"

"Have I had my breakfast?

"Yes."

"I will have another cup of tea, then. This young man and I have a great deal to discuss."

I still could not see him clearly, perhaps because he was a ghost, perhaps because he was so very big. His great round face, looking so much like our father's, turned from Constance to Uncle Julian and back, smiling and opening its mouth to talk. I moved as far into my corner as I could, but finally the big face turned at me.

"Why, there's Mary," it said. "Good morning, Mary."

I put my face down to Jonas.

"Shy?" he asked Constance. "Never mind. Kids always take to me."

Constance laughed. "We don't see many strangers," she said. She was not at all awkward or uncomfortable; it was as though she had been expecting all her life that Cousin Charles would come, as though she had planned exactly what to do and say, almost as though in the house of her life there had always been a room kept for Cousin Charles.

He stood up and came closer to me. “That’s a handsome cat,” he said. “Does it have a name?”

Jonas and I looked at him and then I thought that Jonas’s name might be the safest thing to speak to him first. “Jonas,” I said.

“Jonas? Is he your special pet?”

“Yes,” I said. We looked at him, Jonas and I, not daring to blink or turn away. The big white face was close, still looking like our father, and the big mouth was smiling.

“ We’re going to be good friends, you and Jonas and I,” he said.

“What will you have for breakfast?” Constance asked him, and she smiled at me because I had told him Jonas’s name.

“Whatever you’re serving,” he said, turning away from me at last.

“Merricat had pancakes.”

“Pancakes would be great. A good breakfast in charming company on a beautiful day; what more could I ask?”

“Pancakes,” observed Uncle Julian, “are an honored dish in this family, although I rarely take them myself; my health permits only the lightest and daintiest foods. Pancakes were served for breakfast on that last –”

“Uncle Julian,” Constance said, “your papers are spilling on the floor.”

“Let me get them, sir.” Cousin Charles kneeled to gather the papers and Constance said, “After breakfast you’ll see my garden.”

“A chivalrous young man,” Uncle Julian said, accepting his papers from Charles. “I thank you; I am not able myself to leap across a room and kneel on the floor and I am gratified to find someone who can. I believe that you are a year or so older than my niece?”

“I’m thirty two,” Charles said.

"And Constance is approximately twenty eight. We long ago gave up the practice of birthdays, but twenty eight should be about right. Constance, I should not be talking so on an empty stomach. Where is my breakfast?"

"You finished it an hour ago, Uncle Julian. I am making you a cup of tea, and pancakes for Cousin Charles."

"Charles is intrepid. Your cooking, although it is of a very high standard indeed, has certain disadvantages."

"I'm not afraid to eat anything Constance cooks," Charles said.

"Really?" said Uncle Julian. "I congratulate you. I was referring to the effect a weighty meal like pancakes is apt to have on a delicate stomach. I suppose your reference was to arsenic."

"Come and have your breakfast," Constance said.

I was laughing, although Jonas hid my face. It took Charles a good half-minute to pick up his fork, and he kept smiling at Constance. Finally, knowing that Constance and Uncle Julian and Jonas and I were watching him, he cut off a small piece of pancake and brought it to his mouth, but could not bring himself to put it inside. Finally he set the fork with the piece of pancake down on his plate and turned to Uncle Julian. You know, I was thinking," he said. "Maybe while I'm here there are things I could do for you — dig in the garden, maybe, or run errands. I'm pretty good at hard work." You had dinner here last night and woke up alive this morning," Constance said; I was laughing but she suddenly looked almost cross.

"What?" Charles said. "Oh." He looked down at his fork as though he had forgotten it and at last he picked it up and put the piece of pancake into his mouth very quickly, and chewed it and swallowed it and looked up at Constance. "Delicious," he said, and Constance smiled.

"Constance?"

"Yes, Uncle Julian?"

"I think I shall not, after all, begin chapter forty four this morning. I think I shall go back to chapter seventeen, where I recall that I made some slight mention of your cousin and his family, and their attitude during the trial. Charles, you are a clever young man. I am eager to hear your story."

"It was all so long ago," Charles said.

"You should have kept notes," Uncle Julian said.

"I mean," Charles said, "can't it all be forgotten? There's no point in keeping those memories alive."

"Forgotten?" Uncle Julian said. "Forgotten?"

"It was a sad and horrible time and it's not going to do Connie here any good at all to keep talking about it."

"Young man, you are speaking slightingly, I believe, of my work. A man does not take his work lightly. A man has his work to do, and he does it. Remember that, Charles."

"I'm just saying that I don't want to talk about Connie and that bad time."

"I shall be forced to invent, to fictionalize, to imagine."

"I refuse to discuss it any further."

"Constance?"

"Yes, Uncle Julian?" Constance looked very serious.

"It did happen? I remember that it happened," said Uncle Julian, fingers at his mouth.

Constance hesitated, and then she said, "Of course it did, Uncle Julian."

"My notes... " Uncle Julian's voice trailed off, and he gestured at his papers.

"Yes, Uncle Julian. It was real."

I was angry because Charles ought to be kind to Uncle Julian. I remembered that today was to be a day of sparkles and light, and I thought that I would find something bright and pretty to put near Uncle Julian's chair.

"Constance?

"Yes?"

"May I go outside? Am I warm enough?"

"I think so, Uncle Julian." Constance was sorry, too. Uncle Julian was shaking his head back and forth sadly and he had put down his pencil. Constance went into Uncle Julian's room and brought out his shawl, which she put around his shoulders very gently. Charles was eating his pancakes bravely now, and did not look up; I wondered if he cared that he had not been kind to Uncle Julian.

"Now you will go outside," Constance said quietly to Uncle Julian, " and the sun will be warm and the garden will be bright and you will have broiled liver for your lunch."

"Perhaps not," Uncle Julian said. "Perhaps I had better have just an egg."

Constance wheeled him gently to the door and eased his chair carefully down the step. Charles looked up from his pancakes but when he started to rise to help her she shook her head. "I'll put you in your special corner," she said to Uncle Julian, "where I can see you every minute and five times an hour I'll wave hello to you."

We could hear her talking all the time she was wheeling Uncle Julian to his corner. Jonas left me and went to sit in the doorway and watch them. "Jonas?" Charles said, and Jonas turned toward him. "Cousin Mary doesn't like me," Charles said to Jonas. I disliked the way he was talking to Jonas and I disliked the way Jonas appeared to be listening to him. "How can I make Cousin Mary like me? Charles said, and Jonas looked quickly at me and then back to Charles. "Here I've come to visit my two dear cousins," Charles said, "my two dear cousins and my old uncle whom I haven't seen for years, and my Cousin Mary won't even be polite to me. What do you think, Jonas?"

There were sparkles at the sink where a drop of water was swelling to fall. Perhaps if I held my breath until the drop fell Charles would go away, but I knew that was not true; holding my breath was too easy.

"Oh, well," Charles said to Jonas, "Constance likes me, and I guess that's all that matters."

Constance came to the doorway, waited for Jonas to move, and when he did not, stepped over him. "More pancakes?" she said to Charles.

"No, thanks. I'm trying to get acquainted with my little cousin."

"It won't be long before she's fond of you." Constance was looking at me. Jonas had fallen to washing himself, and I thought at last of what to say. "Today we neaten the house," I said.

Uncle Julian slept all morning in the garden. Constance went often to the back bedroom windows to look down on him while we worked and stood sometimes, with the dust cloth in her hands, as though she were forgetting to come back and dust our mother's jewel box that held our mother's pearls, and her sapphire ring, and her brooch with diamonds. I looked out the window only once, to see Uncle Julian with his eyes closed and Charles standing nearby. It was ugly to think of Charles walking among the vegetables and under the apple trees and across the lawn where Uncle Julian slept.

"We'll let Father's room go this morning, Constance said, "because Charles is living there." Some time later she said, as though she had been thinking about it, "I wonder if it would be right for me to wear Mother's pearls. I have never worn pearls."

"They've always been in the box", I said. "You'd have to take them out."

"It's not likely that anyone would care," Constance said.

"I would care, if you looked more beautiful."

Constance laughed, and said, "I'm silly now. Why should I want to wear pearls?"

"They're better off in the box where they belong."

Charles had closed the door of our father's room so I could not look inside, but I wondered if he had moved our father's things, or put a hat or a handkerchief or a glove on the dresser beside our father's silver brushes. I wondered if he had looked into the closet or into the drawers. Our father's room was in the front of the house, and I wondered if Charles had looked down from the windows and out over the lawn and the long driveway to the road, and wanted to be on that road and away home.

"How long did it take Charles to get here?" I asked Constance.

"Four or five hours, I think," she said. "He came by bus to the village, and had to walk from there.

"Then it will take him four or five hours to get home again?"

"I suppose so. When he goes."

"But first he will have to walk back to the village?"

"Unless you take him on your winged horse."

"I don't have any winged horse," I said.

"Oh, Merricat," Constance said. "Charles is not a bad man.

There were sparkles in the mirrors and inside our mother's jewel box the diamonds and the pearls were shining in the darkness. Constance made shadows up and down the hall when she went to the window to look down on Uncle Julian and outside the new leaves moved quickly in the sunlight. Charles had only gotten in because the magic was broken; if I could re-seal the protection around Constance and shut Charles out he would have to leave the house. Every touch he made on the house must be erased.

"Charles is a ghost," I said, and Constance sighed.

I polished the doorknob to our father's room with my dust cloth, and at least one of Charles' touches was gone.

When we had neatened the upstairs rooms we came downstairs together, carrying our dust cloths and the broom and dustpan and mop like a pair of witches walking home. In the drawing room we dusted the golden-legged chairs and the harp, and everything sparkled at us, even the blue dress in the portrait of our mother. I dusted the wedding cake trim with a cloth on the end of a broom, staggering, and looking up and pretending that the ceiling was the floor and I was sweeping, hovering busily in space looking down at my broom, weightless and flying until the room swung dizzily and I was again on the floor looking up.

"Charles has not yet seen this room," Constance said. "Mother was so proud of it; I ought to have showed it to him right away."

"May I have sandwiches for my lunch? I want to go down to the creek."

"Sooner or later you're going to have to sit at the table with him, Merricat."

"Tonight at dinner. I promise."

We dusted the dining room and the silver tea service and the high wooden backs of the chairs. Constance went every few minutes into the kitchen to look out the back door and check on Uncle Julian, and once I heard her laugh and call, "Watch out for the mud down there," and I knew she was talking to Charles.

"Where did you let Charles sit last night at dinner?" I asked her once.

"In Father's chair," she said, and then, "He has a perfect right to sit there. He's a guest, and he even looks like Father."

"Will he sit there tonight?"

"Yes, Merricat."

I dusted our father's chair thoroughly, although it was small use if Charles was to sit there again tonight. I would have to clean all the silverware.

When we had finished neatening the house we came back to the kitchen. Charles was sitting at the kitchen table smoking his pipe and looking at Jonas, who was looking back at him. The pipe smoke was disagreeable in our kitchen, and I disliked having Jonas look at Charles. Constance went on out the back door to get Uncle Julian, and we could hear him say, "Dorothy? I was not asleep, Dorothy."

"Cousin Mary doesn't like me," Charles said again to Jonas. "I wonder if Cousin Mary knows how I get even with people who don't like me? Can I help you with that chair, Constance? Have a nice nap, Uncle?"

Constance made sandwiches for Jonas and me, and we ate them in a tree; I sat in a low fork and Jonas sat on a small branch near me, watching for birds.

"Jonas," I told him, "you are not to listen any more to Cousin Charles," and Jonas regarded me in wide eyed astonishment, that I should attempt to make decisions for him. "Jonas," I said, "he is a ghost," and Jonas closed his eyes and turned away.

It was important to choose the exact device to drive Charles away. An imperfect magic, or one incorrectly used, might only bring more disaster upon our house. I thought of my mother's jewels, since this was a day of sparkling things, but they might not be strong on a dull day, and Constance would be angry if I took them out of the box where they belonged, when she herself had decided against it. I thought of books, which are always strongly protective, but my father's book had fallen from the tree and let Charles in; books, then, were perhaps powerless against Charles. I lay back against the tree trunk and thought of magic; if Charles had not gone away before three days I would smash the mirror in the hall.

He sat across from me at dinner, in our father's chair, with his big white face blotting out the silver on the sideboard behind him. He watched while Constance cut up Uncle Julian's chicken and put it correctly on the plate, and he watched when Uncle Julian took the first bite and turned it over and over in his mouth.

"Here is a biscuit, Uncle Julian," Constance said. "Eat the soft inside."

Constance had forgotten and put dressing on my salad, but I would not have eaten anyway with that big white face watching. Jonas, who was not allowed chicken, sat on the floor beside my chair.

"Does he always eat with you?" Charles asked once, nodding his head at Uncle Julian.

"When he's well enough," Constance said.

"I wonder how you stand it," Charles said.

"I tell you, John," Uncle Julian said suddenly to Charles, "investments are not what they were when Father made his money. He was a shrewd man, but he never understood that times change.

"Who's he talking to?" Charles asked Constance.

"He thinks you are his brother John."

Charles looked at Uncle Julian for a long minute, and then shook his head and returned to his chicken.

"That was my dead wife's chair on your left, young man, Uncle Julian said. "I well recall the last time she sat there; we –"

"None of that," Charles said, and shook his finger at Uncle Julian; he had been holding his chicken in his hands to eat it, and his finger sparkled with grease. "We're not going to talk about it any more, Uncle."

Constance was pleased with me because I had come to the table and when I looked at her she smiled at me. She knew that I disliked eating when anyone was watching me, and she would save my plate and bring it to me later in the kitchen; she did not remember, I saw, that she had put dressing on my salad.

“Noticed this morning,” Charles said, taking up the platter of chicken and looking into it carefully, “that there was a broken step out back. How about I fix it for you one of these days? I might as well earn my keep.”

“It would be very kind of you,” Constance said. “That step has been a nuisance for a long time.”

“And I want to run into the village to get some pipe tobacco, so I can pick up anything you need there.”

“But I go to the village on Tuesday,” I said, startled.

“You do?” He looked at me across the table, big white face turned directly at me. I was quiet; I remembered that walking to the village was the first step on Charles’ way home.

“Merricat, dear, I think if Charles doesn’t mind it might be a good idea. I never feel quite comfortable when you’re away in the village.” Constance laughed. “I’ll give you a list, Charles, and the money, and you shall be the grocery boy.”

“You keep the money in the house?

“Of course.”

“Doesn’t sound very wise.”

“It’s in Father’s safe.”

“Even so.”

“I assure you, sir,” Uncle Julian said, “I made a point of examining the books thoroughly before committing myself. I cannot have been deceived.”

"So I'm taking little Cousin Mary's job away from her," Charles said, looking at me again. "You'll have to find something else for her to do, Connie."

I had made sure of what to say to him before I came to the table. "The Amanita phalloides," I said to him, "holds three different poisons. There is amanitin, which works slowly and is most potent. There is phalloidin, which acts at once, and there is phallin, which dissolves red corpuscles, although it is the least potent. The first symptoms do not appear until seven to twelve hours after eating, in some cases not before twenty four or even forty hours. The symptoms begin with violent stomach pains, cold sweat, vomiting –"

"Listen," Charles said. He put down his chicken. "You stop that," he said.

Constance was laughing. "Oh, Merricat," she said, laughing through the words, "you are silly. I taught her," she told Charles, "there are mushrooms by the creek and in the fields and I made her learn the deadly ones. Oh, Merricat.

"Death occurs between five and ten days after eating," I said.

"I don't think that's very funny," Charles said. "Silly Merricat," Constance said.

6

The house was not secure just because Charles had gone out of it and into the village; for one thing, Constance had given him a key to the gates. There had originally been a key for each of us; our father had a key, and our mother, and the keys were kept on a rack beside the kitchen door. When Charles started out for the village Constance gave him a key, perhaps our father's key, and a shopping list, and the money to pay for what he bought.

"You shouldn't keep money in the house like this," he said, holding it tight in his hand for a minute before he reached into a back pocket and took out a wallet. "Women alone like you are, you shouldn't keep money in the house."

I was watching him from my corner of the kitchen but I would not let Jonas come to me while Charles was in the house. "Are you sure you put everything down?" he asked Constance. "Hate to make two trips."

I waited until Charles was well along, perhaps almost to the black rock, and then I said, "He forgot the library books."

Constance looked at me for a minute. "Miss Wickedness," she said. "You wanted him to forget.

"How could he know about the library books? He doesn't belong in this house; he has nothing to do with our books."

"Do you know," Constance said, looking into a pot on the stove, "I think that soon we will be picking lettuce; the weather has stayed so warm."

"On the moon," I said, and then stopped.

"On the moon," Constance said, turning to smile at me. "you have lettuce all year round, perhaps?

"On the moon we have everything. Lettuce, and pumpkin pie and Amanita phalloides. We have cat-furred plants and horses dancing with their wings. All the locks are solid and tight, and there are no ghosts. On the moon Uncle Julian would be well and the sun would shine every day. You would wear our mother's pearls and sing, and the sun would shine all the time."

"I wish I could go to your moon. I wonder if I should start the gingerbread now; it will be cold if Charles is late.

"I'll be here to eat it," I said.

"But Charles said he loved gingerbread."

I was making a little house at the table, out of the library books, standing one across two set on edge. “Old witch,” I said, “you have a gingerbread house.”

“I do not,” Constance said. “I have a lovely house where I live with my sister Merricat.”

I laughed at her; she was worrying at the pot on the stove and she had flour on her face. “Maybe he’ll never come back,” I said.

“He has to; I’m making gingerbread for him.”

Since Charles had taken my occupation for Tuesday morning I had nothing to do. I wondered about going down to the creek, but I had no reason to suppose that the creek would even be there, since I never visited it on Tuesday mornings; would the people in the village be waiting for me, glancing from the corners of their eyes to see if I was coming, nudging one another, and then turn in astonishment when they saw Charles? Perhaps the whole village would falter and slow, bewildered at the lack of Miss Mary Katherine Blackwood? I giggled, thinking of Jim Donell and the Harris boys peering anxiously up the road to see if I was coming.

“What’s funny?” Constance asked, turning to see.

“I was thinking that you might make a gingerbread man, and I could name him Charles and eat him.”

“Oh, Merricat, please.”

I could tell that Constance was going to be irritable, partly because of me and partly because of the gingerbread, so I thought it wiser to run away. Since it was a free morning, and I was uneasy at going out of doors, it might be a good time to search out a device to use against Charles, and I started upstairs; the smell of baking gingerbread followed me almost halfway to the top. Charles had left his door open, not wide, but enough for me to get a hand inside.

When I pushed a little the door opened wide and I looked in at our father's room, which now belonged to Charles. Charles had made his bed, I noticed; his mother must have taught him. His suitcase was on a chair, but it was closed; there were things belonging to Charles on the dresser where our father's possessions had always been kept; I saw Charles' pipe, and a handkerchief, things that Charles had touched and used dirtying our father's room. One drawer of the dresser was a little open, and I thought again of Charles picking over our father's clothes. I walked very softly across the room because I did not want Constance to hear me from downstairs, and looked into the open drawer. I thought that Charles would not be pleased to know that I had caught him looking at our father's things, and something from this drawer might be extraordinarily powerful, since it would carry a guilt of Charles. I was not surprised to find that he had been looking at our father's jewelry; inside the drawer was a leather box which held, I knew, a watch and chain made of gold, and cuff links, and a signet ring. I would not touch our mother's jewelry, but Constance had not said anything about our father's jewelry, had not even come into this room to neaten, so I thought I could open the box and take something out. The watch was inside, in a small private box of its own, resting on a satin lining and not ticking, and the watch chain was curled beside it. I would not touch the ring; the thought of a ring around my finger always made me feel tied tight, because rings had no openings to get out of, but I liked the watch chain, which twisted and wound around my hand when I picked it up. I put the jewelry box carefully back inside the drawer and closed the drawer and went out of the room and closed the door after me, and took the watch chain into my room, where it curled again into a sleeping gold heap on the pillow.

I had intended to bury it, but I was sorry when I thought how long it had been there in the darkness in the box in our father's drawer, and I thought that it had earned a place up high, where it could sparkle in the sunlight, and I decided to nail it to the tree where the book had come down. While Constance made gingerbread in the kitchen, and Uncle Julian slept in his room, and Charles walked in and out of the village stores, I lay on my bed and played with my golden chain.

"That's my brother's gold watch chain," Uncle Julian said, leaning forward curiously. "I thought he was buried in it."

Charles' hand was shaking as he held it out; I could see it shaking against the yellow of the wall behind him. "In a tree," he said, and his voice was shaking too. "I found it nailed to a tree, for God's sake. What kind of a house is this?"

"It's not important," Constance said. "Really, Charles, it's not important."

"Not important? Connie, this thing's made of gold."

"But no one wants it."

"One of the links is smashed," Charles said, mourning over the chain. "I could have worn it; what a hell of a way to treat a valuable thing. We could have sold it," he said to Constance.

"But why?"

"I certainly did think he was buried in it," Uncle Julian said. "He was never a man to give things away easily. I suppose he never knew they kept it from him."

"It's worth money," Charles said, explaining carefully to Constance. "This is a gold watch chain, worth possibly a good deal of money. Sensible people don't go around nailing this kind of valuable thing to trees."

"Lunch will be cold if you stand there worrying."

"I'll take it up and put it back in the box where it belongs," Charles said. No one but me noticed that he knew where it had been kept. "Later, he said, looking at me, “we’ll find out how it got on the tree.”

“Merricat put it there,” Constance said. “Please do come to lunch.”

“How do you know? About Mary?”

“She always does.” Constance smiled at me. “Silly Merricat.”

“Does she indeed?” said Charles. He came slowly over to the table, looking at me.

“He was a man very fond of his person,” Uncle Julian said. “Given to adorning himself, and not overly clean.

It was quiet in the kitchen; Constance was in Uncle Julian’s room, putting him to bed for his afternoon nap. “Where would poor Cousin Mary go if her sister turned her out?” Charles asked Jonas, who listened quietly. “What would poor Cousin Mary do if Constance and Charles didn’t love her?”

I cannot think why it seemed to me that I might simply ask Charles to go away. Perhaps I thought that he had to be asked politely just once; perhaps the idea of going away had just not come into his mind and it was necessary to put it there. I decided that asking Charles to go away was the next thing to do, before he was everywhere in the house and could never be eradicated. Already the house smelled of him, of his pipe and his shaving lotion, and the noise of him echoed in the rooms all day long; his pipe was sometimes on the kitchen table and his gloves or his tobacco pouch or his constant boxes of matches were scattered through our rooms. He walked into the village each afternoon and brought back newspapers which he left lying anywhere, even in the kitchen where Constance might see them. A spark from his pipe had left a tiny burn on the rose brocade of a chair in the drawing room; Constance had not yet noticed it and I thought not to tell her because I hoped that the house, injured, would reject him by itself.

“Constance,” I asked her on a bright morning; Charles had been in our house for three days then, I thought; “Constance, has he said anything yet about leaving?”

She was increasingly cross with me when I wanted Charles to leave; always before Constance had listened and smiled and only been angry when Jonas and I had been wicked, but now she frowned at me often, as though I somehow looked different to her. “I’ve told you,” she said to me, “I’ve told you and told you that I won’t hear any more silliness about Charles. He is our cousin and he has been invited to visit us and he will probably go when he is ready.”

“He makes Uncle Julian sicker.”

“He’s only trying to keep Uncle Julian from thinking about sad things all the time. And I agree with him. Uncle Julian should be cheerful.”

“Why should he be cheerful if he’s going to die?

“I haven’t been doing my duty,” Constance said.

“I don’t know what that means.”

“I’ve been hiding here,” Constance said slowly, as though she were not at all sure of the correct order of the words. She stood by the stove in the sunlight with color in her hair and eyes and not smiling, and she said slowly, “I have let Uncle Julian spend all his time living in the past and particularly re-living that one dreadful day. I have let you run wild; how long has it been since you combed your hair?”

I could not allow myself to be angry, and particularly not angry with Constance, but I wished Charles dead. Constance needed guarding more than ever before and if I became angry and looked aside she might very well be lost. I said very cautiously, “On the moon...”

PART IV

"ON THE MOON," Constance said, and laughed unpleasantly. "It's all been my fault," she said. "I didn't realize how wrong I was, letting things go on and on because I wanted to hide. It wasn't fair to you or to Uncle Julian."

"And Charles is also mending the broken step?"

"Uncle Julian should be in a hospital, with nurses to take care of him. And you –" She opened her eyes wide suddenly, as though seeing her old Merricat again, and then she held out her arms to me. "Oh, Merricat," she said, and laughed a little. "Listen to me scolding you; how silly I am."

I went to her and put my arms around her. "I love you, Constance."

"You're a good child, Merricat," she said.

That was when I left her and went outside to talk to Charles. I knew I would dislike talking to Charles, but it was almost too late to ask him politely and I thought I should ask him once. Even the garden had become a strange landscape with Charles' figure in it; I could see him standing under the apple trees and the trees were crooked and shortened beside him. I came out the kitchen door and walked slowly toward him. I was trying to think charitably of him, since I would never be able to speak kindly until I did, but whenever I thought of his big white face grinning at me across the table or watching me whenever I moved I wanted to beat at him until he went away, I wanted to stamp on him after he was dead, and see him lying dead on the grass. So I made my mind charitable toward Charles and came up to him slowly.

"Cousin Charles?" I said, and he turned to look at me. I thought of seeing him dead. "Cousin Charles?"

"Well?"

"I have decided to ask you please to go away."

"All right," he said. "You asked me."

"Please will you go away?

"No," he said.

I could not think of anything further to say. I saw that he was wearing our father's gold watch chain, even with the crooked link, and I knew without seeing that our father's watch was in his pocket. I thought that tomorrow he would be wearing our father's signet ring, and I wondered if he would make Constance put on our mother's pearls.

"You stay away from Jonas," I said.

"As a matter of fact," he said, "come about a month from now, I wonder who will still be here? You," he said, "or me?

I ran back into the house and straight up to our father's room, where I hammered with a shoe at the mirror over the dresser until it cracked across. Then I went into my room and rested my head on the window sill and slept.

I was remembering these days to be kinder to Uncle Julian. I was sorry because he was spending more and more time in his room, taking both his breakfast and his lunch on a tray and only eating his dinners in the dining room under the despising eye of Charles.

"Can't you feed him or something?" Charles asked Constance. "He's got food all over himself."

"I didn't mean to," Uncle Julian said, looking at Constance.

"Ought to wear a baby bib," Charles said, laughing.

While Charles sat in the kitchen in the mornings eating hugely of ham and potatoes and fried eggs and hot biscuits and doughnuts and toast, Uncle Julian drowsed in his room over his hot milk and sometimes when he called to Constance, Charles said, “Tell him you’re busy; you don’t have to go running every time he wets his bed; he just likes being waited on.”

I always had my breakfast earlier than Charles on those sunny mornings, and if he came down before I finished I would take my plate out and sit on the grass under the chestnut tree. Once I brought Uncle Julian a new leaf from the chestnut tree and put it on his window sill. I stood outside in the sunlight and looked in at him lying still in the dark room and tried to think of ways I might be kinder. I thought of him lying there alone dreaming old Uncle Julian dreams, and I went into the kitchen and said to Constance, “Will you make Uncle Julian a little soft cake for his lunch?”

She’s too busy now,” Charles said with his mouth full. Your sister works like a slave.”

“Will you?” I asked Constance.

“I’m sorry,” Constance said. “I have so much to do.”

“But Uncle Julian is going to die.”

“Constance is too busy,” Charles said. “Run along and play.”

I followed Charles one afternoon when he went to the village. I stopped by the black rock, because it was not one of my days for going into the village, and watched Charles go down the main street. He stopped and talked for a minute to Stella, who was standing in the sunlight outside her shop, and he bought a paper; when I saw him sit down on the benches with the other men I turned and went back to our house. If I went into the village shopping again Charles would be one of the men who watched me going past. Constance was working in her garden and Uncle Julian slept in his chair in the sun, and when I sat quietly on my bench Constance asked, not looking up at me, “Where have you been, Merricat?”

“Wandering. Where is my cat?

“I think,” Constance said, “that we are going to have to forbid your wandering. It’s time you quieted down a little.”

“Does we mean you and Charles?

“Merricat.” Constance turned toward me, sitting back against her feet and folding her hands before her. “I never realized until lately how wrong I was to let you and Uncle Julian hide here with me. We should have faced the world and tried to live normal lives; Uncle Julian should have been in a hospital all these years, with good care and nurses to watch him. We should have been living like other people. You should... “ She stopped, and waved her hands helplessly. “You should have boy friends,” she said finally, and then began to laugh because she sounded funny even to herself.

“I have Jonas,” I said, and we both laughed and Uncle Julian woke up suddenly and laughed a thin old cackle.

“You are the silliest person I ever saw,” I told Constance, and went off to look for Jonas. While I was wandering Charles came back to our house; he brought a newspaper and a bottle of wine for his dinner and our father’s scarf which I had used to tie shut the gate, because Charles had a key.

“I could have worn this scarf,” he said irritably, and I heard him from the vegetable garden where I had found Jonas sleeping in a tangle of young lettuce plants. “It’s an expensive thing, and I like the colors.”

“It belonged to Father,” Constance said.

“That reminds me,” Charles said. “One of these days I’d like to look over the rest of his clothes.” He was quiet for a minute; I thought he was probably sitting down on my bench. Then he went on, very lightly. “Also,” he said, “while I’m here, I ought to go over your father’s papers. There might be something important.”

“Not my papers,” Uncle Julian said. “That young man is not to put a finger on my papers.”

“I haven’t even seen your father’s study,” Charles said.

“We don’t use it. Nothing in there is ever touched.”

“Except the safe, of course,” Charles said.

“Constance?”

“Yes, Uncle Julian?”

“I want you to have my papers afterwards. No one else is to touch my papers, do you hear me?”

“Yes, Uncle Julian.”

I was not allowed to open the safe where Constance kept our father’s money. I was allowed to go into the study, but I disliked it and never even touched the doorknob. I hoped Constance would not open the study for Charles; he already had our father’s bedroom, after all, and our father’s watch and his gold chain and his signet ring. I was thinking that being a demon and a ghost must be very difficult, even for Charles; if he ever forgot, or let his disguise drop for a minute, he would be recognized at once and driven away; he must be extremely careful to use the same voice every time, and present the same face and the same manner without a slip; he must be constantly on guard against betraying himself. I wondered if he would turn back to his true form when he was dead. When it grew cooler and I knew that Constance would be taking Uncle Julian indoors I left Jonas asleep on the lettuce plants and came back into the house. When I came into the kitchen Uncle Julian was poking furiously at the papers on his table, trying to get them into a small heap, and Constance was peeling potatoes. I could hear Charles moving around upstairs, and for a minute the kitchen was warm and glowing and bright.

“Jonas is asleep in the lettuce,” I said.

“There is nothing I like more than cat fur in my salad,” Constance said amiably.

“It is time that I had a box,” Uncle Julian announced. He sat back and looked angrily at his papers. “They must all be put into a box, this very minute. Constance?”

“Yes, Uncle Julian; I can find you a box.”

“If I put all my papers in a box and put the box in my room, then that dreadful young man cannot touch them. He is a dreadful young man, Constance.”

“Really, Uncle Julian, Charles is very kind.”

“He is dishonest. His father was dishonest. Both my brothers were dishonest. If he tries to take my papers you must stop him; I cannot permit tampering with my papers and I will not tolerate intrusion. You must tell him this, Constance. He is a bastard.”

“Uncle Julian –”

“In a purely metaphorical sense, I assure you. Both my brothers married women of very strong will. That is merely a word used — among men, my dear; I apologize for submitting you to such a word — to categorize an undesirable fellow.”

Constance turned without speaking and opened the door which led to the cellar stairs and to the rows and rows of food preserved at the very bottom of our house. She went quietly down the stairs, and we could hear Charles moving upstairs and Constance moving downstairs.

“William of Orange was a bastard,” Uncle Julian said to himself; he took up a bit of paper and made a note. Constance came back up the cellar stairs with a box which she brought to Uncle Julian. “Here is a clean box,” she said.

“What for?” Uncle Julian asked.

“To put your papers in.

“That young man is not to touch my papers, Constance. I will not have that young man going through my papers.”

“This is all my fault,” Constance said, turning to me. “He should be in a hospital.”

“I will put my papers in that box, Constance, my dear, if you will be kind enough to hand it to me.”

“He has a happy time,” I said to Constance.

“I should have done everything differently.” It would certainly not be kind to put Uncle Julian in a hospital.”

“But I’ll have to if I –” and Constance stopped suddenly, and turned back to the sink and the potatoes. “Shall I put walnuts in the applesauce?” she asked.

I sat very quietly, listening to what she had almost said. Time was running shorter, tightening around our house, crushing me. I thought it might be time to smash the big mirror in the hall, but then Charles’ feet were coming heavily down the stairs and through the hall and into the kitchen.

“Well, well, everybody’s here, he said. “What’s for dinner?”

That evening Constance played for us in the drawing room, the tall curve of her harp making shadows against our mother’s portrait and the soft notes falling into the air like petals. She played “Over the Sea to Skye” and Flow Gently, Sweet Afton” and “I Saw a Lady,” and other songs our mother used to play, but I never remember that our mother’s fingers touched the strings so lightly with such a breath of melody. Uncle Julian kept himself awake, listening and dreaming, and even Charles did not quite dare to put his feet on the furniture in the drawing room, although the smoke from his pipe drifted against the wedding cake ceiling and he moved restlessly while Constance played.

“A delicate touch,” Uncle Julian said once. All the Blackwood women had a gifted touch.

Charles stopped by the fireplace to knock his pipe against the grate. “Pretty,” he said, taking down one of the Dresden figurines. Constance stopped playing and he turned to look at her. “Valuable?”

“Not particularly, Constance said. “My mother liked them.”

Uncle Julian said, “My particular favorite was always ‘Bluebells’ of Scotland’; Constance, my dear, would you –”

“No more now,” Charles said. “Now Constance and I want to talk, Uncle. We’ve got plans to make.”

7

Thursday was my most powerful day. It was the right day to settle with Charles. In the morning Constance decided to make spice cookies for dinner; that was too bad, because if any of us had known we could have told her not to bother, that Thursday was going to be the last day. Even Uncle Julian did not suspect, however; he felt a little stronger on Thursday morning and late in the morning Constance brought him into the kitchen which smelled richly of spice cookies and he continued putting his papers into the box. Charles had taken a hammer and found nails and a board and was pounding away mercilessly at the broken step; from the kitchen window I could see that he was doing it very badly and I was pleased; I wished the hammer to pound his thumb. I stayed in the kitchen until I was certain that they would all keep where they were for a while and then I went upstairs and into our father’s room, walking softly so Constance would not know I was there. The first thing to do was stop our father’s watch which Charles had started. I knew he was not wearing it to mend the broken step because he was not wearing the chain, and I found the watch and the chain and our father’s signet ring on our father’s dresser with Charles’ tobacco pouch and four books of matches. I was not allowed to touch matches but in any case I would not have touched Charles' matches. I took up the watch and listened to it ticking because Charles had started it; I could not turn it all the way back to where it had formerly been because he had kept it going for two or three days, but I twisted the winding knob backward until there was a small complaining crack from the watch and the ticking stopped. When I was sure that he could never start it ticking again I put it back gently where I had found it; one thing, at least, had been released from Charles' spell and I thought that I had at last broken through his tight skin of invulnerability. I need not bother about the chain, which was broken, and I disliked the ring. Eliminating Charles from everything he had touched was almost impossible, but it seemed to me that if I altered our father's room, and perhaps later the kitchen and the drawing room and the study, and even finally the garden, Charles would be lost, shut off from what he recognized, and would have to concede that this was not the house he had come to visit and so would go away. I altered our father's room very quickly, and almost without noise.

During the night I had gone out in the darkness and brought in a large basket filled with pieces of wood and broken sticks and leaves and scraps of glass and metal from the field and the wood. Jonas came back and forth with me, amused at our walking silently while everyone slept. When I altered our father's room I took the books from the desk and blankets from the bed, and I put my glass and metal and wood and sticks and leaves into the empty places. I could not put the things which had been our father's into my own room, so I carried them softly up the stairs to the attic where everything else of theirs was kept. I poured a pitcher of water onto our father's bed; Charles could not sleep there again. The mirror over the dresser was already smashed; it would not reflect Charles. He would not be able to find books or clothes and would be lost in a room of leaves and broken sticks. I tore down the curtains and threw them on the floor; now Charles would have to look outside and see the driveway going away and the road beyond.

I looked at the room with pleasure. A demon-ghost would not easily find himself here. I was back in my own room, lying on the bed and playing with Jonas when I heard Charles down below in the garden shouting to Constance. “This is too much,” he was saying, “simply too much.”

“What now?” Constance asked; she had come to the kitchen door and I could hear Uncle Julian somewhere below saying, “Tell that young fool to stop his bellowing.”

I looked out quickly; the broken step had clearly been too much for Charles because the hammer and the board lay on the ground and the step was still broken; Charles was coming up the path from the creek and he was carrying something; I wondered what he had found now.

“Did you ever hear of anything like this?” he was saying; even though he was close now he was still shouting. “Look at this, Connie, just look at it.”

“I suppose it belongs to Merricat,” Constance said.

“It does not belong to Merricat, or anything like it. This is money.”

“I remember,” Constance said. “Silver dollars. I remember when she buried them.”

“There must be twenty or thirty dollars here; this is outrageous.”

“She likes to bury things.”

Charles was still shouting, shaking my box of silver dollars back and forth violently. I wondered if he would drop it; I would like to have seen Charles on the ground, scrabbling after my silver dollars.

“It’s not her money,” he was shouting, “she has no right to hide it.” I wondered how he had happened to find the box where I had buried it;

perhaps Charles and money found each other no matter how far apart they were, or perhaps Charles was engaged in systematically digging up every inch of our land. This is terrible," he was shouting, "terrible; she has no right."

"No harm is done," Constance said. I could see that she was puzzled and somewhere inside the kitchen Uncle Julian was pounding and calling her.

"How do you know there isn't more?" Charles held the box out accusingly. "How do you know that crazy kid hasn't buried thousands of dollars all over, where we'll never find it"?

"She likes to bury things," Constance said. "Coming, Uncle Julian."

Charles followed her inside, still holding the box tenderly. I supposed I could bury the box again after he had gone, but I was not pleased. I came to the top of the stairs and watched Charles proceeding down the hall to the study; he was clearly going to put my silver dollars into our father's safe. I ran down the stairs quickly and quietly and out through the kitchen. "Silly Merricat," Constance said to me as I passed; she was putting spice cookies in long rows to cool.

I was thinking of Charles. I could turn him into a fly and drop him into a spider's web and watch him tangled and helpless and struggling, shut into the body of a dying buzzing fly; I could wish him dead until he died. I could fasten him to a tree and keep him there until he grew into the trunk and bark grew over his mouth. I could bury him in the hole where my box of silver dollars had been so safe until he came; if he was under the ground I could walk over him stamping my feet.

He had not even bothered to fill in the hole. I could imagine him walking here and noticing the spot where the ground was disturbed, stopping to poke in it and then digging wildly with both his hands, scowling and finally greedy and shocked and gasping when he found my box of silver dollars.

“Don’t blame me,” I said to the hole; I would have to find something else to bury here and I wished it could be Charles.

The hole would hold his head nicely. I laughed when I found a round stone the right size, and scratched a face on it and buried it in the hole. “Goodbye, Charles,” I said. “Next time don’t go around taking other people’s things.”

I stayed by the creek for an hour or so; I was staying by the creek when Charles finally went upstairs and into the room which was no longer his and no longer our father’s. I thought for one minute that Charles had been in my shelter, but nothing was disturbed, as it would have been if Charles had come scratching around. He had been near enough to bother me, however, so I cleared out the grass and leaves I usually slept on, and shook out my blanket, and put in everything fresh. I washed the flat rock where I sometimes ate my meals, and put a better branch across the entrance. I wondered if Charles would come back looking for more silver dollars and I wondered if he would like my six blue marbles. I was finally hungry and went back to our house, and there in the kitchen was Charles, still shouting.

“I can’t believe it,” he was saying, quite shrill by now, “I simply can’t believe it”.

I wondered how long Charles was going to go on shouting. He made a black noise in our house and his voice was getting thinner and higher; perhaps if he shouted long enough he would squeak. I sat on the kitchen step next to Jonas and thought that perhaps Constance might laugh out loud if Charles squeaked at her. It never happened, however, because as soon as he saw that I was sitting on the step he was quiet for a minute and then when he spoke he had brought his voice down and made it slow.

“So you’re back,” he said. He did not move toward me but I felt his voice as though he were coming closer. I did not look at him; I looked at

Jonas, who was looking at him.

"I haven't quite decided what I'm going to do with you," he said. "But whatever I do, you'll remember it".

"Don't bully her, Charles," Constance said. I did not like her voice either because it was strange and I knew she was uncertain. "It's all my fault, anyway." That was her new way of thinking.

I thought I would help Constance, perhaps make her laugh. "Amanita pantherina," I said, "highly poisonous. Amanita rubescens, edible and good. The Cicuta maculata is the water hemlock, one of the most poisonous of wild plants if taken internally. The Apocynum cannabinum is not a poisonous plant of the first importance, but the snakeberry—"

"Stop it," Charles said, still quiet.

"Constance," I said, "we came home for lunch, Jonas and I."

"First you will have to explain to Cousin Charles," Constance said, and I was chilled.

Charles was sitting at the kitchen table, with his chair pushed back and turned a little to face me in the doorway. Constance stood behind him, leaning against the sink. Uncle Julian sat at his table, stirring papers. There were rows and rows of spice cookies cooling and the kitchen still smelled of cinnamon and nutmeg. I wondered if Constance would give Jonas a spice cookie with his supper but of course she never did because that was the last day.

"Now listen," Charles said. He had brought down a handful of sticks and dirt, perhaps to prove to Constance that they had really been in his room, or perhaps because he was going to clean it away handful by handful; the sticks and dirt looked wrong on the kitchen table and I thought that perhaps one reason Constance looked so sad was the dirt on her clean table. "Now listen," Charles said.

“I cannot work in here if that young man is going to talk all the time,” Uncle Julian said. “Constance, tell him he must be quiet for a little while.”

“You, too,” Charles said in that soft voice. “I have put up with enough from both of you. One of you fouls my room and goes around burying money and the other one can’t even remember my name.”

“Charles,” I said to Jonas. I was the one who buried money, certainly, so I was not the one who could not remember his name; poor old Uncle Julian could not bury anything and could not remember Charles’ name. I would remember to be kinder to Uncle Julian. “Will you give Uncle Julian a spice cookie for his dinner?” I asked Constance. “And Jonas one too?”

“Mary Katherine,” Charles said, “I am going to give you one chance to explain. Why did you make that mess in my room?

There was no reason to answer him. He was not Constance, and anything I said to him might perhaps help him to get back his thin grasp on our house. I sat on the door step and played with Jonas’s ears, which flicked and snapped when I tickled them.

“Answer me,” Charles said.

“How often must I tell you, John, that I know nothing whatsoever about it?” Uncle Julian slammed his hand down onto his papers and scattered them. “It is a quarrel between the women and none of my affair. I do not involve myself in my wife’s petty squabbles and I strongly advise you to do the same. It is not fitting for men of dignity to threaten and reproach because women have had a falling out. You lose stature, John, you lose stature.”

“Shut up,” Charles said; he was shouting again and I was pleased. “Constance,” he said, lowering his voice a little, “this is terrible. The sooner you’re out of it the better.”

"– will not be told to shut up by my own brother. We will leave your house, John, if that is really your desire. I ask you, however, to reflect. My wife and I –"

"It's my fault, all of it," Constance said. I thought she was going to cry. It was unthinkable for Constance to cry again after all these years, but I was held tight, I was chilled, and I could not move to go over to her.

"You are evil," I said to Charles. "You are a ghost and a demon."

"What the hell?" Charles said.

"Don't pay any attention," Constance told him. "Don't listen to Merricat's nonsense."

"You are a very selfish man, John, perhaps even a scoundrel, and overly fond of the world's goods; I sometimes wonder, John, if you are every bit the gentleman".

"It's a crazy house," Charles said with conviction. "Constance, this is a crazy house."

"I'll clean your room, right away. Charles, please don't be angry." Constance looked at me wildly, but I was held tight and could not see her.

"Uncle Julian." Charles got up and went over to where Uncle Julian sat at his table.

"Don't you touch my papers," Uncle Julian said, trying to cover them with his hands. "You get away from my papers, you bastard."

"What?" said Charles.

"I apologize," Uncle Julian said to Constance. "Not language fitting for your ears, my dear. Just tell this young bastard to stay away from my papers."

"Look," Charles said to Uncle Julian, "I tell you I've had enough of this. I am not going to touch your silly papers and I am not your brother John."

"Of course you are not my brother John; you are not tall enough by half an inch. You are a young bastard and I desire that you return to your father, who, to my shame, is my brother Arthur, and tell him I said so. In the presence of your mother, if you choose; she is a strong-willed woman but lacks family feeling. She desired that the family connection be severed. I have consequently no objection to your repeating my high language in her presence."

"That has all been forgotten, Uncle Julian; Constance and I –"

"I think you have forgotten yourself, young man, to take such a tone to me. I am pleased that you are repentant, but you have taken far too much of my time. Please be extremely quiet now."

"Not until I have finished with your niece Mary Katherine."

"My niece Mary Katherine has been a long time dead, young man. She did not survive the loss of her family; I supposed you knew that."

"What?" Charles turned furiously to Constance.

"My niece Mary Katherine died in an orphanage, of neglect, during her sister's trial for murder. But she is of very little consequence to my book, and so we will have done with her."

"She is sitting right here." Charles waved his hands, and his face was red.

"Young man." Uncle Julian put down his pencil and half-turned to face Charles. "I have pointed out to you, I believe, the importance of my work. You choose constantly to interrupt me. I have had enough. You must either be quiet or you must leave this room."

I was laughing at Charles and even Constance was smiling. Charles stood staring at Uncle Julian, and Uncle Julian, going through his papers, said to himself, "Damned impertinent puppy," and then, "Constance"?

"Yes, Uncle Julian?"

“Why have my papers been put into this box? I shall have to take them all out again and rearrange them. Has that young man been near my papers? Has he?”

“No, Uncle Julian.”

“He takes a great deal upon himself, I think. When is he going away?”

“I’m not going away,” Charles said. “I am going to stay”.

“Impossible,” Uncle Julian said. We have not the room. Constance?”

“Yes, Uncle Julian?”

“I would like a chop for my lunch. A nice little chop, neatly broiled. Perhaps a mushroom.”

“Yes,” Constance said with relief, “I should start lunch. As though she were happy to be doing it at last she came to the table to brush away the dirt and leaves that Charles had left there. She brushed them into a paper bag and threw the bag into the wastebasket, and then she came back with a cloth and scrubbed the table. Charles looked at her and at me and at Uncle Julian. He was clearly baffled, unable to grasp his fingers tightly around anything he saw or heard; it was a joyful sight, to see the first twistings and turnings of the demon caught, and I was very proud of Uncle Julian. Constance smiled down at Charles, happy that no one was shouting any more; she was not going to cry now and perhaps she too was getting a quick glimpse of a straining demon because she said, “You look tired, Charles. Go and rest till lunch.”

“Go and rest where?” he said and he was still angry. “I am not going to stir out of here until something is done about that girl.”

“Merricat? Why should anything be done? I said I would clean your room.”

“Aren’t you even going to punish her?”

"Punish me?" I was standing then, shivering against the door frame. "Punish me? You mean send me to bed without my dinner?"

And I ran. I ran until I was in the field of grass, in the very center where it was safe, and I sat there, the grass taller than my head and hiding me. Jonas found me, and we sat there together where no one could ever see us.

After a very long time I stood up again because I knew where I was going. I was going to the summerhouse. I had not been near the summerhouse for six years, but Charles had blackened the world and only the summer house would do. Jonas would not follow me; he disliked the summer house and when he saw me turning onto the overgrown path which led there he went another way as though he had something important to do and would meet me somewhere later. No one had ever liked the summer house very much, I remembered. Our father had planned it and had intended to lead the creek near it and build a tiny waterfall, but something had gotten into the wood and stone and paint when the summer house was built and made it bad. Our mother had once seen a rat in the doorway looking in and nothing after that could persuade her there again, and where our mother did not go, no one else went.

I had never buried anything around here. The ground was black and wet and nothing buried would have been quite comfortable. The trees pressed too closely against the sides of the summer house, and breathed heavily on its roof, and the poor flowers planted here once had either died or grown into huge tasteless wild things. When I stood near the summer house and looked at it I thought it the ugliest place I had ever seen; I remembered that our mother had quite seriously asked to have it burned down.

Inside was all wet and dark. I disliked sitting on the stone floor but there was no other place; once, I recalled, there had been chairs here and perhaps even a low table but these were gone now, carried off or rotted away. I sat on the floor and placed all of them correctly in my mind, in the circle around the dining room table. Our father sat at the head. Our mother sat at the foot. Uncle Julian sat on one hand of our mother, and our brother Thomas on the other; beside my father sat our Aunt Dorothy and Constance. I sat between Constance and Uncle Julian, in my rightful, my own and proper, place at the table. Slowly I began to listen to them talking.

"– to buy a book for Mary Katherine. Lucy, should not Mary Katherine have a new book?"

"Mary Katherine should have anything she wants, my dear. Our most loved daughter must have anything she likes."

"Constance, your sister lacks butter. Pass it to her at once, please."

"Mary Katherine, we love you."

"You must never be punished. Lucy, you are to see to it that our most loved daughter Mary Katherine is never punished."

"Mary Katherine would never allow herself to do anything wrong; there is never any need to punish her."

"I have heard, Lucy, of disobedient children being sent to their beds without dinner as a punishment. That must not be permitted with our Mary Katherine."

"I quite agree, my dear. Mary Katherine must never be punished. Must never be sent to bed without her dinner. Mary Katherine will never allow herself to do anything inviting punishment."

"Our beloved, our dearest Mary Katherine must be guarded and cherished. Thomas, give your sister your dinner; she would like more to eat."

"Dorothy — Julian. Rise when our beloved daughter rises."

"Bow all your heads to our adored Mary Katherine."

I had to go back for dinner; it was vital that i sit at the dinner table with Constance and Uncle Julian and Charles. It was unthinkable that they should sit there, eating their dinner and talking and passing food to one another, and see my place empty. As Jonas and I came along the path and through the garden in the gathering darkness I looked at the house with all the richness of love I contained; it was a good house, and soon it would be cleaned and fair again. I stopped for a minute, looking, and Jonas brushed my leg and spoke softly, in curiosity.

"I'm looking at our house," I told him and he stood quietly beside me, looking up with me. The roof pointed firmly against the sky, and the walls met one another compactly, and the windows shone darkly; it was a good house, and nearly clean. There was light from the kitchen window and from the windows of the dining room; it was time for their dinner and I must be there. I wanted to be inside the house, with the door shut behind me.

When I opened the kitchen door to go inside I could feel at once that the house still held anger, and I wondered that anyone could keep one emotion so long; I could hear his voice clearly from the kitchen, going on and on.

"–must be done about her," he was saying, "things simply cannot continue like this."

Poor Constance, I thought, having to listen and listen and watch the food getting cold. Jonas ran ahead of me into the dining room, and Constance said, "Here she is."

I stood in the dining room doorway and looked carefully for a minute. Constance was wearing pink, and her hair was combed back nicely; she smiled at me when I looked at her, and I knew she was tired of listening. Uncle Julian's wheel chair was pushed up tight against the table and I was sorry to see that Constance had tucked his napkin under his chin; it was too bad that Uncle Julian should not be allowed to eat freely. He was eating meat loaf, and peas which Constance had preserved one fragrant summer day; Constance had cut the meat loaf into small pieces and Uncle Julian mashed meat loaf and peas with the back of his spoon and stirred them before trying to get them into his mouth. He was not listening, but the voice went on and on.

"So you decided to come back again, did you? And high time, too, young lady; your sister and I have been trying to decide how to teach you a lesson."

"Wash your face, Merricat," Constance said gently. "And comb your hair; we do not want you untidy at table, and your Cousin Charles is already angry with you."

Charles pointed his fork at me. "I may as well tell you, Mary, that your tricks are over for good. Your sister and I have decided that we have had just exactly enough of hiding and destroying and temper."

I disliked having a fork pointed at me and I disliked the sound of the voice never stopping; I wished he would put food on the fork and put it into his mouth and strangle himself.

"Run along, Merricat," Constance said, "your dinner will be cold." She knew I would not eat dinner sitting at that table and she would bring me my dinner in the kitchen afterward, but I thought that she did not want to remind Charles of that and so give him one more thing to talk about. I smiled at her and went into the hall, with the voice still talking behind me. There had not been this many words sounded in our house for a long time, and it was going to take a while to clean them out. I walked heavily going up the stairs so they could hear that I was surely going up, but when I reached the top I went as softly as Jonas behind me.

Constance had cleaned the room where he was living. It looked very empty, because all she had done was take things out; she had nothing to put back because I had carried all of it to the attic. I knew the dresser drawers were empty, and the closet, and the bookshelves. There was no mirror, and a broken watch and a smashed chain lay alone on the dresser top. Constance had taken away the wet bedding, and I supposed she had dried and turned the mattress, because the bed was made up again. The long curtains were gone, perhaps to be washed. He had been lying on the bed, because it was disarranged, and his pipe, still burning, lay on the table beside the bed; I supposed that he had been lying here when Constance called him to dinner, and I wondered if he had looked around and around the altered room, trying to find something familiar, hoping that perhaps the angle of the closet door or the light on the ceiling would bring everything back to him again. I was sorry that Constance had to turn the mattress alone; usually I helped her but perhaps he had come and offered to do it for her. She had even brought him a clean saucer for his pipe; our house did not have ashtrays and when he kept trying to find places to put down his pipe Constance had brought a set of chipped saucers from the pantry shelf and given them to him to hold his pipe. The saucers were pink, with gold leaves around the rim; they were from a set older than any I remembered.

"Who used them?" I asked Constance, when she brought them into the kitchen. "Where are their cups?"

"I've never seen them used; they come from a time before I was in the kitchen. Some great-grandmother brought them with her dowry and they were used and broken and replaced and finally put away on the top shelf of the pantry; there are only these saucers and three dinner plates."

"They belong in the pantry," I said. "Not put around the house."

Constance had given them to Charles and now they were scattered, instead of spending their little time decently put away on a shelf. There was one in the drawing room and one in the dining room and one, I supposed, in the study. They were not fragile, because the one now in the bedroom had not cracked although the pipe on it was burning. I had known all day that I would find something here; I brushed the saucer and the pipe off the table into the wastebasket and they fell softly onto the newspapers he had brought into the house.

I was wondering about my eyes; one of my eyes — the left — saw everything golden and yellow and orange, and the other eye saw shades of blue and grey and green; perhaps one eye was for daylight and the other was for night. If everyone in the world saw different colors from different eyes there might be a great many new colors still to be invented. I had reached the staircase to go downstairs before I remembered and had to go back to wash, and comb my hair. What took you so long?" he asked when I sat down at the table. "What have you been doing up there?"

"Will you make me a cake with pink frosting? I asked Constance. "With little gold leaves around the edge? Jonas and I are going to have a party.

"Perhaps tomorrow," Constance said.

"We are going to have a long talk after dinner," Charles said.

"Solarium dulcamara," I told him.

"What?" he said.

"Deadly nightshade", Constance said. "Charles, please let it wait."

"I've had enough," he said.

"Constance?"

"Yes, Uncle Julian?

"I have cleaned my plate." Uncle Julian found a morsel of meat loaf on his napkin and put it into his mouth. "What do I have now?"

"Perhaps a little more, Uncle Julian? It is a pleasure to see you so hungry."

"I feel considerably better tonight. I have not felt so hearty for days."

I was pleased that Uncle Julian was well and I knew he was happy because he had been so discourteous to Charles. While Constance was cutting up another small piece of meat loaf Uncle Julian looked at Charles with an evil shine in his old eyes, and I knew he was going to say something wicked. “Young man”, he began at last, but Charles turned his head suddenly to look into the hall.

“I smell smoke,” Charles said.

Constance paused and lifted her head and turned to the kitchen door. “The stove?” she said and got up quickly to go into the kitchen.

“Young man –”

“There is certainly smoke.” Charles went to look into the hall. “I smell it out here,” he said. I wondered whom he thought he was talking to; Constance was in the kitchen and Uncle Julian was thinking about what he was going to say, and I had stopped listening. “There is smoke,” Charles said.

“It’s not the stove.” Constance stood in the kitchen doorway and looked at Charles.

Charles turned and came closer to me. “If this is anything you’ve done... “ he said.

I laughed because it was clear that Charles was afraid to go upstairs and follow the smoke; then Constance said, “Charles — your pipe—” and he turned and ran up the stairs. “I’ve asked him and asked him,” Constance said.

“Would it start a fire?” I asked her, and then Charles screamed from upstairs, screamed, I thought, with the exact sound of a bluejay in the woods. “That’s Charles,” I said politely to Constance, and she hurried to go into the hall and look up. “What is it?” she asked, “Charles, what is it?

“Fire,” Charles said, crashing down the stairs, “Run, run; the whole damn house is on fire,” he screamed into Constance’s face, “and you haven’t got a phone.”

“My papers,” Uncle Julian said. “I shall collect my papers and remove them to a place of safety.” He pushed against the edge of the table to move his chair away. “Constance?”

“Run,” Charles said, at the front door now, wrenching at the lock, “run, you fool.”

“I have not done much running in the past few years, young man. I see no cause for this hysteria; there is time to gather my papers.”

Charles had the front door open now, and turned on the doorsill to call to Constance. “Don’t try to carry the safe,” he said, “put the money in a bag. I’ll be back as fast as I can get help. Don’t panic.” He ran, and we could hear him screaming “Fire! Fire! Fire!” as he ran toward the village.

“Good heavens,” Constance said, almost amused. Then she took Uncle Julian’s chair to help him into his room and I went into the hall and looked upstairs. Charles had left the door to our father’s room standing open and I could see the movement of fire inside. Fire burns upward, I thought; it will burn their things in the attic. Charles had left the front door open too, and a line of smoke reached down the stairs and drifted outside. I did not see any need to move quickly or to run shrieking around the house because the fire did not seem to be hurrying itself. I wondered if I could go up the stairs and shut the door to our father’s room and keep the fire inside, belonging entirely to Charles, but when I started up the stairs I saw a finger of flame reach out to touch the hall carpet and some heavy object fell crashing in our father’s room. There would be nothing of Charles in there now; even his pipe must have been consumed.

"Uncle Julian is gathering his papers," Constance said, coming into the hall to stand beside me. She had Uncle Julian's shawl over her arm.

"We will have to go outside," I said. I knew that she was frightened, so I said, "We can stay on the porch, behind the vines, in the darkness."

"We neatened it just the other day," she said, "it has no right to burn." She began to shiver as though she were angry, and I took her by the hand and brought her through the open front door and just as we turned back for another look the lights came into the driveway with the disgusting noise of sirens and we were held in the doorway in the light. Constance put her face against me to hide, and then there was Jim Donell, the first one to leap from the fire engine and run up the steps. "Out of the way," he said, and pushed past us and into our house. I took Constance along the porch to the corner where the vines grew thick, and she moved into the corner and pressed against the vines. I held her hand tight, and together we watched the great feet of the men stepping across our doorsill, dragging their hoses, bringing filth and confusion and danger into our house. More lights moved into the driveway and up to the steps, and the front of the house was white and pale and uncomfortable at being so clearly visible; it had never been lighted before. The noise was too much for me to hear all together, but somewhere in the noise was Charles' voice, still going on and on. "Get the safe in the study," he said a thousand times.

Smoke squeezed out the front door, coming between the big men pushing in. "Constance," I whispered, "Constance, don't watch them."

"Can they see me?" she whispered back. "Is anyone looking?"

"They're all watching the fire. Be very quiet."

I looked carefully out between the vines. There was a long row of cars, and the village fire engine, all parked as close to the house as they could get, and everyone in the village was there, looking up and watching. I saw faces laughing, and faces that looked frightened, and then someone called out, very near to us, “What about the women, and the old man? Anyone see them?”

“They had plenty of warning,” Charles shouted from somewhere, “they’re all right.”

Uncle Julian could manage his chair well enough to get out the back door, I thought, but it did not seem that the fire was going near the kitchen or Uncle Julian’s room; I could see the hoses and hear the men shouting, and they were all on the stairs and in the front bedrooms upstairs. I could not get through the front door, and even if I could leave Constance there was no way to go around to the back door without going down the steps in the light with all of them watching. “Was Uncle Julian frightened?” I whispered to Constance.

“I think he was annoyed,” she said. A few minutes later she said, “It will take a great deal of scrubbing to get that hall clean again,” and sighed. I was pleased that she thought of the house and forgot the people outside.

“Jonas?” I said to her, “where is he?”

I could see her smile a little in the darkness of the vines. “He was annoyed, too,” she said. “He went out the back door when I took Uncle Julian in to get his papers.

We were all right. Uncle Julian might very well forget that there was a fire at all if he became interested in his papers, and Jonas was almost certainly watching from the shadow of the trees. When they had finished putting out Charles’ fire I would take Constance back inside and we could start to clean our house again. Constance was quieter, although more and more cars came down the driveway and the unending pattern of feet went back and forth across our doorsill. Except for Jim Donell, who wore a hat proclaiming him “Chief,” it was impossible to identify any one person, any more than it was possible to put a name to any of the faces out in front of our house, looking up and laughing at the fire.

I tried to think clearly. The house was burning; there was fire inside our house, but Jim Donell and the other, anonymous, men in hats and raincoats were curiously able to destroy the fire which was running through the bones of our house. It was Charles' fire. When I listened particularly for the fire I could hear it, a singing hot noise upstairs, but over and around it, smothering it, were the voices of the men inside and the voices of the people watching outside and the distant sound of cars on the driveway. Next to me Constance was standing quietly, sometimes looking at the men going into the house, but more often covering her eyes with her hands; she was excited, I thought, but not in any danger. Every now and then it was possible to hear one voice raised above the others; Jim Donell shouted some word of instruction, or someone in the crowd called out. "Why not let it burn?" a woman's voice came loudly, laughing, and "Get the safe out of the study downstairs"; that was Charles, safely in the crowd out front.

"Why not let it burn?" the woman called insistently, and one of the dark men going in and out of our front door turned and waved and grinned. "We're the firemen," he called back, "we got to put it out."

"Let it burn," the woman called.

Smoke was everywhere, thick and ugly. Sometimes when I looked out the faces of the people were clouded with smoke, and it came out the front door in frightening waves. Once there was a crash from inside the house and voices speaking quickly and urgently, and the faces outside turned up happily in the smoke, mouths open. "Get the safe," Charles called out wildly, "two or three of you men get the safe out of the study; the whole house is going."

"Let it burn," the woman called.

I was hungry and I wanted my dinner, and I wondered how long they could make the fire last before they put it out and went away and Constance and I could go back inside. One or two of the village boys had edged onto the porch dangerously close to where we stood, but they only looked inside, not at the porch, and tried to stand on their toes and see past the fireman and the hoses. I was tired and I wished it would all be over. I realized then that the light was lessening, the faces on the lawn less distinct, and a new tone came into the noise; the voices inside were surer, less sharp, almost pleased, and the voices outside were lower, and disappointed.

"It's going out," someone said.

"Under control," another voice added.

"Did a lot of damage, though." There was laughter. "Sure made a mess of the old place."

"Should of burned it down years ago.

"And them in it."

They mean us, I thought, Constance and me.

"Say — anybody seen them?"

"No such luck. Firemen threw them out."

"Too bad."

The light was almost gone. The people outside stood now in shadows, their faces narrowed and dark, with only the headlights of the cars to light them; I saw the flash of a smile, and somewhere else a hand raised to wave, and the voices went on regretfully.

"Just about over."

"Pretty good fire."

Jim Donell came through the front door. Everyone knew him because of his size and his hat saying CHIEF. "Say, Jim," someone called, "why don't you let it burn?"

He lifted both his hands to make everyone be quiet. “Fire’s all out, folks,” he said.

Very carefully he put up his hands and took off his hat saying CHIEF and while everyone watched he walked slowly down the steps and over to the fire engine and set his hat down on the front seat. Then he bent down, searching thoughtfully, and finally, while everyone watched, he took up a rock. In complete silence he turned slowly and then raised his arm and smashed the rock through one of the great tall windows of our mother’s drawing room. A wall of laughter rose and grew behind him and then, first the boys on the steps and then the other men and at last the women and the smaller children, they moved like a wave at our house.

“Constance,” I said, “Constance,” but she had her hands over her eyes.

The other of the drawing room windows crashed, this time from inside, and I saw that it had been shattered by the lamp which always stood by Constance’s chair in the drawing room.

Above it all, most horrible, was the laughter. I saw one of the Dresden figurines thrown and break against the porch rail, and the other fell unbroken and rolled along the grass. I heard Constance’s harp go over with a musical cry, and a sound which I knew was a chair being smashed against the wall.

“Listen,” said Charles from somewhere, “will a couple of you guys help me with this safe?”

Then, through the laughter, someone began, “Merricat, said Constance, would you like a cup of tea?” It was rhythmic and insistent. I am on the moon, I thought, please let me be on the moon. Then I heard the sound of dishes smashing and at that minute realized that we stood outside the tall windows of the dining room and they were coming very close.

PART V

"CONSTANCE," I SAID, "we have to run."

She shook her head, her hands over her face.

"They'll find us in a minute. Please, Constance dearest; run with me."

"I can't," she said, and from just inside the dining room window a shout went up: "Merricat, said Constance, would you like to go to sleep?" and I pulled Constance away a second before the window went; I thought a chair had been thrown through it, perhaps the dining room chair where our father used to sit and Charles used to sit. "Hurry," I said, no longer able to be quiet in all that noise, and pulling Constance by the hand I ran toward the steps. As we came into the light she threw Uncle Julian's shawl across her face to hide it.

A little girl ran out of the front door carrying something, and her mother, behind her, caught her by the back of the dress and slapped her hands. "Don't you put that stuff in your mouth," the mother screamed, and the little girl dropped a handful of Constance's spice cookies.

"Merricat, said Constance, would you like a cup of tea?"

"Merricat," said Constance, would you like to go to sleep?"

"Oh, no, said Merricat, you'll poison me."

We had to get down the steps and into the woods to be safe; it was not far but the headlights of the cars shone across the lawn. I wondered if Constance would slip and fall, running through the light, but we had to get to the woods and there was no other way. We hesitated near the steps, neither one of us quite daring to go farther, but the windows were broken and inside they were throwing our dishes and our glasses and our silverware and even the pots Constance used in cooking; I wondered if my stool in the corner of the kitchen had been smashed yet. While we stood still for a last minute, a car came up the driveway, and another behind it; they swung to a stop in front of the house, sending more light onto the lawn. “What the holy devil is going on here?” Jim Clarke said, rolling out of the first car, and Helen Clarke, on the other side, opened her mouth and stared. Shouting and pushing, and not seeing us at all, Jim Clarke made his way through our door and into our house, “What the holy goddam devil is going on here?” he kept saying and outside Helen Clarke never saw us, but only stared at our house. “Crazy fools,” Jim Clarke yelled inside, “crazy drunken fools.” Dr Levy came out of the second car and hurried toward the house. “Has everyone gone crazy in here?” Jim Clarke was saying from inside, and there was a shout of laughter. “Would you like a cup of tea?” someone inside screamed, and they laughed. “Ought to bring it down brick by brick,” someone said inside.

The doctor came up the steps running, and pushed us aside without looking. “Where is Julian Blackwood?” he asked a woman in the doorway, and the woman said, “Down in the boneyard ten feet deep.”

It was time; I took Constance tightly by the hand, and we started carefully down the steps. I would not run yet because I was afraid that Constance might fall, so I brought her slowly down the steps; no one could see us yet except Helen Clarke and she stared at the house. Behind us I heard Jim Clarke shouting; he was trying to make the people leave our house, and before we reached the bottom step there were voices behind us.

“There they are,” someone shouted and I think it was Stella, “There they are, there they are, there they are,” and I started to run but Constance stumbled and then they were all around us, pushing and laughing and trying to get close to see. Constance held Uncle Julian’s shawl across her face so they could not look at her, and for a minute we stood very still, pressed together by the feeling of people all around us.

“Put them back in the house and start the fire all over again.”

“We fixed things up nice for you girls, just like you always wanted it.”

“Merricat, said Constance, would you like a cup of tea?”

For one terrible minute I thought that they were going to join hands and dance around us, singing. I saw Helen Clarke far away, pressed hard against the side of her car; she was crying and saying something and even though I could not hear her through the noise I knew she was saying “I want to go home, please, I want to go home.”

“Merricat, said Constance, would you like to go to sleep?”

They were trying not to touch us; whenever I turned they fell back a little; once, between two shoulders I saw Harler of the junk yard wandering across the porch of our house, picking up things and setting them to one side in a pile. I moved a little, holding Constance’s hand tight, and as they fell back we ran suddenly, going toward the trees, but Jim Donell’s wife and Mrs Mueller came in front of us, laughing and holding out their arms, and we stopped. I turned, and gave Constance a little pull, and we ran, but Stella and the Harris boys crossed in front of us, laughing, and the Harris boys shouting “Down in the boneyard ten feet deep,” and we stopped. Then I turned toward the house, running again with Constance pulled behind me, and Elbert the grocer and his greedy wife were there, holding their hands to halt us, almost dancing together, and we stopped. I went then to the side, and Jim Donell stepped in front of us, and we stopped.

“Oh, no, said Merricat, you’ll poison me,” Jim Donell said politely, and they came around us again, circling and keeping carefully out of reach. “Merricat, said Constance, would you like to go to sleep?” Over it all was the laughter, almost drowning the singing and the shouting and the howling of the Harris boys.

"Merricat, said Constance, would you like a cup of tea?"

Constance held to me with one hand and with the other hand she kept Uncle Julian's shawl across her face. I saw an opening in the circle around us, and ran again for the trees, but all the Harris boys were there, one on the ground with laughter, and we stopped. I turned again and ran for the house but Stella came forward and we stopped. Constance was stumbling, and I wondered if we were going to fall onto the ground in front of them, lying there where they might step on us in their dancing, and I stood still; I could not possibly let Constance fall in front of them.

"That's all now," Jim Clarke said from the porch. His voice was not loud, but they all heard. "That's enough," he said. There was a small polite silence, and then someone said, "Down in the boneyard ten feet deep," and the laughter rose.

"Listen to me," Jim Clarke said, raising his voice, "listen to me. Julian Blackwood is dead."

Then they were quiet at last. After a minute Charles Blackwood said from the crowd around us, "Did she kill him?" They went back from us, moving slowly in small steps, withdrawing, until there was a wide clear space around us and Constance standing clearly with Uncle Julian's shawl across her face. "Did she kill him?" Charles Blackwood asked again.

"She did not," said the doctor, standing in the doorway of our house. "Julian died as I have always known he would; he has been waiting a long time."

"Now go quietly," Jim Clarke said. He began to take people by the shoulders, pushing a little at their backs, turning them toward their cars and the driveway. "Go quickly," he said, "There has been a death in this house."

It was so quiet, in spite of many people moving across the grass and going away, that I heard Helen Clarke say, “Poor Julian.”

I took a cautious step toward the darkness, pulling Constance a little so that she followed me. “Heart,” the doctor said on the porch, and I went another step. No one turned to look at us. Car doors slammed softly and motors started. I looked back once. A little group was standing around the doctor on the steps. Most of the lights were turned away, heading down the driveway. When I felt the shadows of the trees fall on us, I moved quickly; one last step and we were inside. Pulling Constance, I hurried under the trees, in the darkness; when I felt my feet leave the grass of the lawn and touch the soft mossy ground of the path through the woods and knew that the trees had closed in around us I stopped and put my arms around Constance. “It’s all over,” I told her, and held her tight. “It’s all right,” I said, “all right now.”

I knew my way in the darkness or in the light.

I thought once how good it was that I had straightened my hiding place and freshened it, so it would now be pleasant for Constance. I would cover her with leaves, like children in a story, and keep her safe and warm. Perhaps I would sing to her or tell her stories; I would bring her bright fruits and berries and water in a leaf cup. Someday we would go to the moon. I found the entrance to my hiding place and led Constance in and took her to the corner where there was a fresh pile of leaves and a blanket. I pushed her gently until she sat down and I took Uncle Julian’s shawl away from her and covered her with it. A little purr came from the corner and I knew that Jonas had been waiting here for me.

I put branches across the entrance; even if they came with lights they would not see us. It was not entirely dark; I could see the shadow that was

Constance and when I put my head back I saw two or three stars, shining from far away between the leaves and the branches and down onto my head.

“One of our mother’s Dresden figurines is broken, I thought, and I said aloud to Constance, “I am going to put death in all their food and watch them die.”

Constance stirred, and the leaves rustled. “The way you did before?” she asked.

It had never been spoken of between us, not once in six years.

“Yes,” I said after a minute, “the way I did before.”

9

Sometime during the night an ambulance came and took Uncle Julian away, and I wondered if they missed his shawl, which was wound around Constance as she slept. I saw the ambulance lights turning into the driveway, with the small red light on top, and I heard the distant sounds of Uncle Julian’s leaving, the voices speaking gently because they were in the presence of the dead, and the doors opening and closing. They called to us two or three times, perhaps to ask if they might have Uncle Julian, but their voices were subdued and no one came into the woods. I sat by the creek, wishing that I had been kinder to Uncle Julian. Uncle Julian had believed that I was dead, and now he was dead himself; bow your heads to our beloved Mary Katherine, I thought, or you will be dead.

The water moved sleepily in the darkness and I wondered what kind of a house we would have now. Perhaps the fire had destroyed everything and we would go back tomorrow and find that the past six years had been burned and they were waiting for us, sitting around the dining room table waiting for Constance to bring them their dinner. Perhaps we would find ourselves in the Rochester house, or living in the village or on a houseboat on the river or in a tower on top of a hill; perhaps the fire might be persuaded to reverse itself and abandon our house and destroy the village instead; perhaps the villagers were all dead now. Perhaps the village was really a great game board, with the squares neatly marked out, and I had been moved past the square which read “Fire; return to Start,” and was now on the last few squares, with only one move to go to reach home.

Jonas’s fur smelled of smoke. Today was Helen Clarke’s day to come to tea, but there would be no tea today, because we would have to neaten the house, although it was not the usual day for neatening the house. I wished that Constance had made sandwiches for us to bring down to the creek, and I wondered if Helen Clarke would try to come to tea even though the house was not ready. I decided that from now on I would not be allowed to hand tea cups.

When it first began to get light I heard Constance stirring on the leaves and I went into my hiding place to be near her when she awakened. When she opened her eyes she looked first at the trees above her, and then at me and smiled.

“We are on the moon at last,” I told her, and she smiled.

“I thought I dreamed it all,” she said.

“It really happened,” I said.

“Poor Uncle Julian.”

“They came in the night and took him away, and we stayed here on the moon.”

“I’m glad to be here,” she said. “Thank you for bringing me.”

There were leaves in her hair and dirt on her face and Jonas, who had followed me into my hiding place, stared at her in surprise; he had never seen Constance with a dirty face before. For a minute she was quiet, no longer smiling, looking back at Jonas, realizing that she was dirty, and then she said, “Merricat, what are we going to do?”

"First we must neaten the house, even though it is not the usual day."

"The house," she said. "Oh, Merricat."

"I had no dinner last night," I told her.

"Oh, Merricat." She sat up and untangled herself quickly from Uncle Julian's shawl and the leaves; "Oh, Merricat, poor baby," she said. "We'll hurry," and she scrambled to her feet.

"First you had better wash your face".

She went to the creek and wet her handkerchief and scrubbed at her face while I shook out Uncle Julian's shawl and folded it, thinking how strange and backward everything was this morning; I had never touched Uncle Julian's shawl before. I already saw that the rules were going to be different, but it was odd to be folding Uncle Julian's shawl. Later, I thought, I would come back here to my hiding place and clean it, and put in fresh leaves.

"Merricat, you'll starve."

"We have to watch," I said, taking her hand to slow her. "We have to go very quietly and carefully; some of them may still be around waiting.

I went first down the path, walking silently, with Constance and Jonas behind me. Constance could not step as silently as I could, but she made very little sound and of course Jonas made no sound at all. I took the path that would bring us out of the woods at the back of the house, near the vegetable garden, and when I came to the edge of the woods I stopped and held Constance back while we looked carefully to see if there were any of them left. For one first minute we saw only the garden and the kitchen door, looking just as always, and then Constance gasped and said, "Oh, Merricat," with a little moan, and I held myself very still, because the top of our house was gone.

I remembered that I had stood looking at our house with love yesterday, and I thought how it had always been so tall, reaching up into the trees.

Today the house ended above the kitchen doorway in a nightmare of black and twisted wood; I saw part of a window frame still holding broken glass and I thought: that was my window; I looked out that window from my room.

There was no one there, and no sound. We moved together very slowly toward the house, trying to understand its ugliness and ruin and shame. I saw that ash had drifted among the vegetable plants; the lettuce would have to be washed before I could eat it, and the tomatoes. No fire had come this way, but everything, the grass and the apple trees and the marble bench in Constance's garden, had an air of smokiness and everything was dirty. As we came closer to the house we saw more clearly that the fire had not reached the ground floor, but had had to be content with the bedrooms and the attic. Constance hesitated at the kitchen door, but she had opened it a thousand times before and it ought surely to recognize the touch of her hand, so she took the latch and lifted it. The house seemed to shiver when she opened the door, although one more draft could hardly chill it now. Constance had to push at the door to make it open, but no burned timber crashed down, and there was not, as I half thought there might be, a sudden rushing falling together, as a house, seemingly solid but really made only of ash, might dissolve at a touch.

"My kitchen," Constance said. "My kitchen."

She stood in the doorway, looking. I thought that we had somehow not found our way back correctly through the night, that we had somehow lost ourselves and come back through the wrong gap in time, or the wrong door, or the wrong fairy tale. Constance put her hand against the door frame to steady herself, and said again, "My kitchen, Merricat."

"My stool is still there," I said.

The obstacle which made the door hard to open was the kitchen table, turned on its side. I set it upright, and we went inside. Two of the chairs had been smashed, and the floor was horrible with broken dishes and glasses and broken boxes of food and paper torn from the shelves. Jars of jam and syrup and catsup had been shattered against the walls. The sink where Constance washed her dishes was filled with broken glass, as though glass after glass had been broken there methodically, one after another. Drawers of silverware and cooking ware had been pulled out and broken against the table and the walls, and silverware that had been in the house for generations of Blackwood wives was lying bent and scattered on the floor. Tablecloths and napkins hemmed by Blackwood women, and washed and ironed again and again, mended and cherished, had been ripped from the dining room sideboard and dragged across the kitchen. It seemed that all the wealth and hidden treasure of our house had been found out and torn and soiled; I saw broken plates which had come from the top shelves in the cupboard, and our little sugar bowl with roses lay almost at my feet, handles gone. Constance bent down and picked up a silver spoon. “This was our grandmother’s wedding pattern, she said, and set the spoon on the table. Then she said, “The preserves,” and turned to the cellar door; it was closed and I hoped that perhaps they had not seen it, or had perhaps not had time to go down the stairs. Constance picked her way carefully across the floor and opened the cellar door and looked down. I thought of the jars and jars so beautifully preserved lying in broken sticky heaps in the cellar, but Constance went down a step or two and said, “No, it’s all right; nothing here’s been touched.” She closed the cellar door again and made her way across to the sink to wash her hands and dry them on a dishtowel from the floor. “First, your breakfast,” she said.

Jonas sat on the doorstep in the growing sunlight looking at the kitchen with astonishment; once he raised his eyes to me and I wondered if he thought that Constance and I had made this mess. I saw a cup not broken, and picked it up and set it on the table, and then thought to look for more things which might have escaped. I remembered that one of our mother's Dresden figurines had rolled safely onto the grass and I wondered if it had hidden successfully and preserved itself; I would look for it later.

Nothing was orderly, nothing was planned; it was not like any other day. Once Constance went into the cellar and came back with her arms full. "Vegetable soup," she said, almost singing, "and strawberry jam, and chicken soup, and pickled beef." She set the jars on the kitchen table and turned slowly, looking down at the floor. There," she said at last, and went to a corner to pick up a small saucepan. Then on a sudden thought she set down the saucepan and made her way into the pantry. "Merricat," she called with laughter, "they didn't find the flour in the barrel. Or the salt. Or the potatoes."

They found the sugar, I thought. The floor was gritty, and almost alive under my feet, and I thought of course; of course they would go looking for the sugar and have a lovely time; perhaps they had thrown handfuls of sugar at one another, screaming, "Blackwood sugar, Blackwood sugar, want a taste?"

"They got to the pantry shelves," Constance went on, "the cereals and the spices and the canned food."

I walked slowly around the kitchen, looking at the floor. I thought that they had probably tumbled things by the armload, because cans of food were scattered and bent as though they had been tossed into the air, and the boxes of cereal and tea and crackers had been trampled under foot and broken open. The tins of spices were all together, thrown into a corner unopened; I thought I could still smell the faint spicy scent of Constance's cookies and then saw some of them, crushed on the floor.

Constance came out of the pantry carrying a loaf of bread. "Look what they didn't find," she said, and there are eggs and milk and butter in the cooler. Since they had not found the cellar door they had not found the cooler just inside, and I was pleased that they had not discovered eggs to mix into the mess on the floor.

At one time I found three unbroken chairs and set them where they belonged around the table. Jonas sat in my corner, on my stool, watching us. I drank chicken soup from a cup without a handle, and Constance washed a knife to spread butter on the bread. Although I did not perceive it then, time and the orderly pattern of our old days had ended; I do not know when I found the three chairs and when I ate buttered bread, whether I had found the chairs and then eaten bread, or whether I had eaten first, or even done both at once. Once Constance turned suddenly and put down her knife; she started for the closed door to Uncle Julian's room and then turned back, smiling a little. "I thought I heard him waking," she said, and sat down again.

We had not yet been out of the kitchen. We still did not know how much house was left to us, or what we might find waiting beyond the closed doors into the dining room and the hall. We sat quietly in the kitchen, grateful for the chairs and the chicken soup and the sunlight coming through the doorway, not yet ready to go further.

"What will they do with Uncle Julian?" I asked.

"They will have a funeral," Constance said with sadness. "Do you remember the others?"

"I was in the orphanage."

They let me go to the funerals of the others. I can remember. They will have a funeral for Uncle Julian, and the Clarke's will go, and the Carrington's, and certainly little Mrs Wright. They will tell each other how sorry they are. They will look to see if we are there."

I felt them looking to see if we were there, and I shivered.

"They will bury him with the others."

"I would like to bury something for Uncle Julian," I said.

Constance was quiet, looking at her fingers which lay still and long on the table. "Uncle Julian is gone, and the others," she said. "Most of our house is gone, Merricat; we are all that is left."

"Jonas."

"Jonas. We are going to lock ourselves in more securely than ever."

"But today is the day Helen Clarke comes to tea."

"No," she said. "Not again. Not here."

As long as we sat quietly together in the kitchen it was possible to postpone seeing the rest of the house. The library books were still on their shelf, untouched, and I supposed that no one had wanted to touch books belonging to the library; there was a fine, after all, for destroying library property.

Constance, who was always dancing, seemed now unwilling to move; she sat on at the kitchen table with her hands spread before her, not looking around at the destruction, and almost dreaming, as though she never believed that she had wakened this morning at all. "We must neaten the house," I said to her uneasily, and she smiled across at me.

When I felt that I could not wait for her any longer I said, "I'm going to look," and got up and went to the dining room door. She watched me, not moving. When I opened the door to the dining room there was a shocking smell of wetness and burned wood and destruction, and glass from the tall windows lay across the floor and the silver tea service had been swept off the sideboard and stamped into grotesque, unrecognizable shapes. Chairs were broken here, too; I remembered that they had taken up chairs and hurled them at windows and walls. I went through the dining room and into the front hall. The front door stood wide open and early sunlight lay in patterns along the floor of the hall, touching broken glass and torn cloth; after a minute I recognized the cloth as the drawing room draperies which our mother had once had made up fourteen feet long. No one was outside; I stood in the open doorway and saw that the lawn was marked with the tires of cars and the feet which had danced, and where the hoses had gone there were puddles and mud. The front porch was littered, and I remembered the neat pile of partly broken furniture which Harler the junk dealer had set together last night. I wondered if he planned to come today with a truck and gather up everything he could, or if he had only put the pile together because he loved great piles of broken things and could not resist stacking junk wherever he found it. I waited in the doorway to be sure that no one was watching, and then I ran down the steps across the grass and found our mother's Dresden figurine unbroken where it had hidden aghast the roots of a bush; I thought to take it to Constance.

She was still sitting quietly at the kitchen table, and when I put the Dresden figurine down before her she looked for a minute and then took it in her hands and held it against her cheek. "It was all my fault," she said. "Somehow it was all my fault."

"I love you, Constance," I said.

"And I love you, Merricat."

"And will you make that little cake for Jonas and me? Pink frosting, with gold leaves around the edge?"

She shook her head, and for a minute I thought she was not going to answer me, and then she took a deep breath, and stood up. “First,” she said, “I’m going to clean this kitchen.”

“What are you going to do with that?” I asked her, touching the Dresden figurine with the very tip of my finger.

“Put it back where it belongs,” she said, and I followed her as she opened the door to the hall and made her way down the hall to the drawing room doorway. The hall was less littered than the rooms, because there had been less in it to smash, but there were fragments carried from the kitchen, and we stepped on spoons and dishes which had been thrown here. I was shocked when we came into the drawing room to see our mother’s portrait looking down on us graciously while her drawing room lay destroyed around her. The white wedding cake trim was blackened with smoke and soot and would never be clean again; I disliked seeing the drawing room even more than the kitchen or the dining room, because we had always kept it so tidy, and our mother had loved this room. I wondered which of them had pushed over Constance’s harp and I remembered that I had heard it cry out as it fell. The rose brocade on the chairs was torn and dirty, smudged with the marks of wet feet that had kicked at the chairs and stamped on the sofa. The windows were broken here too, and with the drapes torn down we were clearly visible from outside.

“I think I can close the shutters,” I said, as Constance hesitated in the doorway, unwilling to come further into the room. I stepped out onto the porch through the broken window, thinking that no one had ever come this way before, and found that I could unhook the shutters easily. The shutters were as tall as the windows; originally it was intended that a man with a ladder would close the shutters when the summers were ended and the family went away to a city house, but so many years had passed since the shutters were closed that the hooks had rusted and I needed only to shake the heavy shutters to pull the hooks away from the house. I swung the shutters closed, but I could only reach the lower bolt to hold them; there were two more bolts high above my head; perhaps some night I might come out here with a ladder, but the lower bolt would have to hold them now. After I had closed the shutters on both tall drawing room windows I went along the porch and in, formally, through the front door and into the drawing room where Constance stood in dimness now, without the sunlight. Constance went to the mantel and set the Dresden figurine in its place below the portrait of our mother and for one quick minute the great shadowy room came back together again, as it should be, and then fell apart forever.

We had to walk carefully because of the broken things on the floor. Our father's safe lay just inside the drawing room door, and I laughed and even Constance smiled, because it had not been opened and it had clearly not been possible to carry it any farther than this. "Foolishness", Constance said, and touched the safe with her toe.

Our mother had always been pleased when people admired her drawing room, but now no one could come to the windows and look in, and no one would ever see it again. Constance and I closed the drawing room door behind us and never opened it afterwards. Constance waited just inside the front door while I went onto the porch again and closed the shutters over the tall dining room windows, and then I came inside and we shut and locked the front door and we were safe. The hall was dark, with two narrow lines of sunlight coming through the two narrow glass panels set on either side of the door; we could look outside through the glass, but no one could see in, even by putting their eyes up close, because the hall inside was dark. Above us the stairs were black and led into blackness or burned rooms with, incredibly, tiny spots of sky showing through. Until now, the roof had always hidden us from the sky, but I did not think that there was any way we could be vulnerable from above, and closed my mind against the thought of silent winged creatures coming out of the trees above to perch on the broken burnt rafters of our house, peering down. I thought it might be wise to barricade the stairs by putting something — a broken chair, perhaps — across. A mattress, soaked and dirty, lay halfway down the stairs; this was where they had stood with the hoses and fought the fire back and out. I stood at the foot of the stairs, looking up, wondering where our house had gone, the walls and the floors and the beds and the boxes of things in the attic; our father's watch was burned away, and our mother's tortoiseshell dressing set. I could feel a breath of air on my cheek; it came from the sky I could see, but it smelled of smoke and ruin. Our house was a castle, turreted and open to the sky.

"Come back to the kitchen," Constance said. "I can't stay out here."

Like children hunting for shells, or two old ladies going through dead leaves looking for pennies, we shuffled along the kitchen floor with our feet, turning over broken trash to find things which were still whole, and useful. When we had been along and across and diagonally through the kitchen we had gathered together a little pile of practical things on the kitchen table, and there was quite enough for the two of us. There were two cups with handles, and several without, and half a dozen plates, and three bowls. We had been able to rescue all the cans of food undamaged, and the cans of spice went neatly back onto their shelf. We found most of the silverware and straightened most of it as well as we could and put it back into its proper drawers. Since every Blackwood bride had brought her own silverware and china and linen into the house we had always had dozens of butter knives and soup ladles and cake servers; our mother's best silverware had been in a tarnish-proof box in the dining room sideboard, but they had found it and scattered it or the floor.

One of our whole cups was green with a pale yellow inside, and Constance said that one could be mine. “I never saw anyone use it before,” she said. “I suppose a grandmother or a great-great-aunt brought that set to the house as her wedding china. There once were plates to match.” The cup which Constance chose was white with orange flowers, and one of the plates matched that. “I remember when we used those dishes,” Constance said; “they were the everyday china when I was very small. The china we used for best then was white, with gold edges. Then Mother bought new best china and the white and gold china was used for everyday and these flowered dishes went onto the pantry shelf with the other half broken sets. These last few years I have always used Mother’s everyday china, except when Helen Clarke came to tea. We will take our meals like ladies,” she said, “using cups with handles.”

When we had taken out everything we wanted and could use, Constance got the heavy broom and swept all the rubble into the dining room. “Now we won’t have to look at it,” she said. She swept the hall clear so we could go from the kitchen to the front door without passing through the dining room, and then we closed all the doors to the dining room and never opened them again. I thought of the Dresden figurine standing small and courageous under our mother’s portrait in the dark drawing room and I remembered that we would never dust it again. Before Constance swept away the torn cloth that had been the drawing room drapes I asked her to cut me off a piece of the cord which had once drawn them open and shut, and she cut me a piece with a gold tassel on the end; I wondered if it might be the right thing to bury for Uncle Julian.

When we had finished and Constance had scrubbed the kitchen floor our house looked clean and new; from the front door to the kitchen door everything was clear and swept. So many things were gone from the kitchen that it looked bare, but Constance put our cups and plates and bowls on a shelf, and found a pan to give Jonas milk, and we were quite safe. The front door was locked, and the kitchen door was locked and bolted, and we were sitting at the kitchen table drinking milk from our two cups and Jonas was drinking from his pan when a knocking started on the front door. Constance ran to the cellar, and I stopped just long enough to be sure that the kitchen door was bolted, and then followed her. We sat on the cellar stairs in the darkness, and listened. Far away, at the front door, the knocking went on and on, and then a voice called, “Constance? Mary Katherine?”

“It’s Helen Clarke,” Constance said in a whisper.

“Do you think she has come for her tea?”

“No. Never again.”

As we had both known she would, she came around the house, calling us. When she knocked on the kitchen door we held our breath, neither of us moving, because the top half of the kitchen door was glass, and we knew she could see in, but we were safely on the cellar stairs and she could not open the door.

“Constance? Mary Katherine? Are you in there? She shook the door handle as people do when they want a door to open and think to catch it unaware and slip in before the lock can hold. “Jim,” she said, “I know they’re in there. I can see something cooking on the stove. You’ve got to open the door,” she said, raising her voice. “Constance, come and talk to me; I want to see you. Jim,” she said, “they’re in there and they can hear me, I know it.”

"I'm sure they can hear you," Jim Clarke said. "They can probably hear you in the village."

"But I'm sure they misunderstood the people last night; I' m sure Constance was upset, and I must tell them that nobody meant any harm. Constance, listen to me, please. We want you and Mary Katherine to come to our house until we can decide what to do with you. Everything's all right, really it is; we're going to forget all about it."

"Do you think she will push over the house"? I whispered to Constance, and Constance shook her head wordlessly.

"Jim, do you think you could break down the door?"

"Certainly not. Leave them alone, Helen, they'll come out when they're ready."

"But Constance takes these things so seriously. I'm sure she's frightened now."

"Leave them alone."

"They cannot be left alone, that is absolutely the worst possible thing for them. I want them out of there and home with me where I can't take care of them."

"They don't seem to want to come," Jim Clarke said.

"Constance? Constance? I know you're in there; come and open the door."

I was thinking that we might very well put a cloth or a piece of cardboard over the window in the kitchen door; it simply would not do to have Helen Clarke constantly peering in to watch pots cooking on the stove. We could pin the curtains together across the kitchen windows, and perhaps if the windows were all covered we could sit quietly at the table when Helen Clarke came pounding outside and not have to hide on the cellar stairs.

“Let’s leave,” Jim Clarke said. “They’re not going to answer you.”

“But I want to take them home with me.”

“We did what we could. We’ll come back another time, when they’ll feel more like seeing you.”

“Constance? Constance, please answer me.”

Constance sighed, and tapped her fingers irritably and almost noiselessly on the stair rail. “I wish she’d hurry,” she said into my ear, “my soup is going to boil over.”

Helen Clarke called again and again, going back around the house to their car, calling “Constance? Constance?” as though we might be somewhere in the woods, up a tree perhaps, or under the lettuce leaves, or waiting to spring out at her from behind a bush. When we heard their car start, distantly, we came up out of the cellar and Constance turned off her soup and I went along the hall to the front door to be sure they had gone and that the door was safely locked. I saw their car turn out of the driveway and thought I could still hear Helen Clarke calling “Constance? Constance?”

“She certainly wanted her tea,” I said to Constance when I came back to the kitchen.

“We have only two cups with handles,” Constance said. “She will never take tea here again.”

“It’s a good thing Uncle Julian’s gone, or one of us would have to use a broken cup. Are you going to neaten Uncle Julian’s room?”

“Merricat.” Constance turned from the stove to look at me. “What are we going to do?”

“We’ve neatened the house. We’ve had food. We’ve hidden from Helen Clarke. What are we going to do?”

“Where are we going to sleep? How are we going to know what time it is? What will we wear for clothes?

“Why do we need to know what time it is?”

“Our food won t last forever, even the preserves.”

“We can sleep in my hiding place by the creek.”

“No. That’s all right for hiding, but you must have a real bed.”

“I saw a mattress on the stairs. From my own old bed, perhaps. We can pull it down and clean it and dry it in the sun. One corner is burned.”

“Good,” said Constance. We went together to the stairs and took hold of the mattress awkwardly; it was unpleasantly wet and dirty. We dragged it, pulling together, along the hall, with little scraps of wood and glass coming with it, and got it across Constance’s clean kitchen floor to the kitchen door. Before unlocking the door I looked out carefully, and even when the door was opened I went out first to look around in every direction, but it was safe. We dragged the mattress out onto the lawn, and put it in the sun near our mother’s marble bench.

“Uncle Julian used to sit right here,” I said.

“It would be a good day, today, for Uncle Julian to sit in the sun.”

“I hope he was warm when he died. Perhaps he remembered the sun for a minute.”

I had his shawl; I hope he didn’t wish for it. Merricat, I am going to plant something here, where he used to sit.” “I am going to bury something for him. What will you plant?”

“A flower.” Constance leaned, and touched the grass softly. “Some kind of a yellow flower.”

“It’s going to look funny, right in the middle of the lawn.”

“We’ll know why it’s there, and no one else will ever see it.”

“And I will bury something yellow, to keep Uncle Julian warm.”

“First, however, my lazy Merricat, you will get a pot of water and scrub that mattress clean. And I will wash the kitchen floor again.”

We were going to be very happy, I thought. There were a great many things to do, and a whole new pattern of days to arrange, but I thought we were going to be very happy. Constance was pale, and still saddened by what they had done to her kitchen, but she had scrubbed every shelf, and washed the table again and again, and washed the windows and the floor. Our dishes were bravely on their shelf, and the cans and unbroken boxes of food we had rescued made a substantial row in the pantry.

"I could train Jonas to bring back rabbits for stew," I told her, and she laughed, and Jonas looked back at her blandly.

"That cat is so used to living on cream and rum cakes and buttered eggs that I doubt if he could catch a grasshopper," she said.

"I don't think I could care for a grasshopper stew."

"At any rate, right now I am making an onion pie."

While Constance washed the kitchen I found a heavy cardboard carton which I took apart carefully, and so had several large pieces of cardboard to cover the glass window in the kitchen door. The hammer and the nails were in the tool shed where Charles Blackwood had put them after trying to mend the broken step, and I nailed cardboard across the kitchen door until the glass was completely covered and no one could see in. I nailed more cardboard across the two kitchen windows, and the kitchen was dark, but safe. "It would be safer to let the kitchen windows get dirty," I told Constance, but she was shocked, and said, "I wouldn't live in a house with dirty windows."

When we had finished the kitchen was very clean but could not sparkle because there was so little light, and I knew that Constance was not pleased. She loved sunshine and brightness and cooking in a light lovely kitchen.

"We can keep the door open," I said, if we watch carefully all the time. We'll hear if any cars stop in front of the house. When I can," I said, "I will try to think of a way to build barricades along the sides of the house so no one will be able to come around here to the back."

"I am sure Helen Clarke will try again."

"At any rate she cannot look in now."

The afternoon was drawing in; even with the door open the sunlight came only a short way across the floor, and Jonas came to Constance at the stove, asking for his supper. The kitchen was warm and comfortable and familiar and clean. It would be nice to have a fireplace in here, I thought; we could sit beside a fire, and then I thought no, we have already had a fire.

"I will go and make sure that the front door is locked," I said.

The front door was locked and no one was outside. When I came back into the kitchen Constance said, "Tomorrow I will clean Uncle Julian's room. We have so little house left that it should all be very clean."

"Will you sleep in there? In Uncle Julian's bed?"

"No, Merricat. I want you to sleep in there. It's the only bed we have."

"I am not allowed in Uncle Julian's room."

She was quiet for a minute, looking at me curiously, and then asked, "Even though Uncle Julian's gone, Merricat?"

"Besides, I found the mattress, and cleaned it, and it came from my bed. I want it on the floor in my corner."

"Silly Merricat. Anyway, I'm afraid we'll both have the floor tonight. The mattress will not dry before tomorrow, and Uncle Julian's bed is not clean."

"I can bring branches from my hiding place, and leaves."

"On my clean kitchen floor?"

"I'll get the blanket, though, and Uncle Julian's shawl."

"You're going out? Now? All that way?"

“No one’s outside”, I said. “It’s almost dark and I can go very safely. If anyone comes, close the door and lock it; if I see that the door is closed I will wait by the creek until I can come safely home. And I will take Jonas for protection”.

I ran all the way to the creek, but Jonas was faster, and was waiting for me when I got to my hiding place. It was good to run, and good to come back again to our house and see the kitchen door standing open and the warm light inside. When Jonas and I came in I shut the door and bolted it and we were ready for the night.

“It’s a good dinner,” Constance said, warm and happy from cooking. “Come and sit down, Merricat.” With the door shut she had had to turn on the ceiling light, and our dishes on the table were neatly set. “Tomorrow I will try to polish the silverware, she said, “and we must bring in things from the garden”.

“The lettuce is full of ashes.”

“Tomorrow, too,” Constance said, looking at the black squares of cardboard which covered the windows, “I am going to try to think of some kind of curtains to hide your cardboard.”

“Tomorrow I will barricade the sides of the house. Tomorrow Jonas will catch us a rabbit. Tomorrow I will guess for you what time it is.”

Far away, in the front of the house, a car stopped, and we were silent, looking at one another; now, I thought, now we will know how safe we are, and I got up and made sure that the kitchen door was bolted; I could not see out through the cardboard and I was sure that they could not see in. The knocking started at the front door, but there was no time to make sure that the front door was locked. They knocked only for a moment, as though certain that we would not be in the front of the house, and then we heard them stumbling in the darkness as they tried to find their way around the side of the house to the back. I heard Jim Clarke's voice, and another which I remembered was the voice of Dr Levy.

"Can't see a thing," Jim Clarke said. "Black as sin out here."

"There's a crack of light at one of the windows."

Which one, I wondered; which window still showed a crack?

"They're in there, all right," Kim Clarke said. "No place else they could be."

"I just want to know if they're hurt, or sick; don't like to think of them shut up in there needing help."

"I'm supposed to bring them home with me," Jim Clarke said.

They came to the back door; their voices were directly outside, and Constance reached out her hand across the table to me; if it seemed that they might be able to look in we could run together for the cellar. "Damn place is all boarded up," Jim Clarke said, and I thought, good, oh, that's good. I had forgotten that there would be real boards in the tool shed; I never thought of anything but cardboard which is much too weak.

"Miss Blackwood?" the doctor called, and one of them knocked on the door. "Miss Blackwood? It's Dr Levy."

"And Jim Clarke. Helen's husband. Helen's very worried about you."

"Are you hurt? Sick? Do you need help?"

"Helen wants you to come to our house; she's waiting there for you."

"Listen," the doctor said, and I thought he had his face up very close to the glass, almost touching it. He talked in a very friendly voice, and quietly. "Listen, no one's going to hurt you. We're your friends. We came all the way over here to help you and make sure you were all right and we don't want to bother you. As a matter of fact, we promise not to bother you at all, ever again, if you'll just once say that you're well and safe. Just one word."

“You can’t just let people go on worrying and worrying about you,” Jim Clarke said.

“Just one word,” the doctor said. “All you have to do is say you’re all right.

They waited; I could feel them pressing their faces close to the glass, longing to see inside. Constance looked at me across the table and smiled a little, and I smiled back; our safeguards were good and they could not see in.

“Listen,” the doctor said, and he raised his voice a little; “listen, Julian’s funeral is tomorrow. We thought you’d want to know.”

“There are a lot of flowers already,” Jim Clarke said. “You’d be really pleased to see all the flowers. We sent flowers, and the Wrights, and the Carrington’s. I think you’d feel a little different about your friends if you could see the flowers we all sent Julian.”

I wondered why we would feel different if we saw who sent Uncle Julian flowers. Certainly Uncle Julian buried in flowers, swarmed over by flowers, would not resemble the Uncle Julian we had seen every day. Perhaps masses of flowers would warm Uncle Julian dead; I tried to think of Uncle Julian dead and could only remember him asleep. I thought of the Clarke’s and the Carrington’s and the Wrights pouring armfuls of flowers down onto poor old Uncle Julian, helplessly dead.

“You’re not gaining anything by driving away your friends, you know. Helen said to tell you –”

“Listen.” I could feel them pushing against the door. “No one’s going to bother you. Just tell us, are you all right?”

“We’re not going to keep coming, you know. There’s a limit to how much friends can’t take.”

Jonas yawned. In silence Constance turned, slowly and carefully, back to face her place at the table, and took up a buttered biscuit and took a tiny silent bite. I wanted to laugh, and put my hands over my mouth; Constance eating a biscuit silently was funny, like a doll pretending to eat.

"Damn it," Jim Clarke said. He knocked on the door. "Damn it," he said.

"For the last time," the doctor said, "we know you're in there; for the last time will you just –"

"Oh, come away, Jim Clarke said. "It's not worth all the yelling."

"Listen," the doctor said, and I thought he had his mouth against the door, "one of these days you're going to need help. You'll be sick, or hurt. You'll need help. Then you'll be quick enough to –"

"Leave them be," Jim Clarke said. "Come on."

I heard their footsteps going around the side of the house and wondered if they were tricking us, pretending to walk away and then coming silently back to stand without sound outside the door, waiting. I thought of Constance silently eating a biscuit inside and Jim Clarke silently listening outside and a little cold chill went up my back; perhaps there would never be noise in the world again. Then the car started at the front of the house and we heard it drive away and Constance put her fork down on her plate with a little crash and I breathed again and said, "Where have they got Uncle Julian, do you suppose?"

"At that same place," Constance said absently, "in the city. Merricat," she said, looking up suddenly.

"Yes, Constance?"

"I want to say I'm sorry. I was wicked last night."

I was still and cold, looking at her and remembering.

"I was very wicked," she said. "I never should have reminded you of why they all died."

“Then don’t remind me now.” I could not move my hand to reach over and take hers.

“I wanted you to forget about it. I never wanted to speak about it, ever, and I’m sorry I did.”

“I put it in the sugar.”

“I know. I knew then.” You never used sugar.”

“No.”

“So I put it in the sugar.”

Constance sighed. “Merricat,” she said, “we’ll never talk about it again. Never.”

I was chilled, but she smiled at me kindly and it was all right.

“I love you, Constance,” I said.

“And I love you, my Merricat.”

Jonas sat on the floor and slept on the floor and I thought it ought not to be so difficult for me. Constance should have had leaves and soft moss under her blanket but we could not dirty the kitchen floor again. I put my blanket in the corner near my stool because it was the place I knew best, and Jonas got up onto the stool and sat there, looking down on me. Constance lay on the floor near the stove; it was dark, but I could see the paleness of her face across the kitchen. “Are you comfortable?” I asked her, and she laughed.

“I’ve spent a lot of time in this kitchen,” she said, “but I never before tried lying on its floor. I’ve taken such good care of it that it has to make me welcome, I think.”

“Tomorrow we bring in lettuce.”

10

Slowly the pattern of our days grew and shaped itself into a happy life. In the mornings when I awakened I would go at once down the hall to make sure the front door was locked. We were most active in the very early morning because no one was ever around. We had not realized that, with the gates opened and the path exposed to public use, the children would come; one morning I stood beside the front door, looking out through the narrow pane of glass, and saw children playing on our front lawn. Perhaps the parents had sent them to explore the way and make sure it was navigable, or perhaps children can never resist playing anywhere; they seemed a little uneasy playing in front of our house, and their voices were subdued. I thought that perhaps they were only pretending to play, because they were children and were supposed to play, but perhaps they were actually sent here to look for us, thinly disguised as children. They were not really convincing, I decided as I watched them; they moved gracelessly, and never once glanced, that I could see, at our house. I wondered how soon they would creep onto the porch, and press their small faces against the shutters, trying to see through cracks. Constance came up behind me and looked out over my shoulder. “They are the children of the strangers,” I told her. They have no faces.”

PART VI

"THEY HAVE EYES."

"Pretend they are birds. They can't see us. They don't know it yet, they don't want to believe it, but they won't ever see us again."

"I suppose that now they've come once, they'll come again."

"All the strangers will come, but they can't see inside. And now may I please have my breakfast?"

The kitchen was always dark in the mornings until I unbolted the kitchen door and opened it to let the sunlight in. Then Jonas went to sit on the step and bathe and Constance sang while she made our breakfast. After breakfast I sat on the step with Jonas while Constance washed the kitchen. Barricading the sides of the house had been easier than I expected; I managed it in one night with Constance holding a flashlight for me. At either side of our house there was a spot where the trees and bushes grew close to the house, sheltering the back and narrowing the path which was the only way around. I brought piece after piece from the pile of junk Mr Harler had made on our front porch, and heaped the broken boards and furniture across the narrowest spot. It would not really keep anyone out, of course; the children could climb over it easily, but if anyone did try to get past there would be enough noise and falling of broken boards to give us plenty of time to close and bolt the kitchen door. I had found some boards around the tool shed, and nailed them rudely across the glass of the kitchen door, but I disliked putting them across the sides of the house as a barricade, where anyone might see them and know how clumsily I built. Perhaps, I told myself, I might try my hand at mending the broken step.

"What are you laughing about now?" Constance asked me.

"I am thinking that we are on the moon, but it is not quite as I supposed it would be."

"It is a very happy place, though." Constance was bringing breakfast to the table: scrambled eggs and toasted biscuits and blackberry jam she had made some golden summer. "We ought to bring in as much food as we can," she said. "I don't like to think of the garden waiting there for us to come and gather growing things. And I'd feel much better if we had more food put securely away in the house."

"I will go on my winged horse and bring you cinnamon and thyme, emeralds and clove, cloth of gold and cabbages."

"And rhubarb."

We were able to leave the kitchen door open when we went down to the vegetable garden, because we could see clearly whether anyone was approaching my barricades and run back to the house if we needed to. I carried the basket and we brought back lettuce, still grey with ash, and radishes, and tomatoes and cucumbers and, later, berries, and melons. Usually I ate fruit and vegetables still moist from the ground and the air, but I disliked eating anything while it was still dirty with the ash from our burned house. Most of the dirt and the soot had blown away and the air around the garden was fresh and clean, but the smoke was in the ground and I thought it would always be there.

As soon as we were safely settled Constance had opened Uncle Julian's room and cleaned it. She brought out the sheets from Uncle Julian's bed, and the blankets, and washed them in the kitchen sink and set them outside to dry in the sunlight. "What are you going to do with Uncle Julian's papers? " I asked her, and she rested her hands against the edge of the sink, hesitating.

"I suppose I'll keep them all in the box," she said at last. "I suppose I'll put the box down in the cellar."

"And preserve it?"

"And preserve it. He would like to think that his papers were treated respectfully. And I would not want Uncle Julian to suspect that his papers were not preserved."

"I had better go and see that the front door is locked."

The children were often outside on our front lawn, playing their still games and not looking at our house, moving awkwardly in little dashing runs, and slapping one another without cause. Whenever I checked to make sure that the front door was locked I looked out to see if the children were there. Very often I saw people walking on our path now, using it to go from one place to another, and putting their feet down where once only my feet had gone; I thought they used the path without wanting to, as though each of them had to travel it once to show that it could be done, but I thought that only a few, the defiant hating ones, came by more than once.

I dreamed away the long afternoon while Constance cleaned Uncle Julian's room; I sat on the doorsill with Jonas asleep beside me, and looked out on the quiet safe garden.

"Look, Merricat," Constance said, coming to me with an armful of clothes, "look, Uncle Julian had two suits, and a topcoat and a hat."

"He walked upright once; he told us so himself."

"I can just barely remember him, years ago, going off one day to buy a suit, and I suppose it was one of these suits he bought; they are neither of them much worn."

"What would he have been wearing on the last day with them? What tie did he have on at dinner? He would surely like to have it remembered."

She looked at me for a minute, not smiling. “It would hardly have been one of these; when I came to get him afterwards, at the hospital, he was wearing pajamas and a robe.”

“Perhaps he should have one of these suits now.”

“He was probably buried in an old suit of Jim Clarke’s.” Constance started for the cellar, and then stopped. “Merricat?”

“Yes, Constance?

“Do you realize that these things of Uncle Julian’s are the only clothes left in our house? All of mine burned, and all of yours.”

“And everything of theirs in the attic.”

“I have only this pink dress I have on.”

I looked down. “And I am wearing brown.”

“And yours needs washing, and mending; how can you tear your clothes so, my Merricat?”

“I shall weave a suit of leaves. At once. With acorns for buttons.”

“Merricat, be serious. We will have to wear Uncle Julian’s clothes.”

“I am not allowed to touch Uncle Julian’s things. I shall have a lining of moss, for cold winter days, and a hat made of bird feathers.”

“That may be all very well for the moon, Miss Foolishness. On the moon you may wear a suit of fur like Jonas, for all of me. But right here in our house you are going to be clothed in one of your Uncle Julian’s old shirts, and perhaps his trousers too.”

“Or Uncle Julian’s bathrobe and pajamas, I suppose. No; I am not allowed to touch Uncle Julian’s things; I will wear leaves.”

“But you are allowed. I tell you that you are allowed.”

“No.”

She sighed. “Well,” she said, “you’ll probably see me wearing them.” Then she stopped, and laughed, and looked at me, and laughed again.

“Constance?” I said.

She put Uncle Julian’s clothes over the back of a chair, and, still laughing, went into the pantry and opened one of the drawers. I remembered what she was after and I laughed too. Then she came back and put an armload of tablecloths down beside me.

“These will do you very nicely, elegant Merricat. Look; how will you feel in this, with a border of yellow flowers? Or this handsome red and white check? The damask, I am afraid, is too stiff for comfort, and besides it has been darned.”

I stood up and held the red and white checked tablecloth against me. “You can cut a hole for my head,” I said; I was pleased.

“I have no sewing things. You will simply have to tie it around your waist with a cord or let it hang like a toga.”

“I will use the damask for a cloak; who else wears a damask cloak?”

“Merricat, oh, Merricat.” Constance dropped the tablecloth she was holding and put her arms around me. “ What have I done to my baby Merricat?” she said. “No house. No food. And dressed in a tablecloth; what have I done?

“Constance,” I said, “I love you, Constance.”

“Dressed in a tablecloth like a rag doll.”

“Constance. We are going to be very happy, Constance.”

“Oh, Merricat,” she said, holding me.

“Listen to me, Constance. We are going to be very happy.”

I dressed at once, not wanting to give Constance more time to think. I chose the red and white check, and when Constance had cut a hole for my head I took my gold cord with the tassel that Constance had cut from the drawing room drapes and tied it around me for a belt and looked, I thought, very fine. Constance was sad at first, and turned away sadly when she saw me, and scrubbed furiously at the sink to get my brown dress clean, but I liked my robe, and danced in it, and before long she smiled again and then laughed at me.

"Robinson Crusoe dressed in the skins of animals," I told her. "He had no gay cloths with a gold belt."

"I must say you never looked so bright before."

"You will be wearing the skins of Uncle Julian; I prefer my tablecloth."

"I believe the one you are wearing now was used for summer breakfasts on the lawn many years ago. Red and white check would never be used in the dining room, of course."

"Some days I shall be a summer breakfast on the lawn, and some days I shall be a formal dinner by candlelight, and some days I shall be—"

"A very dirty Merricat. You have a fine gown, but your face is dirty. We have lost almost everything, young lady, but at least we still have clean water and a comb."

One thing was most lucky about Uncle Julian's room: I persuaded Constance to bring out his chair and wheel it through the garden to reinforce my barricade. It looked strange to see Constance wheeling the empty chair, and for a minute I tried to see Uncle Julian again, riding with his hands in his lap, but all that remained of Uncle Julian's presence were the worn spots on the chair, and a handkerchief tucked under the cushion. The chair would be powerful in my barricade, however, staring out always at intruders with a blank menace of dead Uncle Julian. I was troubled to think that Uncle Julian might vanish altogether, with his papers in a box and his chair on the barricade and his toothbrush thrown away and even the smell of Uncle Julian gone from his room, but when the ground was soft Constance planted a yellow rosebush at Uncle Julian's spot on the lawn, and one night I went down to the creek and buried Uncle Julian's initialled gold pencil by the water, so the creek would always speak his name. Jonas took to going into Uncle Julian's room, where he had never gone before, but I did not go inside.

Helen Clarke came to our door twice more, knocking and calling and begging us to answer, but we sat quietly, and when she found that she could not come around the house because of my barricade she told us from the front door that she would not come back, and she did not. One evening, perhaps the evening of the day Constance planted Uncle Julian's rosebush, we heard a very soft knock at our front door while we sat at the table eating dinner. It was far too soft a knock for Helen Clarke, and I left the table and hurried silently down the hall to be sure that the front door was locked, and Constance followed me, curious. We pressed silently against the door and listened.

"Miss Blackwood?" someone said outside, in a low voice; I wondered if he suspected we were so close to him. "Miss Constance? Miss Mary Katherine?"

It was not quite dark outside, but inside where we stood we could only see one another dimly, two white faces against the door. "Miss Constance?" he said again. "Listen."

I thought that he was moving his head from side to side to make sure that he was not seen. "Listen," he said, "I got a chicken here."

He tapped softly on the door. "I hope you can hear me," he said. "I got a chicken here. My wife fixed it, roasted it nice, and there's some cookies and a pie. I hope you can hear me."

I could see that Constance's eyes were wide with wonder. I stared at her and she stared at me.

"I sure hope you can hear me, Miss Blackwood. I broke one of your chairs and I'm sorry." He tapped against the door again, very softly. "Well," he said. “I’ll just set this basket down on your step here. I hope you heard me. Goodbye.”

We listened to quiet footsteps going away, and after a minute Constance said, “What shall we do? Shall we open the door?”

“Later,” I said, “I’ll come when it’s really dark.”

“I wonder what kind of pie it is. Do you think it’s as good as my pies?”

We finished our dinner and waited until I was sure that no one could possibly see the front door opening, and then we went down the hall and I unlocked the door and looked outside. The basket sat on the doorstep, covered with a napkin. I brought it inside and locked the door while Constance took the basket from me and carried it to the kitchen. “Blueberry,” she said when I came. “Quite good, too; it’s still warm.”

She took out the chicken, wrapped in a napkin, and the little package of cookies, touching each lovingly and with gentleness. “Everything’s still warm,” she said. “She must have baked them right after dinner, so he could bring them right over. I wonder if she made two pies, one for the house. She wrapped everything while it was still warm and told him to bring them over. These cookies are not crisp enough.”

“I’ll take the basket back and leave it on the porch, so he’ll know we found it.”

“No, no.” Constance caught me by the arm. “Not until I’ve washed the napkins; what would she think of me?”

Sometimes they brought bacon, home cured, or fruit, or their own preserves, which were never as good as the preserves Constance made. Mostly they brought roasted chicken; sometimes a cake or a pie, frequently cookies, sometimes a potato salad or coleslaw. Once they brought a pot of beef stew, which Constance took apart and put back together again according to her own rules for beef stew, and sometimes there were pots of baked beans or macaroni. “We are the biggest church supper they ever had,” Constance said once, looking at a loaf of homemade bread I had just brought inside.

These things were always left on the front doorstep, always silently and in the evenings. We thought that the men came home from work and the women had the baskets ready for them to carry over; perhaps they came in darkness not to be recognized, as though each of them wanted to hide from the others, and bringing us food was somehow a shameful thing to do in public. There were many women cooking, Constance said. “Here is one,” she explained to me once, tasting a bean, “who uses ketchup, and too much of it; and the last one used more molasses.” Once or twice there was a note in the basket: “This is for the dishes,” or “We apologize about the curtains,” or “Sorry for your harp.” We always set the baskets back where we had found them, and never opened the front door until it was completely dark and we were sure that no one was near. I always checked carefully afterwards to make certain that the front door was locked.

I discovered that I was no longer allowed to go to the creek; Uncle Julian was there, and it was much too far from Constance. I never went farther away than the edge of the woods, and Constance went only as far as the vegetable garden. I was not allowed to bury anything more, nor was I allowed to touch stone. Every day I looked over the boards across the kitchen windows and when I found small cracks I nailed on more boards. Every morning I checked at once to make sure the front door was locked, and every morning Constance washed the kitchen. We spent a good deal of time at the front door, particularly during the afternoons, when most people came by; we sat, one on either side of the front door, looking out through the narrow glass panels which I had covered almost entirely with cardboard so that we had each only a small peephole and no one could possibly see inside. We watched the children playing, and the people walking past, and we heard their voices and they were all strangers, with their wide staring eyes and their evil open mouths. One day a group came by bicycle; there were two women and a man, and two children. They parked their bicycles in our driveway and lay down on our front lawn, pulling at the grass and talking while they rested. The children ran up and down our driveway and over and around the trees and bushes. This was the day that we learned that the vines were growing over the burned roof of our house, because one of the women glanced sideways at the house and said that the vines almost hid the marks of burning. They rarely turned squarely to look at our house face to face, but looked from the corners of their eyes or from over a shoulder or through their fingers. “It used to be a lovely old house, I hear,” said the woman sitting on our grass. “I’ve heard that it was quite a local landmark at one time.

“Now it looks like a tomb,” the other woman said.

“Shh,” the first woman said, and gestured toward the house with her head. “I heard,” she said loudly, “that they had a staircase which was very fine. Carved in Italy, I heard.”

“They can’t hear you,” the other woman said, amused. “And who cares if they do, anyway?

“Shhh.”

“No one knows for sure if there’s anyone inside or not. The local people tell some tall tales.”

“Shh. Tommy,” she called to one of the children, “don’t you go near those steps.”

“Why?” said the child, backing away.

“Because the ladies live in there, and they don’t like it.”

"Why?" said the child, pausing at the foot of the steps and giving a quick look backward at our front door.

"The ladies don't like little boys," the second woman said; she was one of the bad ones; I could see her mouth from the side and it was the mouth of a snake.

"What would they do to me?"

"They'd hold you down and make you eat candy full of poison; I heard that dozens of bad little boys have gone too near that house and never been seen again. They catch little boys and they –"

"Shh. Honestly, Ethel."

"Do they like little girls?" The other child drew near.

"They hate little boys and little girls. The difference is, they eat the little girls."

"Ethel, stop. You're terrifying the children. It isn't true, darlings; she's only teasing you."

"They never come out except at night," the bad woman said, looking evilly at the children, "and then when it's dark they go hunting little children."

"Just the same," the man said suddenly, "I don't want to see the kids going too near that house."

Charles Blackwood came back only once. He came in a car with another man late one afternoon when we had been watching for a long time. All the strangers had gone, and Constance had just stirred and said, "Time to put on the potatoes," when the car turned into the driveway and she settled back to watch again. Charles and the other man got out of the car in front of the house and walked directly to the foot of the steps, looking up, although they could not see us inside. I remembered the first time Charles had come and stood looking up at our house in just the same manner, but this time he would never get in. I reached up and touched the lock on the front door to make sure it was fastened, and on the other side of the doorway Constance turned and nodded to me; she knew, too, that Charles would never get in again.

“See?” Charles said, outside, at the foot of our steps. “There’s the house, just like I said. It doesn’t look as bad as it did, now the vines have grown so. But the roof’s been burned away, and the place was gutted inside.”

“Are the ladies in there?”

“Sure.” Charles laughed, and I remembered his laughter and his big staring white face and from inside the door I wished him dead. “They’re in there all right,” he said. “And so is a whole damn fortune.

“You know that?”

“They’ve got money in there’s never even been counted. They’ve got it buried all over, and a safe full, and God knows where else they’ve hidden it. They never come out, just hide away inside with all that money.”

“Look,” the other man said, “they know you, don’t they?”

“Sure. I’m their cousin. I came here on a visit once.”

“You think there’s any chance you might get one of them to talk to you? Maybe come to the window or something, so I could get a picture?”

Charles thought. He looked at the house and at the other man, and thought. “If you sell this, to the magazine or somewhere, do I get half?”

“Sure, it’s a promise.”

“I’ll try it,” Charles said. “You get back behind the car, out of sight. They certainly won’t come out if they see a stranger.” The other man went back to the car and took out a camera and settled himself on the other side of the car where we could not see him. “Okay,” he called, and Charles started up the steps to our front door.

“Connie?” he called. “Hey, Connie? It’s Charles; I’m back.”

I looked at Constance and thought she had never seen Charles so truly before.

"Connie?"

She knew now that Charles was a ghost and a demon, one of the strangers.

"Let's forget all that happened," Charles said. He came close to the door and spoke pleasantly, with a little pleading tone. "Let's be friends again."

I could see his feet. One of them was tapping and tapping on the floor of our porch. "I don't know what you've got against me," he said, "and I've been waiting and waiting for you to let me know I could come back again. If I did anything to offend you, I'm really sorry."

I wished Charles could see inside, could see us sitting on the floor on either side of the front door, listening to him and looking at his feet, while he talked beggingly to the door three feet above our heads.

"Open the door," he said very softly. "Connie, will you open the door for me, for Cousin Charles?"

Constance looked up to where his face must be and smiled unpleasantly. I thought it must be a smile she had been saving for Charles if he ever came back again.

"I went to see old Julian's grave this morning," Charles said. "I came back to visit old Julian's grave and to see you once more." He waited a minute and then said with a little break in his voice, "I put a couple of flowers — you know — on the old fellow's grave; he was a fine old guy, and he was always pretty good to me."

Beyond Charles' feet I saw the other man coming out from behind the car with his camera. "Look," he called, "you're wasting your breath. And I haven't got all day."

“Don’t you understand?” Charles had turned away from the door, but his voice still had the little break in it. “I’ve got to see her once more. I was the cause of it all.”

“What?”

“ Why do you suppose two old maids shut themselves up in a house like this? “God knows, Charles said, “I didn’t mean it to turn out this way.”

I thought Constance was going to speak then, or at least laugh out loud, and I reached across and touched her arm, warning her to be quiet, but she did not turn her head to me.

“If I could just talk to her,” Charles said. “You can get some pictures of the house, anyway, with me standing here. Or knocking at the door; I could be knocking frantically at the door.”

“You could be stretched across the doorsill dying of a broken heart, for all of me,” the other man said. He went to the car and put his camera inside. “Waste of time.”

“And all that money. Connie,” Charles called loudly, “will you for heaven’s sake open that door?”

“You know,” the other man said from the car, “I’ll just bet you’re never going to see those silver dollars again.”

“Connie,” Charles said, “you don’t know what you’re doing to me; I never deserved to be treated like this. Please, Connie.”

“You want to walk back to town?” the other man said. He closed the car door.

Charles turned away from the door and then turned back. “All right, Connie,” he said, “this is it. If you let me go this time, you’ll never see me again. I mean it, Connie.

“I’m leaving,” the other man said from the car.

"I mean it, Connie, I really do." Charles started down the steps, talking over his shoulder. "Take a last look," he said. "I'm going. One word could make me stay."

I did not think he was going to go in time. I honestly did not know whether Constance was going to be able to contain herself until he got down the steps and safely into the car. "Goodbye, Connie," he said from the foot of the steps and then turned away and went slowly toward the car. He looked for a minute as though he might wipe his eyes or blow his nose, but the other man said, "Hurry up," and Charles looked back once more, raised his hand sadly, and got into the car. Then Constance laughed, and I laughed, and for a minute I saw Charles in the car turn his head quickly, as though he had heard us laughing, but the car started, and drove off down the driveway, and we held each other in the dark hall and laughed, with the tears running down our cheeks and echoes of our laughter going up the ruined stairway to the sky.

"I am so happy," Constance said at last, gasping. "Merricat, I am so happy."

"I told you that you would like it on the moon."

The Carrington's stopped their car in front of our house one Sunday after church and sat quietly in the car looking at our house, as though supposing that we would come out if there was anything the Carrington's could do for us. Sometimes I thought of the drawing room and the dining room, forever closed away, with our mother's lovely broken things lying scattered, and the dust sifting gently down to cover them; we had new landmarks in the house, just as we had a new pattern for our days. The crooked, broken-off fragment which was all that was left of our lovely stairway was something we passed every day and came to know as intimately as we had once known the stairs themselves. The boards across the kitchen windows were ours, and part of our house, and we loved them. We were very happy, although Constance was always in terror lest one of our two cups should break, and one of us have to use a cup without a handle. We had our well known and familiar places: our chairs at the table, and our beds, and our places beside the front door. Constance washed the red and white tablecloth and the shirts of Uncle Julian's which she wore, and while they were hanging in the garden to dry I wore a tablecloth with a yellow border, which looked very handsome with my gold belt. Our mother's old brown shoes were safely put away in my corner of the kitchen, since in the warm summer days I went barefoot like Jonas. Constance disliked picking many flowers, but there was always a bowl on the kitchen table with roses or daisies, although of course she never picked a rose from Uncle Julian's rosebush.

I sometimes thought of my six blue marbles, but I was not allowed to go to the long field now, and I thought that perhaps my six blue marbles had been buried to protect a house which no longer existed and had no connection with the house where we lived now, and where we were very happy. My new magical safeguards were the lock on the front door, and the boards over the windows, and the barricades along the sides of the house. In the evenings sometimes we saw movement in the darkness on the lawn, and heard whispers.

"Don't; the ladies might be watching."

"You think they can see in the dark?"

"I heard they see everything that goes on."

Then there might be laughter, drifting away into the warm darkness.

"They will soon be calling this Lover's Lane," Constance said.

"After Charles, no doubt."

"The least Charles could have done," Constance said, considering seriously, "was shoot himself through the head in the driveway."

We learned, from listening, that all the strangers could see from outside, when they looked at all, was a great ruined structure overgrown with vines, barely recognizable as a house. It was the point halfway between the village and the highway, the middle spot on the path, and no one ever saw our eyes looking out through the vines.

"You can't go on those steps," the children warned each other; "if you do, the ladies will get you."

Once a boy, dared by the others, stood at the foot of the steps facing the house, and shivered and almost cried and almost ran away, and then called out shakily, "Merricat, said Constance, would you like a cup of tea?" and then fled, followed by all the others. That night we found on the doorsill a basket of fresh eggs and a note reading, "He didn't mean it, please."

"Poor child," Constance said, putting the eggs into a bowl to go into the cooler. "He's probably hiding under the bed right now."

"Perhaps he had a good whipping to teach him manners."

"We will have an omelette for breakfast."

"I wonder if I could eat a child if I had the chance."

"I doubt if I could cook one," said Constance.

"Poor strangers," I said. "They have so much to be afraid of."

"Well," Constance said, "I am afraid of spiders."

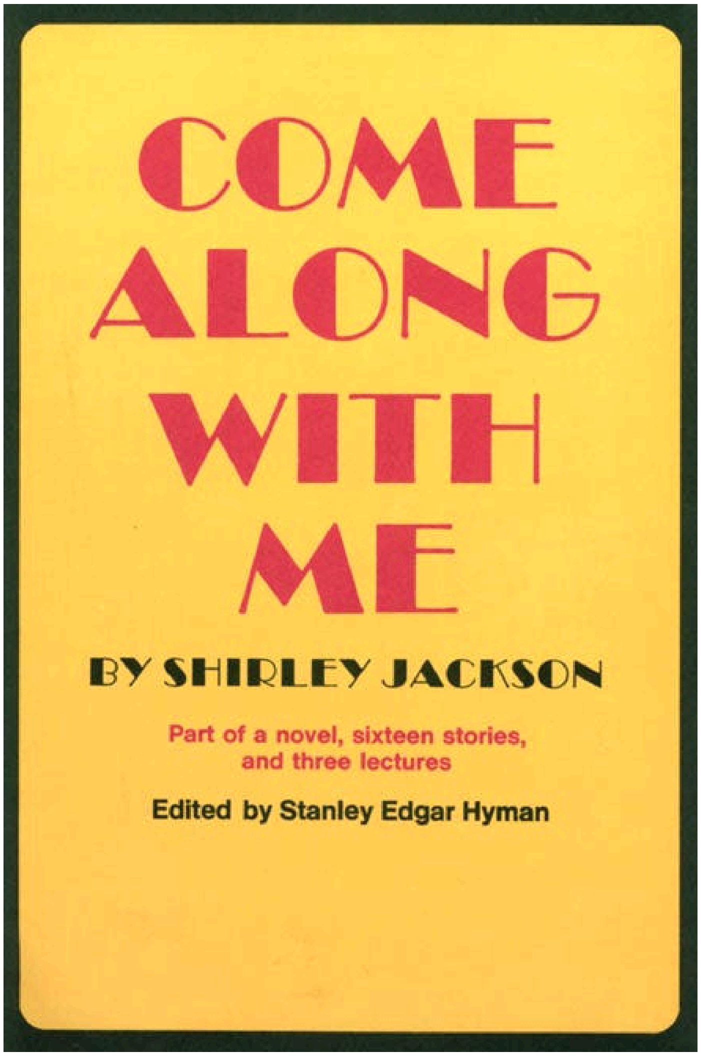
"Jonas and I will see to it that no spider ever comes near you. Oh, Constance," I said, "we are so happy."

Come Along with Me (1968)

AN UNFINISHED NOVEL

Come Along with Me was first published by Viking Press in 1968, three years after Jackson's death. It comprises a collection of stories and non-fiction, selected and edited by her husband, Stanley Edgar Hyman. The book opens with the unfinished final novel she was working on when she died, the titular, *Come Along with Me*, which is then followed by sixteen short stories and three lectures. In the preface, Hyman states he chose which short stories to include based on what he viewed as '…those best showing the range and variety of her work over three decades'. He writes that, at the author's request, the compilation is dedicated to Carol Brandt, Jackson's friend and literary agent from 1957 until 1965.

Come Along with Me, the unfinished novel, centres on a middle-aged widow, who decides shortly after her husband's death to sell everything they own, including their house and to move to a new city without a plan. She shows no grief over the recent loss of her husband, discards her previous identity and assumes the name Angela Motorman. She takes a room in a large boarding-house where she begins a business as a medium holding séances.



COME
ALONG
WITH
ME

BY SHIRLEY JACKSON

Part of a novel, sixteen stories,
and three lectures

Edited by Stanley Edgar Hyman

The first edition

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For

Carol Brandt

Preface

COME ALONG WITH Me is the unfinished novel at which Shirley Jackson, my late wife, was at work at the time of her death in *1965*. She rewrote the first three sections; the remaining three sections are in first draft.

The fourteen short stories were chosen from about seventy-five not previously collected, as the best, or those best showing the range and variety of her work over three decades. Most of them have appeared in magazines, in slightly altered versions and in a few cases with different titles suggested by the magazine — thus “A Visit” returns to its original title and dedication. I titled “The Rock,” which was found in an early draft, untitled; I cannot imagine why it was discarded, since it seems to me a most impressive story. “Janice” must be one of the shortest short stories on record. Shirley Jackson wrote it as a sophomore at Syracuse University, and it was printed in *Threshold*, the magazine published by her class in creative writing. My admiration for it led to our meeting. I suppose that I reprint it to some degree out of sentiment, although in its economy and power it is surely prophetic of her later mastery.

The three lectures are the lectures that Shirley Jackson delivered at colleges and writers’ conferences in her last years. “The Night We All Had Grippe” is printed after the lecture she used to conclude with a reading of it, although it appears as a section of *Life Among the Savages*, since it gets somewhat lost in that book, and I find it the funniest piece since James Thurber’s *My Life and Hard Times*. “The Lottery” is printed after the lecture that customarily concluded with *it*, because of the possibility, however remote, that there are readers unfamiliar with it.

The dedication to Carol Brandt, her good friend and agent, was Shirley Jackson’s wish.

I most gratefully acknowledge my indebtedness to my children, Barry and Sarah Hyman, and my present wife, Phoebe Pettingell, for help in assembling, selecting, and editing the contents of this book.

STANLEY EDGAR HYMAN
1968

1

I ALWAYS BELIEVE in eating when I can. I had plenty of money and no name when I got off the train and even though I had had lunch in the dining car I liked the idea of stopping off for coffee and a doughnut while I decided exactly which way I intended to go, or which way I was intended to go. I do not believe in turning one way or another without consideration, but then neither do I believe that anything is positively necessary at any given time. I got off the train with plenty of money; I needed a name and a place to go; enjoyment and excitement and a fine high gleefulness I knew I could provide on my own.

A woman said to me in the train station, “My sister might want to rent a room to a nice lady; she’s got this little crippled kid.”

I could use a little crippled kid, I thought, and so I said, “Where does your sister live, dear?”

A fine high gleefulness; I think you understand me; I have everything I want.

I sold the house at a profit. Once I got Hughie buried — my God, he was a lousy painter — I only had to make a thousand and three trips back and forth from the barn — which was a studio, which was a mess — to the house. At my age and size — both forty-four, in case it’s absolutely vital to know — I was carrying those paintings and half-finished canvasses (“This is the one the artist was working on the morning of the day he died,” and it was just as lousy as all the rest; not even imminent glowing death could help that Hughie) and books and boxes of letters and more than anything else cartons and cartons of things Hughie saved, his old dance programs and marriage licenses and fans and the like. It was none of it anything I ever wanted to see again, I promise you, but I didn't dare throw any of it away for fear Hughie might turn up someday asking, the way they sometimes do, and knowing Hughie it would be the carbon copy of something back in *1946* he wanted. Everything he might ever possibly come around asking for went into the barn; one thousand and three trips back and forth.

I am not a callous person and no one Hughie ever knew could possibly call me practical, but I had waited long enough. I knew I could sell the house. The furniture went to everyone, and I did think that was funny. They came up to me at the auction, people I had known for years, people who had come to the funeral, people who had sat on the chairs and eaten at the dining-room table and sometimes passed out on the beds, if the truth were known, and they said things like "I bought your little maple desk and anytime you want it back it's waiting for you," and "Listen, we picked up the silver service, but it's nothing personal," and "You know the piano will find a happy home with us," and "We are grieving with you today" — no, that one they said at the funeral. In any case, all the people I had known for years came to the auction and the ones who had the nerve came up and spoke to me, sometimes embarrassed because here they were peeking at the undersprings of my sofa, and sometimes just plain brazen because they had gotten something of mine they wanted. I heard one woman — no names, of course; no one has a name yet — saying to another woman that the dining-room breakfront had always been wasted on me, which was true; I only kept it at all because I was afraid my dead grandmother would come around asking. Actually, almost all of it was wasted on me. It was Hughie's idea. "You come of such a nice family," he used to say to me, "your people were all such cultivated educated people; try to remember."

So that was how I started out. I'd thought about it for a long time of course — not that I positively expected I was going to have to bury Hughie, but he had a good life — and everything went the way I used to figure it would. I sold the house, I auctioned off the furniture, I put all the paintings and boxes in the barn, I erased my old name and took my initials off everything, and I got on the train and left.

I can't say I actually chose the city I was going to; it was actually and truly the only one available at the moment; I hadn't ever been there and it seemed a good size and I had enough in my pocket to pay the fare. When I got off the train I took a deep breath of the dirty city air and carried my suitcase and my pocketbook and my fur stole — Hughie wasn't selfish, I don't want to give a wrong impression; I always had everything I wanted — and stopped at the counter for coffee and doughnuts.

"My sister might want to rent a room to a nice lady," this woman said to me, "she's got this little crippled kid."

So I said, "Where does your sister live, dear?"

That was where I got my first direction, you see. Smith Street. Where I was going to be living for a while.

The city is a pretty city, particularly after living in the country; I have nothing actually against trees and grass, of course, but Hughie always wanted to live in the country. There was a zoo somewhere in this city, and a college, and a few big stores, and streetcars, which I believe you don't often see any more. I knew there was an art gallery — who could be married to Hughie, that painter, and not know about an art gallery? — and a symphony orchestra, and surely a little theater group, mostly wives and fairies; if I liked the city and I stayed I might look up the little theater group; there was an art movie and I hoped at least one good restaurant; I am a first-rate cook.

More than anything else, more than art movies or zoos, I wanted to talk to people; I was starved for strangers. I began with the woman at the counter in the railroad station.

"She has this little crippled kid."

"Where does your sister live, dear?"

"She was married to the same man for twenty-seven years and all he left her was the house and this little kid, he's crippled. Me, I don't like a man like that."

"They don't leave you with much, and that's a fact."

"After twenty-seven years married to the same man she shouldn't have to take in roomers."

"But if one of her roomers turns out to be me it might all have been worthwhile."

"That's where I've been, visiting my sister." She put down her coffee cup. "I come to visit her. And then I take the train back home. You have to take the train to get from my house to hers." She looked at me carefully, as though she might be wondering whether I could remember my own name. "She lives on Smith Street. You'll know the house. It's big. She's got this sign ROOMS."

"At least he left her a big house," I said.

"Up and down stairs all the time, keeping up a big house these days. She's not getting any younger, and the kid."

"Well, we're none of us," I said.

After that I talked to a man on a corner; he was waiting for a streetcar. "Does this streetcar go to Smith Street?" I asked him.

"What streetcar?" He turned and looked down the street.

"The one you're waiting for; this is a car stop, isn't it?"

He looked again, and we marveled together at the delights of the city, where you could stand on a corner and a streetcar would come. "Where you say?" he asked me.

"Smith Street."

"You live there?"

"Yes. I got this little crippled kid. Big house."

"No," he said, "you get that car across the street. Because across the street is going the other way. How long you say you've lived there?"

"Twenty-seven years. With the same man."

"He any better at catching streetcars than you are?"

"He's a motorman," I told him. "I try to avoid his route."

This clearly sounded right to him. "Women always checking up," he said, and turned away from me.

Then I talked to an old lady in a bookshop, who was so very tired that she leaned her elbows on piles of books as we talked; she told me that the city was hell on books, because of the college, and they stole a thousand paperbacks a year. "They can't seem to think of them as books," she said, furious, "books they don't dare steal because of the covers. Also they know I'm watching."

"Do you sell a lot of books?"

"It's the college," she said. "They come here to get an education." She laughed, furious. "No one speaks English any more," she said. She took her elbows off the pile of books and went back to sit down on a dirty old chair in the back of the store. "I'm watching," she called out, "I'm still watching," but I was leaving.

I went to the correct side of the street and put my suitcase down and waited carrying my pocketbook and my fur stole until a streetcar came by reading SMITH STREET and I decided well this is certainly the streetcar they meant when they said it went to Smith Street. I swung my suitcase on and climbed up behind it; you know, *they* know old ladies — not me — and little crippled kids and pregnant women and maybe sick people with broken arms are all going to have to ride on those streetcars; you'd think they didn't want passengers, the way they make those steps. I suppose the salary they pay the motorman he wouldn't help anyone anyway. He looked at me; he was sitting down driving his streetcar and I was climbing on with my suitcase and my pocketbook and my fur stole, and I figured if he wasn't going to help me I wasn't going to help him, so I said, "Does this streetcar go to Smith Street?"

He looked at me; I must say I like it better when they look at you; a lot of the time people seem to be scared of finding out that other people have real faces, as though if you looked at a stranger clearly and honestly and with both eyes you might find yourself learning something you didn't actually want to know. "Lady," he said, "I promise you. This streetcar goes to Smith Street every trip. That's why," he said, and he was not smiling, "that's why it says so on the front."

"You're sure?" I was not smiling either and he knew he had met someone as stubborn as he was, so he quit.

"Yes, lady," he said. "I'm almost positive."

"Thank you," I said. It never pays to let a minute like that slip by; every word counts. I might never see that motorman again, but on the other hand, I might be living on Smith Street and ride home with him every night. He might get to calling me by whatever name I finally picked out and I might take to asking him every night how his wife's asthma was today and did his daughter break up with that guy who stole the money and I might take to asking him every night, "Say, driver, does this streetcar go to Smith Street?"

And he might say, every night, not smiling, "Yes, lady, it surely does."

Hughie would not have thought any of that was funny. In case he ever does come back asking I will certainly remember not to tell him.

There is a kind of controlled madness to streetcars; they swing along as though they haven't quite come to terms with tracks yet, and haven't really decided whether tracks are here to stay or streetcars are here to stay on tracks; they swing and tilt and knock people around, especially people who are trying to hold onto a suitcase and a pocketbook and a fur stole. I sat there sliding around on the seat and wondering if anyone was laughing at me and wondering if maybe I was the streetcar type after all, and outside the window the city went by. I saw the biggest store in town and thought that someday very soon I would be in there, and I might say, "Well, if you haven't got this blouse in a size forty-four I'll just run across the street and try there." I would have to have a name before I could open any charge accounts anywhere. "I'd rather you didn't carry money," Hughie used to say, "I want you to go into a store and pick out what you want and tell them your name and walk out; I don't care if it's a thousand dollars, just tell them your name and take what you want." There were hotels; I might come back for a visit someday, and see all my old friends on Smith Street; I might go tea-dancing at the Splendid Hotel, although one letter was missing from its marquee; I might drop into the lobby of the Royal Hotel to hear who was being paged, and pick up a name that way. I saw a drugstore where I might get a prescription filled and buy shampoo, I saw a shop where I might buy records and a place to get my shoes repaired and a laundry and a candy store and a grocery and a leather shop and a pet shop and a toy store. It was a proper little city, correct and complete, set up exactly for my private use, fitted out with quite the right people, waiting for me to come. I slid around on the streetcar seat and thought that they had done it all very well.

I must say that motorman got the last word. I was still looking out the window when he turned around and yelled, "Smith Street." In case there was any doubt about who he was yelling at he pointed his finger at me.

"How is your wife's asthma?" I asked him when I came down the aisle with my suitcase and my pocketbook and my fur stole.

“Better, thank you,” he said. “Watch your step.”

It was Smith Street all right; no one had lied to me yet. They wanted to make sure I got there as planned; there was a sign on the corner saying SMITH STREET.

I was glad to see that there were trees; far down, at the end, I could see what looked like a little park, and on either side of Smith Street going down to the park there were trees. I thought I would enjoy coming home under the trees, in the rain, perhaps, or in the fall when the leaves were dropping. I thought I would enjoy hearing the sound of the leaves brushing against my window. The houses were the kind no one has built for a good twenty-seven years, big and ample and made for people who liked to sit on their own front porches and watch their neighbors. There were lawns and bushes and garden hoses, there were dogs. The house I wanted was on my right, about halfway down the block; it was a big house with a sign saying ROOMS although I didn’t see any little kids looking crippled. I stood across the street from the house for a few minutes; here I am, I thought, here I am.

No one, anywhere, anytime, had given me any word of any other place to go. This was the only objective I had; if I didn’t go in here they wouldn’t tell me any other place to go. I wondered which room was going to be mine and whether I would look down from its window onto the street and see myself standing there looking up and waiting; by the time I looked out of the window I would have to have a name.

Right then I wished I could sit down for a minute and maybe have a little something to eat; nothing looks sillier than a forty-four-year-old woman standing on a sidewalk with a suitcase and a pocketbook and a fur stole trying to think up a name for herself. Somewhere down the street someone called a dog, calling “Here, Rover,” and I thought that Rover was probably a good name but it was not actually exactly what I was looking for; I thought I might stop someone going by and ask for their name but no one wants to give away a name that might be terribly important to keep, and even if they did tell it to me I might not be able to spell it or even pronounce it right and if you’ve got a name at all you’ve got to be able to say it out loud. I thought of Laura, but Laura was my mother’s name. I didn’t want any more of Hughie and his names, and Bertha was my grandmother and who wants to be named Bertha, particularly after her grandmother? I thought of Muriel but that just sounds like someone who gets raped and robbed in an alley. I once had a cat named Edward, and because he was silver I changed his name to Stargazer and then in the spring to Robin, and when I got tired, which I did very soon, of a cat named Robin, I tried to change his name to Edward again and he got sick and died. You have to be terribly careful with names; one too many and you lose.

I thought of Jean and Helen and Margaret, but I knew people called by all those names, and perhaps I would not enjoy answering to them; I thought of Gertrude and Goneril and I thought of Diana, which was dead wrong and Minerva, which was closer but silly. I knew I had to think of something right away, and I got a little chill at the back of my neck; what is really more frightening than being without a name, nothing to call yourself, nothing to say when they ask you who you are? Then it fell on me; I heard it: Angela. It was right, Angela was the name I had come all this way to find.

The rest of it was easy; I had said it already. Angela Motorman. Mrs. Angela Motorman.

So Mrs. Angela Motorman walked slowly and decently up the walk to the fine old house with the sign in the window saying ROOMS. She was carrying her suitcase and her pocketbook and her fur stole, and she stopped for a minute to look the house over very carefully; a lady cannot be too wary of the company she may find herself among, a lady chooses her place of residence with caution. As she set her foot on the steps she put her shoulders back and took a deep breath: Mrs. Angela Motorman, who never walked on earth before.

2

I MUST SAY she had the good sense to offer me a cup of tea right away, once she found out I was a friend of her sister's, and in case you are wondering about me having lunch on the train and coffee and a doughnut in the station, and now a cup of tea and cookies, let me just remark that I have plenty of room to put it all.

"And what do you do, Mrs. Motorman?" she asked me.

"I dabble in the supernatural," I told her.

Her name was Mrs. Faun; we both had names. "How is my sister?" she wanted to know.

"Doing well," I said. "Of course, she has her troubles like the rest of us."

I had taken to the house right away; I like most houses, and this was one of the best. The staircase was good, wide and clearly worn by a hundred trips up and down every day, up and down, up and down till your feet could fall off. It was a solid house, a devil to clean, but prepared to stand right where it was forever; enough people had lived here to make the air very alive; I was ready for any number to come around asking, but first I had to deal with Mrs. Faun.

"I've just buried my husband," I said.

"I've just buried mine," she said.

"Isn't it a relief?" I said.

"What?" she said.

"It was a very sad occasion," I said.

"You're right," she said, "it's a relief."

She had a jaw and she served a strong cup of tea and I would not say a bad word against a woman who put out her own homemade sugar cookies for a guest; I am an excellent cook. The tea was served in the kitchen; as soon as I said I was a friend of her sister's she said, quite rightly, "I was just having a cup of tea; come on in the kitchen."

When I tried to say it for the first time I was not actually certain how it was going to sound, because no one had ever said it before in the history of this earth, and I thought to myself, I'm giving birth. "I'm Mrs. Angela Motorman," I said.

"I'm Mrs. Faun," she said right back. "I was just having a cup of tea."

I thought that Mrs. Faun and I were going to be all right together. I didn't know yet whether she had a silly laugh, or went on tapping her fingers on the table, but I liked her kitchen, which had no gadgets, and I liked her stove, which was still warm from making sugar cookies, and I liked her jaw.

"I'm not saying I want a room and I'm not saying I don't," I told her, "but if I did, what would you have to show me?"

"I'm not saying I have a room and I'm not saying I don't," she said right back, "but if you wanted to look I could let you see a very pretty little place."

Oh, I was going to be all right with Mrs. Faun. I liked her jaw and I liked her stove and I liked her house and if she wanted to have a little crippled kid I was certainly not going to stand in her way; "It's hard for a woman alone," I said.

"And what do you do, Mrs. Motorman?"

"I dabble in the supernatural."

"My niece had this meningitis," she said as though I had asked some kind of a question. "Let me fill your cup. She had this meningitis and it got to her heart. They knew it was going to, of course, but they never told her. She had it for years before she found out it got to her heart."

"My cousin had mercury poisoning," I said. "That goes directly to the heart, of course. He only lasted for about three days."

"I had a cousin something like that," she said. "You mentioned what a short time they last. Only in her case it all went to the brain. Reddest face I ever saw and she died not knowing one of us."

"My aunt was the same," I said. "Only she died of pneumonia; that's a very quick one. It catches you without any warning, you swell up, and there you go."

"Bloated," she said, "like my nephew, only his was alcohol."

"And then there was this friend of mine," I said. "She had cirrhosis of the scalp. They don't have a cure yet for any of those things, you know, and they run right through you. I hate to think of the way my friend went right on suffering until the very end."

"Very often the end is the most to be desired," she said. "There was a friend of mine, we all couldn't wait for her to go, but she had cancer. Incurable."

"I had a friend who had cancer," I said, "but they cut off her right leg."

"That's never enough," she said. "Mark me, she'll be back for her other leg. I knew a woman once who lost both arms that way."

"My uncle fell under a truck," I said. I wondered if I should tell her about my great-aunt.

"I'm sorry about your uncle," she said. "Do you want a room or don't you?"

"I do."

"And what do you do, Mrs. Motorman?"

“I dabble in the supernatural. Traffic with spirits. Seances, messages, psychiatric advice, that kind of thing.”

“I never had one of those before,” Mrs. Faun said. “I’m not saying I haven’t had all kinds. You rent out rooms, it’s sometimes a surprise what you get.”

“I never lived in a room before.”

You won’t find it terribly difficult,” she said, not smiling. “All you have to do is pay for it regularly. I’d be willing to add some meals, but that would be extra.”

“Perhaps I could give a hand with the cooking; I’m a fine cook.”

“I’m not sure but what that would be extra too,” she said. “You may not cook in your room.”

“I promise,” I said.

“You may not smoke in your bed.”

“I promise.”

“You may not make noise late at night.”

“I promise.”

“These are all safety precautions,” she explained to me. “Thou shalt not — I mean, you may not keep dirty pets.”

“I promise.”

“You may not spread any contagious diseases. Although the room I plan to show you has a private bath. Linen provided, we do the heavy cleaning, and anything you raise by way of spirits you have to put back yourself.”

Oh, I liked Mrs. Faun. She turned her head suddenly and then she stood up and went over to the back door of the kitchen, the door leading outside, and opened it. “Little early today,” she said, and “Must have run all the way,” which was clearly some kind of a private joke because there was laughter. I helped myself to another cookie, and then Mrs. Faun came back pushing the wheelchair; there was a ramp built outside the door so she could push it right inside without difficulty. “This is my son Tom,” Mrs. Faun said, “Tom, this is Mrs. Motorman.” Once again it sounded all right; I was going to learn to answer to it.

“Hi,” the boy in the wheelchair said. He seemed to be about twelve years old, although it’s hard to tell with a boy sitting down. “Any cookies left?”

“I got my share,” I said. “Someday if you want me to I’ll make you my special chocolate cake; it’s got five layers.”

“Okay,” he said, and then he laughed. “Motorman’s a funny name,” he said.

“I just made it up,” I told him. “You just home from school?”

“I like school,” he said, “but they’re always surprised I’m not smarter, because I don’t play baseball and stuff, they always think I’m going to be smarter than anyone else. And I’m not.”

“Maybe if you practice,” I said.

“One kid pushes me down the street every morning and another kid pushes me back home in the afternoon. They do all the pushing and I ride both ways and it’s great, but I’m not as smart as they think I ought to be.”

“You’re smart enough for your own good,” Mrs. Faun said. She brought him a glass of milk and pushed the plate of cookies a little closer to him. “I’ll go and check your room,” she said to me.

“I’m pretty smart,” he said to me anxiously. “I’m not stupid, of course.”

“I’m pretty smart, but I never got pushed back and forth to school.”

“Well, I’m planning to be a scholar, and I better get started pretty soon. You know any Spanish?”

“No.”

“I want to learn Spanish and French and Italian and Russian and then Latin and Greek and be a scholar. So far I only know a little Spanish, but

I'm lazy."

"One of these days I might push you to the movies," I said.

"I would like that," he said. "Perhaps a movie in Spanish or French to improve my accent."

We each had another cookie. Then he said, "What do you study, Mrs. Motorman?"

"I was married to a painter."

"Was he any good?"

"He was lousy."

"Is he dead?"

"Yes."

"How long you think I ought to go on studying Spanish before I start French? They're both good languages."

"If you're so lazy why not give up the whole thing?"

"Well," he said, thinking, "I suppose it's because they all keep waiting for me to be so smart. I wouldn't play baseball if I could, you can hurt yourself playing those games. But I don't mind being a scholar."

"Look," I said, "I'm not used to talking to kids."

"Oh, that's all right," he said.

"I don't know why you can't just sit around and read books."

Mrs. Faun came back and said "Drink your milk there," and "Your room is ready." She touched the boy on the head and he said, "Hey, Mrs. Motorman and I are going to the movies someday," and Mrs. Faun looked at me for a minute and then said, "I think you're going to like the room."

3

I BROUGHT A couple of cookies upstairs with me, just in case. My room was perfectly square, which was good. My name was Mrs. Angela Motorman and this was where I was going to live, in a square room in Mrs. Faun's house on Smith Street. I did not know as yet what I was going to add to this room; it already held a bed and a dresser and two chairs and a pretty little desk, something like the pretty little desk I had last seen disappearing into the back of a station wagon when I had my auction. There was nothing in these desk drawers; I did not know as yet what I was going to put in them. There was a little bookcase which would hold, I thought, perhaps eleven books; I would have to choose my eleven books very carefully; when I found them I could write "Angela Motorman" on the flyleaves. I put my underwear and stockings into the dresser drawers, and hung my two dresses and my fur stole in the closet; someday I would go to the department stores and buy new clothes; I put my brush and comb on the dresser and put my sleeping pills on the bedside table and put my reading glasses beside them. I had no pets, no address books, no small effects to set around on tables or pin on walls, I had no lists of friends to keep in touch with and no souvenirs; all I had was myself.

I like people, but I have never needed companions; Hughie was my only mistake.

I set an armchair next to the window of my room, and I was pleased to see that I did indeed look out over the trees and onto the spot on the street where I had stood not long ago wondering over a name; "It's all right, Angela," I said very softly out the window, "it's all right, you came in and it’s all right; you got here after all.” And outside the dim nameless creature named herself Mrs. Angela Motorman and came steadily to the door.

4

I HAVE A real feeling for shapes; I like things square, and my room was finely square. Even though I couldn't cook there I thought I could be happy. I wanted the barest rock bottom of a room I could have, I wanted nothing but a place to sleep and a place to sit and a place to put my things; any decorating done to my environment is me.

One reason is, the first time it happened was in a square room, my own room when I was about twelve. Before then, most of it was just whisperings and little half-thoughts, the way a child almost notices something, almost remembers, but this time it was real and I was not dreaming; I know when I'm dreaming. I sat up in bed in the middle of the night, and heard my own voice saying "What? What?" and then I heard another voice, not coming out of my own head — I know what comes out of my own head — saying "Find Rosalind Bleeker. Tell her Sid says hello." Three times I heard that crazy voice say "Tell her Sid says hello."

I knew Rosalind Bleeker — in all the years since I've never forgotten her name — and because she was four or five years older and in high school I had a little trouble finding her the next day, but I caught her when she was walking home. I remember I had trouble getting her attention; I was just a little kid, and she was popular and pretty and always laughing. She was wearing a white blouse and a blue skirt and a charm bracelet. Her hair was curly. She was carrying her biology textbook and a blue-covered notebook. Her shoes were white. Her eyes were blue. She wore a little lipstick. I pulled at her sleeve and said "Rosalind, hey, Rosalind," not very loud because she was a high-school girl. She turned around and looked down at me and frowned, because I was a kid and she was a high-school girl and here I was pulling at her sleeve. “Listen, Rosalind,” I said, “listen. I’m supposed to tell you Sid says to say hello.” “What?” she said. “Sid says to say hello,” I said, and then ran, because I had nothing more to say and I felt silly. I heard later she went home and hanged herself. I don’t know.

Anyway, that was the first time. After that there were lots more, some more real than others. There was the time I said to my mother, “Grandma just picked up the phone to call you,” and she said, “That’s nice,” just as the phone rang. She looked at me funny; they always did after a while.

“I dabble in the supernatural,” I told Mrs. Faun; she thought I was making some kind of a joke.

I quit when I married Hughie; you’d have to.

I remember another time when I sat by the window and my mother, who ought to have known better by then, said to me, “Why are you always brooding, staring out the window, never doing anything?”

“I’m watching the peacocks walking on the lawn,” I said.

“But you ought to be out playing with the other children; why do you suppose we moved here to a nice neighborhood, so you could always sit looking out the window instead of playing with the other kids? Haven’t you got any friends? Doesn’t anyone like you?”

“I’m watching the peacocks,” I tried to tell her. “They’re walking on the lawn and I’m watching them.”

“You ought to be out with your friends. What are peacocks doing on our lawn, ruining the grass?” and she came over to look out the window; as I say, she ought to have known better.

Sometimes I knew and sometimes I didn’t; there would be times when I lay on my stomach on the floor watching creatures playing under the dining-room table, and I knew then of course that my mother wasn’t going to see them and was maybe going to put her foot through one when she came by to say why did they move to a nice neighborhood and I wouldn’t go out and make friends. Sometimes my good square room would be so full I just lay in bed and laughed. Sometimes weeks would go by and I would be reading some specially interesting book, or painting, or following people every day after school, and nothing would come at all; sometimes they followed me; once an old man followed me, but he turned out to be real. I could see what the cat saw.

When I was about sixteen I began to get self-conscious about all of it; it wasn’t that I minded them coming around asking and following me everywhere I went; most sixteen-year-old girls like to be followed, but by then I knew no one else was going to see them and sometimes I felt like a fool; you don’t go around staring at empty air all the time, not when you’re sixteen years old you don’t, not without people beginning to notice. “Do you need glasses?” my mother used to ask me, or “Can’t you for heaven’s sake stop gawking at nothing and shut your mouth and comb your hair and get out with the other kids?” Then sometimes for weeks at a time I would think that they had gone away, maybe for good, and I’d start taking care of my hair and putting polish on my nails and hanging around the soda shop or going to a football game, and then first thing I knew I’d be talking to someone and a face would come between us and a mouth would open saying some crazy thing, and I’d be watching and listening and whomever I had been talking to would wait for a few minutes and then get edgy and walk away while I was still listening to some other voice. After a while I just stopped talking to anybody.

That’s not a good way for a girl to grow up. It’s easy to say that if I knew then what I know now I could have handled it better; how can anyone handle things if her head is full of voices and her world is full of things no one else can see? I'm not complaining.

I sat in my pleasant square room at Mrs. Faun's house and thought about it all. Ever since I can remember, I thought as quietly as I could, I have been seeing and hearing things no one else could see and hear. By now I can control the nuisance to some extent. It disappeared entirely when I married Hughie; I have reason to believe now that it is coming back. I sat in Mrs. Faun's house and thought what good did it do to sell the house and find a new name; they don't care what your name is when they come around asking.

At first I tried to point them out to people; I was even foolish enough at first to think other people just hadn't noticed; "Look at that," I would say, "look, right over there, it's a funny man." It didn't take long for my mother to put a stop to that; "There isn't any funny man anywhere," she would say, and jerk on my arm, "what kind of a sewer do you have for a mind?" Once I tried to tell a neighbor about it; it was quite accidental, because I rarely told anyone anything. He was sitting on his front porch one evening in summer and I had been lying on the grass on our lawn, watching small lights go and come among the grass blades, and listening to a kind of singing — sometimes, especially in summer, it was a kind of pleasant world I lived in — and he heard me laughing. He asked me to come and sit on his front porch and he gave me a glass of lemonade, and when he asked me what I had been doing I went ahead and told him. I told him about seeing and hearing, and he listened, which is more than anyone else ever did. "You're clairvoyant," he told me, and I always remembered that; he probably knew less than nothing about it, but he listened and said I was clairvoyant; later he told my mother I ought to be taken to some special clinic and examined, and for about three days she decided I was pregnant. I never talked to him again; I wanted to, once in a while, but he never spoke to me after that.

I knew a lot about people, a lot that they never knew I knew, but I never seemed to have much sense, probably because one thing I never really knew was whether what I was doing was real or not.

The house, I later found out, was almost all square. It had three floors and a basement, and neat trim porches on three sides; whoever built that house had either very little imagination or a mind much like mine, because everything was neatly cornered and as near as possible the same size; that is, one door matched the next almost perfectly and where there were doors they were as often as possible right in the middle of the wall, with an equal space on either side of them. The windows were perfectly correct.

When I asked Mrs. Faun later she told me that there were five people renting rooms in the house; I thought it was wrong that they should be an odd number, but since I was the fifth I could hardly protest, and in any case she had only six rooms to rent. On the top floor were a Mr. Brand who was a bookkeeper, and a Mr. Cabot who was, Mrs. Faun believed, in merchandising. On the second floor were old Mrs. Flanner, who kept a bookshop, Mr. Campbell, who was in transit, and me. Mrs. Faun kept the ground floor for herself. “I always wanted it that way,” she told me, “I always used to dream of the time when I could live on the ground floor; I had it planned for years. I always thought the dining room would work out better as a bedroom, and I hated the idea of going upstairs every night and leaving it behind. It’s more comfortable, it’s more convenient, and it’s perfectly safe.”

“Safe?”

“In case of fire. I can get out.”

I may say that in all the time I was in that house I never met Mr. Campbell, who was in transit.

We were a gay crew, I soon discovered. Here I was, with one suitcase and a fur stole and a pocketbook with plenty of money, but old Mrs. Flanner had had her same room for nine years and she had a television set, all her own furniture, including a Chinese lacquer table, purple drapes on the windows, and a silver tea service. Brand and Cabot on the top floor took cocktails in one another's room every day at six. Mrs. Faun was apt to invite anyone at random to Sunday dinner; she was almost as good a cook as I am. Brand played the cello, and Mrs. Flanner used to sing at one time before her voice cracked. Mrs. Flanner also played the dirtiest game of bridge that Mrs. Faun had ever seen. Brand had a small mustache, Cabot collected Coalport china, Mrs. Faun disliked garlic and consequently never made a decent salad dressing until the day she died; Brand fell over the bottom step of the staircase every night regularly, coming home at five-thirty. He was neither drunk nor clumsy, he never fell over anything else that anyone ever knew of, he never dropped anything or spilled anything, but every night at five-thirty Mr. Brand tripped over the bottom step of the staircase. You could set your clock by Brand falling over the bottom step of the staircase, Mrs. Faun used to say, if it was important to you to set your clock at five-thirty. Brand and Cabot and Flanner and I usually took most of our meals at a little restaurant around the corner, but every Friday night Brand went to his mother's and every Saturday night Cabot took out a girl; he had been taking her out for four years now, Mrs. Faun said, but thought marriage was too confining. I liked Mrs. Faun. I had almost nothing to do, so I got to helping with the housework and we'd knock off and sit around the kitchen drinking coffee and eating cookies; Mrs. Faun baked every second morning, before anyone was up, and one thing I did like about living in that house was waking up to the smell of cookies baking.

My room, as I say, was absolutely, perfectly square; I measured it. I admire a house with a good square room, and when I unpacked I knew I was going to stay. First I unpacked my picture, my painting; it had been painted with Hughie's paints but I painted it myself. "Keep it around if you like," Hughie said, "you're proud of it, all right. Don't think I hate all painting styles but my own." So my own painting went on the wall, although Mrs. Faun said that it would cost to repair the hole. Cabot liked my painting, and Brand. Mrs. Flanner poked it with her finger and said it took her back. Mrs. Faun said it would cost to repair the hole.

"What do you do, Mrs. Motorman?" Brand asked me.

"A little shoplifting, sometimes," I told him. "Some meddling."

"What brought you to our city?"

"Curiosity," I told him.

Brand and Cabot asked me up for cocktails, and Mrs. Faun asked me for Sunday dinner, and Mrs. Flanner asked me if I played bridge and I said no. I walked to the end of Smith Street and around in the little park, under the trees. One day I went back to the streetcar and got on and went into the center of the city, where I went into the first large store and looked at blouses.

"If you don't have this blouse in a size forty-four," I told the salesgirl, "I'll just run across the street and look." I didn't go across the street, actually; I spoke to a lady in a drugstore where I stopped to have a sandwich and a milk shake. "They're all chemicals now," she said to me. "You can't even buy pure vanilla. All chemicals."

"In a drugstore you'd expect chemicals."

"Everywhere. You think you're drinking chocolate in that milk shake? Nothing but chemicals."

"I didn't actually come into the city for a milk shake, though; I came to buy a blouse."

"Well, *they*'re chemical. Clothes, food, drink, plants growing in nothing but water, laboratories overcrowded, it's a bad world."

"Bourbon—"

"It's all this mad race into space," she said, and went away.

When I got onto the streetcar to go back, it said SMITH STREET in big letters on the front; "Does this streetcar go to Smith Street?" I asked the motorman, and he looked at me for a minute and then he said very quietly, "Yes, ma'am, it surely does."

"Thank you," I said. "How is your wife's asthma?"

"I am not married," he said, "thank God."

5

WHEN I DECIDED it was time for me to give a seance, I spoke to Mrs. Faun first, of course, since it was her house and I had no idea how she might feel about people coming around asking in her own house; “I thought I might hold a kind of a small seance,” I said to her.

“What would that include?” she asked me.

“Well, I sit in the middle, and everyone sits around, and we might have sherry. And then I give messages.”

“Who provides the sherry?”

“Everyone has *some* kind of a question they’d like to get answered. Some kind of a question can only be answered from beyond.”

I was sure she was going to say “Beyond what?” so I said quickly, “You don’t have to believe if you don’t want to.”

“Thank you,” she said. “I’ll let you have the cooking sherry.”

“May I use the little parlor?”

“That means I’d have to come,” Mrs. Faun said. “Unless I choose to sit in the kitchen all the time.”

“I’d be honored if you’d come.”

“Who else would be here?”

I had made a little sign reading MESSAGES OBTAINED. QUESTIONS ANSWERED. FORTUNES and tacked it up in the bookshop I found my first day. Several people had been interested. The bookshop lady had promised to let them know. So I told Mrs. Faun, “I think there will be several people. And of course anyone from the house.”

“Not Tom. I don’t allow him seances.”

"Has the question ever come up before?"

"Not that I ever thought it would. But he can read all right in his room. He doesn't listen in."

"One reason I want to use the little parlor is that chair."

Mrs. Faun actually laughed. "It used to be my husband's favorite chair," she said. "Night after night."

"Did he ever get any manifestations, sitting there?"

"Not that he thought it worthwhile mentioning. But it's a good chair. I don't much care for it myself, but I could sell it for money."

It was a good chair. It had a back higher than my head, and the arms were solid, and altogether it looked something like a throne of which the seat had been amply seasoned by Mr. Faun's bottom. Whenever the door of the little parlor was open I sneaked in and sat down for a minute; I liked that chair.

"Are you sure," Mrs. Faun asked me, "that you are not tampering with things better left alone? Are you sure that you know what you are doing? Are you sure, Mrs. Motorman, that you are not stirring up some kind of trouble that will hang around my house?"

"It's exactly like taking a long-distance call," I told her. "Once you hang up, it's over."

"I never knew a long-distance call didn't mean trouble for someone."

The little parlor had drapes, which Mrs. Faun never closed, which is why the dust rose when I closed them, which is why I sneezed and Mrs. Faun scowled; she kept a clean house, generally. I moved the fine chair into the center of the room, and we put a few dining-room chairs around, not too many because I wasn't sure how many would come and I didn't want to look anxious, but enough so no one would stand; no one stood around in Mrs. Faun's house; perhaps because Tom was always sitting down she thought people standing were uncomfortable. Although I have plenty of money I put a large orange bowl, in which Mrs. Faun usually kept apples, on a low table moved just enough out from the wall to be noticeable. "People expect this," I told Mrs. Faun.

"I'll bring the sherry and the glasses," she said, "and you can pay me out of the pot."

"It's really a hobby of mine, mostly. But if it does people good, why keep it to myself?"

"If more people kept more things to themselves this world would be a better place." Mrs. Faun gave the curtain a little shake. "How you can find dust beats me," she said.

I don't know what the bookstore lady could have said around the bookstore, or even what Mrs. Faun might have said around the neighborhood, because when I came to give my seance there were eight people, which made us nine altogether, which is good. I had decided to wear my long dark-blue dress. It doesn't fit as well as it used to, but who says a psychic has to be smart? It has these long sleeves, and I wore my pearls; I will say that for Hughie, he didn't stint me.

All right, I thought, I'll try it once anyway. They all sat there watching me as though they dared me to put something over on them, the watchful, the eager, the perceptive. I realized I was stalling; there were a number of things I wanted to do right now a lot more than lean back and close my eyes in the face of those watching people; I knew they would keep on staring at me after I was gone, and I hated that. I could have said right then that it was a joke, but they would have believed me. "I don't know anything about all this," came to my mind, "please, all of you, go away and don't try to make me do something I hate." But of course I didn't; I looked each of them right in the eye, thinking I hate you I hate you I hope you are brutally disappointed, and I nodded at Mrs. Faun, who at least was almost snarling out loud, and I leaned back and felt the worn velvet of the chair against the back of my neck and wondered who was clamoring around just inside waiting to come around asking, and I closed my eyes. I could hear them breathing. Easy, slow, contemptuous, that would be Mrs. Faun, waiting to be shown. Then the others, quick and eager, a little woman watching, the men aware, alert, dishonest.

I was in a great hall, lofty, pillared, reaching into the distance. There were flowers in great pots, and — the old crystal palace, maybe? — tall glittering walls; there were many people. I waited quietly, not knowing who was going to come around asking, and waited and waited, and then found one man singled out, almost drifting to where I waited, almost moving without movement, surely without sound. “A tall man,” I said, and heard my own voice remotely, “a tall man, wanting something. He has gray hair. He is not very old, but he has gray hair.”

“My father,” someone said.

“*My* brother,” someone else said.

“Excuse me. My father.”

“He says,” and I raised my voice, hearing it speak out there, to them, while I listened inside, “he says to take up the book he left behind, the book that he held in his hands near the end, the book he was holding in his hands. He says to take up the book and turn to page... page... page... it has an eight and a five.”

“Dad?”

“I beg your pardon. My brother. I know the very book.”

“An eight and a five; find the page and there will be a message — a letter? — a message. He says he left a message.”

“Ask him if he is happy. Tell him it’s his sister asking.”

“Excuse me—”

“He does not know the word happy. He is here, and that is all. He is going now.”

“I’m sure it was my father; if I had been given a chance to speak—”

“Someone is here,” I said. I heard my voice saying it. “Someone is here asking for Alice? Anna? Angela?” I knew even then there was something wrong with Angela, but I had forgotten what. “Alice?”

“My wife? Her name is Agnes.”

“She is ill, is she not? Someone is asking if she is better, if her illness has abated; someone is asking that you tell her the old medicine is better. Someone wants her to know that she is being taken care of, someone is over her now, comforting her.”

“But the old medicine didn’t—”

“Tell her someone is caring for her. She will be better.”

“Will you ask my father to come back again? I must speak to him, really.”

“There are many many many here, some of them wanting to speak, some of them moving away. One who wants to speak is asking for a daughter, but it is not a father who wants a daughter; someone is asking for a daughter. Is there a daughter here?”

“My mother? My *mother* wants to talk to me? What for?”

“Are you well? Are you contented? Someone is asking if you are well.”

“It’s not my mother then, because she—”

“Gone now. Some are pressing close to me, some are far away. Here is someone with a message. Do not forget old Ginger.”

“What?”

“Do not forget old Ginger.” My Lord, I thought, from somewhere far away, old Ginger was *my* cat. Messages for myself. Better quit soon. “Do not forget old Ginger," I said, as though I ever could. "Here is someone asking, asking; a message for a wife."

"I don't want it," Mrs. Faun said; I could hear her voice thin and annoyed. "Tell him to go away again; I don't want to hear anything he has to say."

"Someone is here, someone who wants to ask about a little child. Was the little child lost? Did it ever come home again? Where is the little child?"

"Get my father back; we don't know any little—"

"Now there is a message here, a message for T. L."

"Me? The first initial's really J. but they always called me Teddy; I guess it's for me."

"Good fortune in store for you, T. L. great good fortune is being warned against; do not be deceived."

So that was my first seance; it couldn't have been a very good one, since no one said anything, and there was only thirty-five cents in the pot; I had to pay fifty cents more out of my own pocket for the sherry.

"All they talk about is death and dying," I said to Mrs. Faun after she had seen them out. "And they are cheap."

"What do you expect?" She opened the drapes, blowing dust off her nose.

"They could take a little bit more interest."

"If they were interested in real life they wouldn't have come to listen to you. You'll find out."

I thought she was being unnecessarily dreary, but that, as it turned out, was going to be Mrs. Faun's way. "They're all crazy," she said, "all they want is to be told what to do. They wait for some crackpot to give them the word."

"If by crackpot you mean—"

“I mean what I mean,” Mrs. Faun said. “If the shoe fits, Mrs. Motorman.”

6

WELL, I DON'T want you to think that Mrs. Faun and I came right out and quarreled all the time. We kind of sharpened our nails on each other, that was all, and most of the time we finished off our arguments laughing together over a cup of tea, although I must say I was surprised when I began getting a weekly bill from Mrs. Faun, in addition to the rent for the room, for "tea, cookies, etc."

"I thought you invited me," I said to her the first week.

"It won't hurt you," she said. "I get what I can."

I started following people after a day or so in the city; one thing is certain, you can't find your way around a strange city without someone to show you where to go, and when all you know is a Mrs. Faun who won't step out of her front parlor for a bomb explosion on the street outside, you pretty well have to get the way from strangers. The first person I followed was an old fellow I picked up outside a restaurant; he had been eating caviar, and I like to follow someone who is good and full of caviar, although I don't care for it myself; it seemed that he might lead me to a far more interesting place than any I might find by myself, and, in a sense, he did; "Why are you following me?" he asked, turning suddenly on me at a street corner; I was not as good at following people then as I became later.

"Because you were eating caviar," I said. Sometimes the truth doesn't hurt.

"I like caviar."

"I don't."

“Where did you plan to follow me?” He was still bewildered, but I thought amused; I am not very terrifying to look at, I believe. In any case, he was clearly a man without a guilty conscience, or at least no kind of conscience that being followed by me might bother. Perhaps being followed by a lovely young nineteen-year-old boy might have bothered him some.

“Come and have tea with me,” he said. I swear, he took out a cardcase and handed me a card; I don’t think I have ever known anyone to do that before. “I’d like to,” I told him, “it will save me money with Mrs. Faun.”

There was the day I tried my hand at shoplifting; it was particularly important because of the weather; it was one of those winter days which suddenly dreams of spring, when the sky is blue and soft and clear, and the wind has dropped its voice and whispers instead of screaming, and the sun is out and the trees look surprised, and over everything there is the faintest, palest tint of green; weather entertains me.

“I’m trying my hand at shoplifting,” I told the salesgirl, and we both laughed.

I went to the biggest department store; I had not been there before, but one big department store is much like another. This one was one I might have been in a hundred times before; I knew where things were, and recognized the heavily scented air, so rich after the clean air outside. Sometimes I like big stores, with softness underfoot and pressing against the sides of your head; I like long counters with soft highlights and seductively tumbled scarves and vacant mannequins and the dirty gloves of shoppers; I like everything about big department stores except shopping in them. I do not like salesgirls and their manners, and having to buy my dresses in a special behemoths department, and I do not like the stupid mockery of people who enjoy keeping you waiting; I do not like credit offices, but I enjoy quarreling over a bill. Hughie used to be all lost, really frightened, when I got into a fight with a department store because I never really felt I was fighting with people, and so it was not necessary to observe any of the small delicate graces you use automatically when you are fighting with people; even with the electric company I always knew I was fighting with people, but never with department stores, and of course not with the telephone company. We paid our bills — I don't mean to sound as if I fought with any of them because I wanted to save money — but I could always enjoy a good fight over something. I loved being *in* a department store, and I am only surprised that I had not thought of shoplifting long before. "Shoplifting," I explained to the salesgirl, and touched the little box gently with one finger, and we both laughed.

I had really no good idea how you went about stealing something from a department store, but I thought I could make it up as I went along; that is, you will observe, my way with almost everything. I have always been quite successful at making things up as I went along, and very often surprised at where I led myself. I never thought along the way that I might end up in jail, or hurt, or even embarrassed, because that is simply not the kind of thing that happens to the kind of person I am; I am not above the law, but somehow I make the law, which so many other people do not. This is not arrogance; I first became aware of this when I was a child and always got everything I wanted. Before God, I thought I wanted Hughie. But this is not shoplifting.

For reasons which amused me considerably, and which I do not care to discuss here, I had decided that what I most wanted to steal was an ornamental candle. I knew that there would probably be a department which sold candles and candlesticks and elaborate boxes of matches, and I thought to steal a candle and take it back to Mrs. Faun to put in the center of her appalling mantelpiece. Moreover, a candle is not too valuable, although perhaps not always easy to hide. Poor Hughie, and he was such a lousy painter.

In any case, I stepped onto the escalator — such a sense of power, such a sense of being carried, of permitting this small service underfoot — and, looking down at the store, let myself be taken to the second floor, where I paused briefly at lingerie; I do like lace; and then on to the third floor and the fourth, where I found a gift shop and, just beyond, the candles I was looking for. Perhaps a black candle for Mrs. Faun's next black mass, perhaps a candle that told time — although I do think that's too much of a good thing; the nicest part of a candle is its inaccuracy — or perhaps a candle topped with flowers, or a candle looking like a cabbage, or a house, or a poodle. I like things made to look like something else, although I draw the line at food. I once had a recipe for imitation potato pancakes made out of ground cauliflower, and they were just as vile as they sound. But an ordinary everyday plain camouflage is quite all right with me.

I saw a candle made of a thousand different colors, and it was very lovely; I quite wanted it. But wanting it and stealing it were two different things; if I started stealing just because I wanted a colored candle the whole point would be lost, and I had already decided that I could not buy it. So, reluctantly, I passed by the lovely candle and found quite a hideous one; it looked rather like Mrs. Faun, I thought, and I put it in my pocket. Then I turned and saw the salesgirl looking at me with an air of complete joy; she had seen me, of course, and she took a step forward and said, "Can I help you?" and waited to see what I would do.

Naturally, I took the candle out of my pocket and said, "No, just trying my hand at shoplifting," and we both laughed. I set the candle back on the counter and turned away, my candle-stealing days over forever. She could have cried, that salesgirl; perhaps she had been waiting all her working life to catch a shoplifter in action; perhaps her big moment tonight at dinner was now hopelessly ruined. After all, “I caught a shoplifter today,” is a much more sensational beginning to a story than just a “I had the craziest old lady in my department today.” She must have waited on a good many crazy old ladies, and, understand, I’m not saying I’m old. She just looked like she’d tell it that way. So I had to shoplift something else. I won’t go into the number of things I took and had to put back; I don’t seem really cut out for the most efficient stealing; but I did manage to pick up a box of birth announcements (“I’m a girl, I’m a girl, I’m a girl”) which I though might suit Mrs. Faun. No one seemed to care about those. One of the things I had to put back was a bottle of perfume called Svelte, which was fair anyway since I really wanted that.

Well, I’m not boasting. Some of the things that come to me work out well, and some do not. The seance was pretty good, but I will be the very first to admit that I am not light-fingered.

The Shorter Fiction

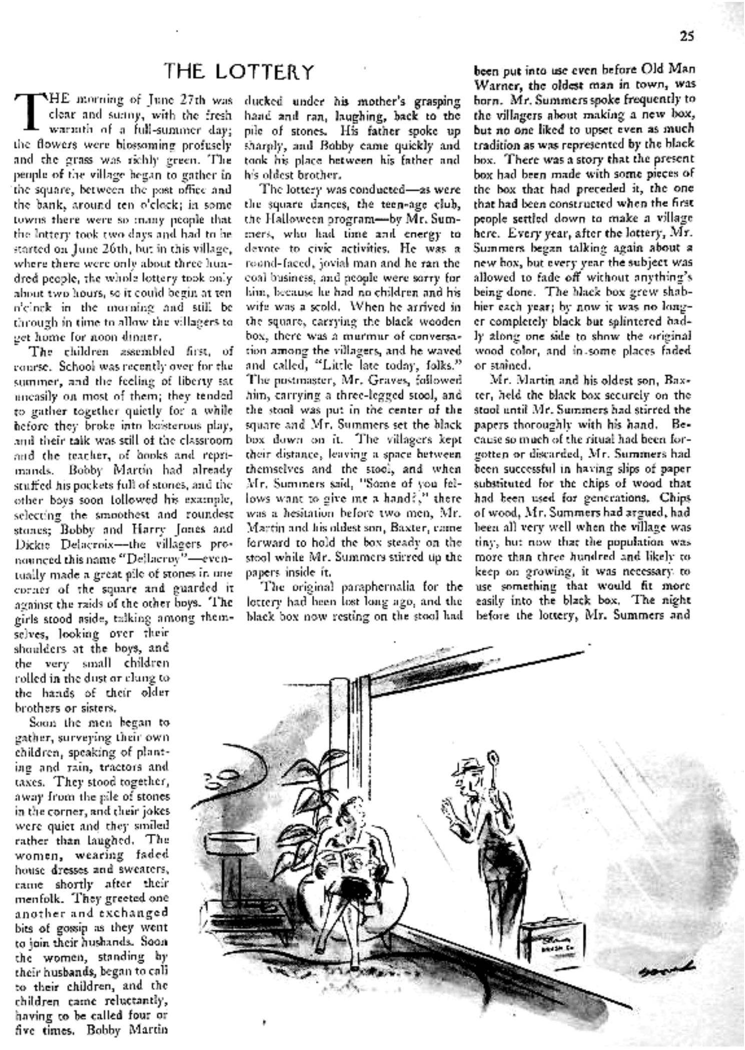
1609 Forest View Road, Burlingame, an affluent suburb of San Francisco – Jackson's family home from 1926, when she was ten years old

Burlingame, c. 1918

The Lottery and Other Stories (1949)

The Lottery and Other Stories was first published by Farrar, Straus and Company in 1949. It was the only collection of short stories to be released during the author's life. It originally included the subtitle *The Adventures of James Harris*, but this was removed from more recent editions, possibly due to it appearing unnecessary to market the work. The character of James Harris derives from a seventeenth century ballad, 'The Daemon Lover', that warns women about the dangers of succumbing to temptation. Jackson's use of the subtitle indicated the centrality of James Harris to the collection and he recurs as a malevolent presence in different guises in multiple stories, clearly representing a devilish figure.

The book is a collection of twenty-five deeply unnerving, sinister and unsettling short stories from a writer that excelled in the field. The famous titular story, 'The Lottery' caused an uproar among readers of *The New Yorker* after its publication in June 1948. Jackson was sent hate mail and the magazine received an influx of letters from their subscribers, profoundly disturbed by the work, demanding an explanation of the author's intentions. The tale is set in a small fictional American community where the inhabitants participate annually in a rite called 'the lottery'. Jackson depicts the preparations for the impending event, but maintains the suspense of what it entails until the very end.



THE LOTTERY

THE morning of June 27th was clear and sunny, with the fresh warmth of a full-summer day; the flowers were blossoming profusely and the grass was richly green. The people of the village began to gather in the square, between the post office and the bank, around ten o'clock; in some towns there were so many people that the lottery took two days and had to be started on June 26th, but in this village, where there were only about three hundred people, the whole lottery took only about two hours, so it could begin at ten o'clock in the morning and still be through in time to allow the villagers to get home for noon dinner.

The children assembled first, of course. School was recently over for the summer, and the feeling of liberty sat uneasily on most of them; they tended to gather together quietly for a while before they broke into boisterous play, and their talk was still of the classroom and the teacher, of books and reprimands. Bobby Martin had already stuffed his pockets full of stones, and the other boys soon followed his example, selecting the smoothest and roundest stones; Bobby and Harry Jones and Dickie Delacroix—the villagers pronounced this name "Dellacroy"—eventually made a great pile of stones in one corner of the square and guarded it against the raids of the other boys. The girls stood aside, talking among themselves, looking over their shoulders at the boys, and the very small children rolled in the dust or clung to the hands of their older brothers or sisters.

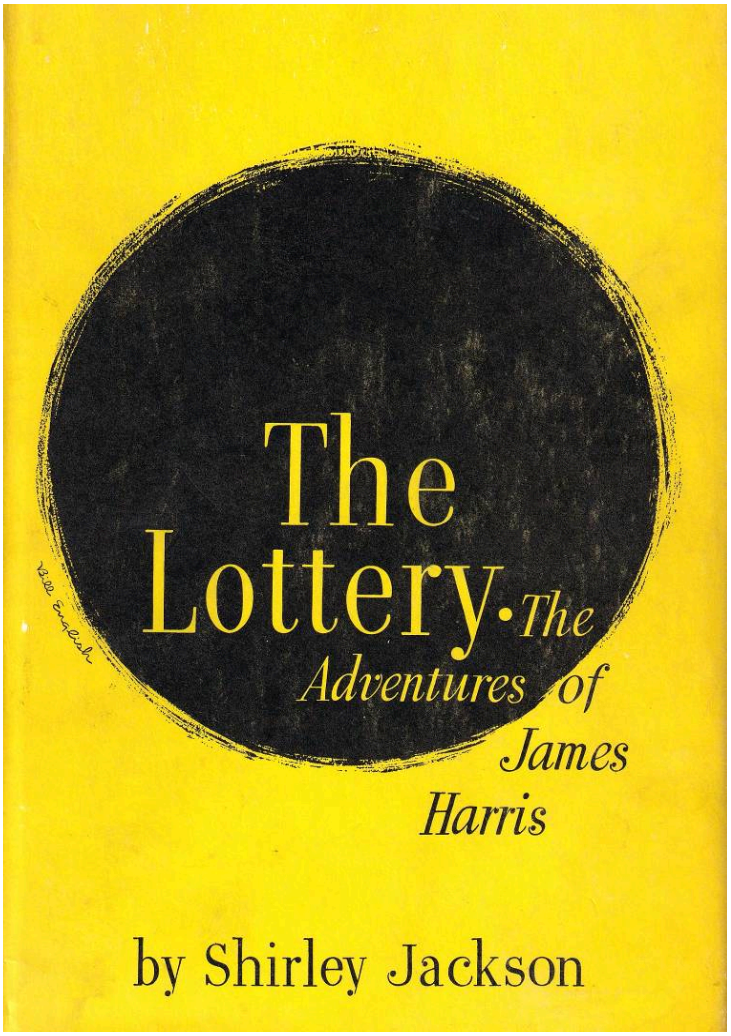
Soon the men began to gather, surveying their own children, speaking of planting and rain, tractors and taxes. They stood together, away from the pile of stones in the corner, and their jokes were quiet and they smiled rather than laughed. The women, wearing faded house dresses and sweaters, came shortly after their menfolk. They greeted one another and exchanged bits of gossip as they went to join their husbands. Soon the women, standing by their husbands, began to call to their children, and the children came reluctantly, having to be called four or five times. Bobby Martin ducked under his mother's grasping hand and ran, laughing, back to the pile of stones. His father spoke up sharply, and Bobby came quickly and took his place between his father and his oldest brother.

The lottery was conducted—as were the square dances, the teen-age club, the Halloween program—by Mr. Summers, who had time and energy to devote to civic activities. He was a round-faced, jovial man and he ran the coal business, and people were sorry for him, because he had no children and his wife was a scold. When he arrived in the square, carrying the black wooden box, there was a murmur of conversation among the villagers, and he waved and called, "Little late today, folks." The postmaster, Mr. Graves, followed him, carrying a three-legged stool, and the stool was put in the center of the square and Mr. Summers set the black box down on it. The villagers kept their distance, leaving a space between themselves and the stool, and when Mr. Summers said, "Some of you fellows want to give me a hand?," there was a hesitation before two men, Mr. Martin and his oldest son, Baxter, came forward to hold the box steady on the stool while Mr. Summers stirred up the papers inside it.

The original paraphernalia for the lottery had been lost long ago, and the black box now resting on the stool had been put into use even before Old Man Warner, the oldest man in town, was born. Mr. Summers spoke frequently to the villagers about making a new box, but no one liked to upset even as much tradition as was represented by the black box. There was a story that the present box had been made with some pieces of the box that had preceded it, the one that had been constructed when the first people settled down to make a village here. Every year, after the lottery, Mr. Summers began talking again about a new box, but every year the subject was allowed to fade off without anything's being done. The black box grew shabbier each year; by now it was no longer completely black but splintered badly along one side to show the original wood color, and in some places faded or stained.

Mr. Martin and his oldest son, Baxter, held the black box securely on the stool until Mr. Summers had stirred the papers thoroughly with his hand. Because so much of the ritual had been forgotten or discarded, Mr. Summers had been successful in having slips of paper substituted for the chips of wood that had been used for generations. Chips of wood, Mr. Summers had argued, had been all very well when the village was tiny, but now that the population was more than three hundred and likely to keep on growing, it was necessary to use something that would fit more easily into the black box. The night before the lottery, Mr. Summers and

How the story 'The Lottery' first appeared in The New Yorker, June 26, 1948


The Lottery · The Adventures of James Harris
by Shirley Jackson
Bill English

The first edition

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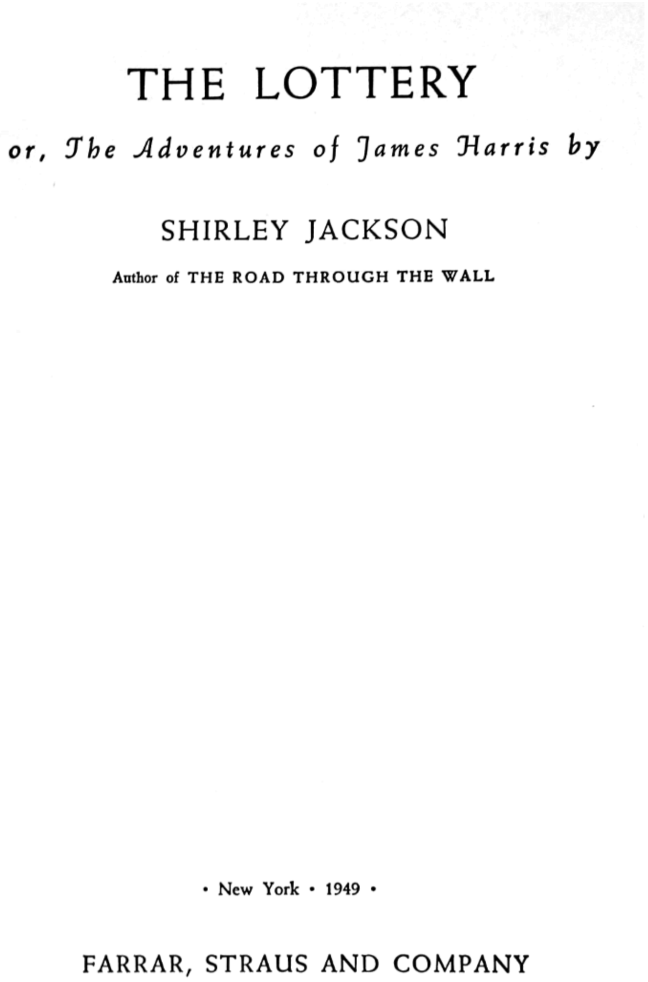

THE LOTTERY

or, The Adventures of James Harris by

SHIRLEY JACKSON

Author of THE ROAD THROUGH THE WALL

· New York · 1949 ·

FARRAR, STRAUS AND COMPANY

The first edition's title page

For

my mother and father

PART I

THE INTOXICATED

HE WAS JUST TIGHT ENOUGH and just familiar enough with the house to be able to go out into the kitchen alone, apparently to get ice, but actually to sober up a little; he was not quite enough a friend of the family to pass out on the living-room couch. He left the party behind without reluctance, the group by the piano singing "Stardust," his hostess talking earnestly to a young man with thin clean glasses and a sullen mouth; he walked guardedly through the dining-room where a little group of four or five people sat on the stiff chairs reasoning something out carefully among themselves; the kitchen doors swung abruptly to his touch, and he sat down beside a white enamel table, clean and cold under his hand. He put his glass on a good spot in the green pattern and looked up to find that a young girl was regarding him speculatively from across the table.

"Hello," he said. "You the daughter?"

"I'm Eileen," she said. "Yes."

She seemed to him baggy and ill-formed; it's the clothes they wear now, young girls, he thought foggily; her hair was braided down either side of her face, and she looked young and fresh and not dressed-up; her sweater was purplish and her hair was dark. "You sound nice and sober," he said, realizing that it was the wrong thing to say to young girls.

"I was just having a cup of coffee," she said. "May I get you one?"

He almost laughed, thinking that she expected she was dealing knowingly and competently with a rude drunk. "Thankyou," he said, "I believe I will." He made an effort to focus his eyes; the coffee was hot, and when she put a cup in front of him, saying, "I suppose you'd like it black," he put his face into the steam and let it go into his eyes, hoping to clear his head.

"It sounds like a lovely party," she said without longing, "everyone must be having a fine time."

"It is a lovely party." He began to drink the coffee, scalding hot, wanting her to know she had helped him. His head steadied, and he smiled at her. "I feel better," he said, "thanks to you."

"It must be very warm in the other room," she said soothingly.

Then he did laugh out loud and she frowned, but he could see her excusing him as she went on, "It was so hot upstairs I thought I'd like to come down for a while and sit out here."

"Were you asleep?" he asked. "Did we wake you?"

"I was doing my homework," she said.

He looked at her again, seeing her against a background of careful penmanship and themes, worn textbooks and laughter between desks. "You're in high school?"

"I'm a Senior." She seemed to wait for him to say something, and then she said, "I was out a year when I had pneumonia."

He found it difficult to think of something to say (ask her about boys? basketball?), and so he pretended he was listening to the distant noises from the front of the house. "It's a fine party," he said again, vaguely.

"I suppose you like parties," she said.

Dumbfounded, he sat staring into his empty coffee cup. He supposed he did like parties; her tone had been faintly surprised, as though next he were to declare for an arena with gladiators fighting wild beasts, or the solitary circular waltzing of a madman in a garden. I'm almost twice your age, my girl, he thought, but it's not so long since I did homework too. "Play basketball?" he asked.

“No,” she said.

He felt with irritation that she had been in the kitchen first, that she lived in the house, that he must keep on talking to her. “What’s your homework about?” he asked.

“I’m writing a paper on the future of the world,” she said, and smiled. “It sounds silly, doesn’t it? I think it’s silly.”

“Your party out front is talking about it. That’s one reason I came out here.” He could see her thinking that that was not at all the reason he came out here, and he said quickly, “What are you saying about the future of the world?”

“I don’t really think it’s got much future,” she said, “at least the way we’ve got it now.”

“It’s an interesting time to be alive,” he said, as though he were still at the party.

“Well, after all,” she said, “it isn’t as though we didn’t *know* about it in advance.”

He looked at her for a minute; she was staring absently at the toe of her saddle shoe, moving her foot softly back and forth, following it with her eyes. “It’s really a frightening time when a girl sixteen has to think of things like that.” In my day, he thought of saying mockingly, girls thought of nothing but cocktails and necking.

“I’m seventeen.” She looked up and smiled at him again. “There’s a terrible difference,” she said.

“In my day,” he said, overemphasizing, “girls thought of nothing but cocktails and necking.”

“That’s partly the trouble,” she answered him seriously. “If people had been really, honestly scared when you were young we wouldn’t be so badly off today.”

His voice had more of an edge than he intended ("When *I* was young!"), and he turned partly away from her as though to indicate the half-interest of an older person being gracious to a child: "I imagine we thought we were scared. I imagine all kids sixteen — seventeen — think they're scared. It's part of a stage you go through, like being boy-crazy."

"I keep figuring how it will be." She spoke very softly, very clearly, to a point just past him on the wall. "Somehow I think of the churches as going first, before even the Empire State building. And then all the big apartment houses by the river, slipping down slowly into the water with the people inside. And the schools, in the middle of Latin class maybe, while we're reading Cæsar." She brought her eyes to his face, looking at him in numb excitement. "Each time we begin a chapter in Cæsar, I wonder if this won't be the one we never finish. Maybe we in our Latin class will be the last people who ever read Cæsar."

"That would be good news," he said lightly. "I used to hate Cæsar."

"I suppose when you were young everyone hated Cæsar," she said coolly.

He waited for a minute before he said, "I think it's a little silly for you to fill your mind with all this morbid trash. Buy yourself a movie magazine and settle down."

"I'll be able to get all the movie magazines I want," she said insistently. "The subways will crash through, you know, and the little magazine stands will all be squashed. You'll be able to pick up all the candy bars you want, and magazines, and lipsticks and artificial flowers from the five-and-ten, and dresses lying in the street from all the big stores. And fur coats."

"I hope the liquor stores will break wide open," he said, beginning to feel impatient with her, "I'd walk in and help myself to a case of brandy and never worry about anything again."

"The office buildings will be just piles of broken stones," she said, her wide emphatic eyes still looking at him. "If only you could know exactly what *minute* it will come."

"I see," he said. "I go with the rest. I see."

"Things will be different afterward," she said. "Everything that makes the world like it is now will be gone. We'll have new rules and new ways of living. Maybe there'll be a law not to live in houses, so then no one can hide from anyone else, you see."

"Maybe there'll be a law to keep all seventeen-year-old girls in school learning sense," he said, standing up.

"There won't be any schools," she said flatly. "No one will learn anything. To keep from getting back where we are now."

"Well," he said, with a little laugh. "You make it sound very interesting. Sorry I won't be there to see it." He stopped, his shoulder against the swinging door into the dining-room. He wanted badly to say something adult and scathing, and yet he was afraid of showing her that he had listened to her, that when he was young people had not talked like that. "If you have any trouble with your Latin," he said finally, "I'll be glad to give you a hand."

She giggled, shocking him. "I still do my homework every night," she said.

Back in the living-room, with people moving cheerfully around him, the group by the piano now singing "Home on the Range," his hostess deep in earnest conversation with a tall, graceful man in a blue suit, he found the girl's father and said, "I've just been having a very interesting conversation with your daughter."

His host's eye moved quickly around the room. "Eileen? Where is she?"

"In the kitchen. She's doing her Latin."

“‘Gallia est omnia divisa in partes tres,’” his host said without expression. “I know.”

“A really extraordinary girl.”

His host shook his head ruefully. “Kids nowadays,” he said.

THE DAEMON LOVER

SHE HAD NOT SLEPT WELL; from one-thirty, when Jamie left and she went lingeringly to bed, until seven, when she at last allowed herself to get up and make coffee, she had slept fitfully, stirring awake to open her eyes and look into the half-darkness, remembering over and over, slipping again into a feverish dream. She spent almost an hour over her coffee — they were to have a real breakfast on the way — and then, unless she wanted to dress early, had nothing to do. She washed her coffee cup and made the bed, looking carefully over the clothes she planned to wear, worried unnecessarily, at the window, over whether it would be a fine day. She sat down to read, thought that she might write a letter to her sister instead, and began, in her finest handwriting, “Dearest Anne, by the time you get this I will be married. Doesn’t it sound funny? I can hardly believe it myself, but when I tell you how it happened, you’ll see it’s even stranger than that.…”

Sitting, pen in hand, she hesitated over what to say next, read the lines already written, and tore up the letter. She went to the window and saw that it was undeniably a fine day. It occurred to her that perhaps she ought not to wear the blue silk dress; it was too plain, almost severe, and she wanted to be soft, feminine. Anxiously she pulled through the dresses in the closet, and hesitated over a print she had worn the summer before; it was too young for her, and it had a ruffled neck, and it was very early in the year for a print dress, but still.…

She hung the two dresses side by side on the outside of the closet door and opened the glass doors carefully closed upon the small closet that was her kitchenette. She turned on the burner under the coffeepot, and went to the window; it was sunny. When the coffeepot began to crackle she came back and poured herself coffee, into a clean cup. I'll have a headache if I don't get some solid food soon, she thought, all this coffee, smoking too much, no real breakfast. A headache on her wedding day; she went and got the tin box of aspirin from the bathroom closet and slipped it into her blue pocketbook. She'd have to change to a brown pocketbook if she wore the print dress, and the only brown pocketbook she had was shabby. Helplessly, she stood looking from the blue pocket-book to the print dress, and then put the pocketbook down and went and got her coffee and sat down near the window, drinking her coffee, and looking carefully around the one-room apartment. They planned to come back here tonight and everything must be correct. With sudden horror she realized that she had forgotten to put clean sheets on the bed; the laundry was freshly back and she took clean sheets and pillow cases from the top shelf of the closet and stripped the bed, working quickly to avoid thinking consciously of why she was changing the sheets. The bed was a studio bed, with a cover to make it look like a couch, and when it was finished no one would have known she had just put clean sheets on it. She took the old sheets and pillow cases into the bathroom and stuffed them down into the hamper, and put the bathroom towels in the hamper too, and clean towels on the bathroom racks. Her coffee was cold when she came back to it, but she drank it anyway.

When she looked at the clock, finally, and saw that it was after nine, she began at last to hurry. She took a bath, and used one of the clean towels, which she put into the hamper and replaced with a clean one. She dressed carefully, all her underwear fresh and most of it new; she put everything she had worn the day before, including her nightgown, into the hamper. When she was ready for her dress, she hesitated before the closet door. The blue dress was certainly decent, and clean, and fairly becoming, but she had worn it several times with Jamie, and there was nothing about it which made it special for a wedding day. The print dress was overly pretty, and new to Jamie, and yet wearing such a print this early in the year was certainly rushing the season. Finally she thought, This is my wedding day, I can dress as I please, and she took the print dress down from the hanger. When she slipped it on over her head it felt fresh and light, but when she looked at herself in the mirror she remembered that the ruffles around the neck did not show her throat to any great advantage, and the wide swinging skirt looked irresistibly made for a girl, for someone who would run freely, dance, swing it with her hips when she walked. Looking at herself in the mirror she thought with revulsion, It's as though I was trying to make myself look prettier than I am, just for him; he'll think I want to look younger because he's marrying me; and she tore the print dress off so quickly that a seam under the arm ripped. In the old blue dress she felt comfortable and familiar, but unexciting. It isn't what you're wearing that matters, she told herself firmly, and turned in dismay to the closet to see if there might be anything else. There was nothing even remotely suitable for her marrying Jamie, and for a minute she thought of going out quickly to some little shop nearby, to get a dress. Then she saw that it was close on ten, and she had no time for more than her hair and her make-up. Her hair was easy, pulled back into a knot at the nape of her neck, but her makeup was another delicate balance between looking as well as possible, and deceiving as little. She could not try to disguise the sallowness of her skin, or the lines around her eyes, today, when it might look as though she were only doing it for her wedding, and yet she could not bear the thought of Jamie's bringing to marriage anyone who looked haggard and lined. You're thirty-four years old after *all,* she told herself cruelly in the bathroom mirror. Thirty, it said on the license.

It was two minutes after ten; she was not satisfied with her clothes, her face, her apartment. She heated the coffee again and sat down in the chair by the window. Can't do anything more now, she thought, no sense trying to improve anything the last minute.

Reconciled, settled, she tried to think of Jamie and could not see his face clearly, or hear his voice. It's always that way with someone you love, she thought, and let her mind slip past today and tomorrow, into the farther future, when Jamie was established with his writing and she had given up her job, the golden house-in-the-country future they had been preparing for the last week. "I used to be a wonderful cook," she had promised Jamie, "with a little time and practice I could remember how to make angel-food cake. And fried chicken," she said, knowing how the words would stay in Jamie's mind, half-tenderly. "And Hollandaise sauce."

Ten-thirty. She stood up and went purposefully to the phone. She dialed, and waited, and the girl's metallic voice said, "…the time will be exactly ten-twenty-nine." Half-consciously she set her clock back a minute; she was remembering her own voice saying last night, in the doorway: "Ten o'clock then. I'll be ready. Is it really *true?*"

And Jamie laughing down the hallway.

By eleven o'clock she had sewed up the ripped seam in the print dress and put her sewing-box away carefully in the closet. With the print dress on, she was sitting by the window drinking another cup of coffee. I could have taken more time over my dressing after all, she thought; but by now it was so late he might come any minute, and she did not dare try to repair anything without starting all over. There was nothing to eat in the apartment except the food she had carefully stocked up for their life beginning together: the unopened package of bacon, the dozen eggs in their box, the unopened bread and the unopened butter; they were for breakfast tomorrow. She thought of running downstairs to the drugstore for something to eat, leaving a note on the door. Then she decided to wait a little longer.

By eleven-thirty she was so dizzy and weak that she had to go downstairs. If Jamie had had a phone she would have called him then. Instead, she opened her desk and wrote a note: “Jamie, have gone downstairs to the drugstore. Back in five minutes.” Her pen leaked onto her fingers and she went into the bathroom and washed, using a clean towel which she replaced. She tacked the note on the door, surveyed the apartment once more to make sure that everything was perfect, and closed the door without locking it, in case he should come.

In the drugstore she found that there was nothing she wanted to eat except more coffee, and she left it half-finished because she suddenly realized that Jamie was probably upstairs waiting and impatient, anxious to get started.

But upstairs everything was prepared and quiet, as she had left it, her note unread on the door, the air in the apartment a little stale from too many cigarettes. She opened the window and sat down next to it until she realized that she had been asleep and it was twenty minutes to one.

Now, suddenly, she was frightened. Waking without preparation into the room of waiting and readiness, everything clean and untouched since ten o’clock, she was frightened, and felt an urgent need to hurry. She got up from the chair and almost ran across the room to the bathroom, dashed cold water on her face, and used a clean towel; this time she put the towel carelessly back on the rack without changing it; time enough for that later. Hatless, still in the print dress with a coat thrown on over it, the wrong blue pocketbook with the aspirin inside in her hand, she locked the apartment door behind her, no note this time, and ran down the stairs. She caught a taxi on the corner and gave the driver Jamie's address.

It was no distance at all; she could have walked it if she had not been so weak, but in the taxi she suddenly realized how imprudent it would be to drive brazenly up to Jamie's door, demanding him. She asked the driver, therefore, to let her off at a corner near Jamie's address and, after paying him, waited till he drove away before she started to walk down the block. She had never been here before; the building was pleasant and old, and Jamie's name was not on any of the mailboxes in the vestibule, nor on the doorbells. She checked the address; it was right, and finally she rang the bell marked "Superintendent." After a minute or two the door buzzer rang and she opened the door and went into the dark hall where she hesitated until a door at the end opened and someone said, "Yes?"

She knew at the same moment that she had no idea what to ask, so she moved forward toward the figure waiting against the light of the open doorway. When she was very near, the figure said, "Yes?" again and she saw that it was a man in his shirtsleeves, unable to see her any more clearly than she could see him.

With sudden courage she said, "I'm trying to get in touch with someone who lives in this building and I can't find the name outside."

"What's the name you wanted?" the man asked, and she realized that she would have to answer.

"James Harris," she said. "Harris."

The man was silent for a minute and then he said, "Harris." He turned around to the room inside the lighted doorway and said, "Margie, come here a minute."

"What now?" a voice said from inside, and after a wait long enough for someone to get out of a comfortable chair a woman joined him in the doorway, regarding the dark hall. "Lady here," the man said. "Lady looking for a guy name of Harris, lives here. Anyone in the building?"

"No," the woman said. Her voice sounded amused. "No men named Harris here."

"Sorry," the man said. He started to close the door. "You got the wrong house, lady," he said, and added in a lower voice, "or the wrong guy," and he and the woman laughed.

When the door was almost shut and she was alone in the dark hall she said to the thin lighted crack still showing, "But he *does* live here; I know it."

"Look," the woman said, opening the door again a little, "it happens all the time."

"Please don't make any mistake," she said, and her voice was very dignified, with thirty-four years of accumulated pride. "I'm afraid you don't understand."

"What did he look like?" the woman said wearily, the door still only part open.

"He's rather tall, and fair. He wears a blue suit very often. He's a writer."

"No," the woman said, and then, "Could he have lived on the third floor?"

"I'm not sure."

"There was a fellow," the woman said reflectively. "He wore a blue suit a lot, lived on the third floor for a while. The Roysters lent him their apartment while they were visiting her folks upstate."

"That might be it; I thought, though. . . ."

"This one wore a blue suit mostly, but I don't know how tall he was," the woman said. "He stayed there about a month."

"A month ago is when—"

“You ask the Roysters,” the woman said. “They come back this morning. Apartment 3B.”

The door closed, definitely. The hall was very dark and the stairs looked darker.

On the second floor there was a little light from a skylight far above. The apartment doors lined up, four on the floor, uncommunicative and silent. There was a bottle of milk outside 2C.

On the third floor, she waited for a minute. There was the sound of music beyond the door of 3B, and she could hear voices. Finally she knocked, and knocked again. The door was opened and the music swept out at her, an early afternoon symphony broadcast. “How do you do,” she said politely to this woman in the doorway. “Mrs. Royster?”

“That’s right.” The woman was wearing a housecoat and last night’s make-up.

“I wonder if I might talk to you for a minute?”

“Sure,” Mrs. Royster said, not moving.

“About Mr. Harris.”

“*What* Mr. Harris?” Mrs. Royster said flatly.

“Mr. James Harris. The gentleman who borrowed your apartment.”

“O Lord,” Mrs. Royster said. She seemed to open her eyes for the first time. “What’d he do?”

“Nothing. I’m just trying to get in touch with him.”

“O Lord,” Mrs. Royster said again. Then she opened the door wider and said, “Come in,” and then, “Ralph!”

Inside, the apartment was still full of music, and there were suitcases half-unpacked on the couch, on the chairs, on the floor. A table in the corner was spread with the remains of a meal, and the young man sitting there, for a minute resembling Jamie, got up and came across the room.

"What about it?" he said.

"Mr. Royster," she said. It was difficult to talk against the music. "The superintendent downstairs told me that this was where Mr. James Harris has been living."

"Sure," he said. "If that was his name."

"I thought you lent him the apartment," she said, surprised.

"*I* don't know anything about him," Mr. Royster said. "He's one of Dottie's friends."

"Not *my* friends," Mrs. Royster said. "No friend of mine." She had gone over to the table and was spreading peanut butter on a piece of bread. She took a bite and said thickly, waving the bread and peanut butter at her husband. "Not *my* friend."

"You picked him up at one of those damn meetings," Mr. Royster said. He shoved a suitcase off the chair next to the radio and sat down, picking up a magazine from the floor next to him. "I never said more'n ten words to him."

"You said it was okay to lend him the place," Mrs. Royster said before she took another bite. "You never said a word against him, after *all.*"

"*I* don't say anything about *your* friends," Mr. Royster said.

"If he'd of been a friend of mine you would have said *plenty,* believe me," Mrs. Royster said darkly. She took another bite and said, "Believe me, he would have said *plenty.*"

"That's all I want to hear," Mr. Royster said, over the top of the magazine. "No more, now."

"You see." Mrs. Royster pointed the bread and peanut butter at her husband. "That's the way it is, day and night."

There was silence except for the music bellowing out of the radio next to Mr. Royster, and then she said, in a voice she hardly trusted to be heard over the radio noise, “Has he gone, then?”

“Who?” Mrs. Royster demanded, looking up from the peanut butter jar.

“Mr. James Harris.”

“Him? He must’ve left this morning, before we got back. No sign of him anywhere.”

“Gone?”

“Everything was fine, though, perfectly fine. I told you,” she said to Mr. Royster, “I told you he’d take care of everything fine. I can always tell.”

“You were lucky,” Mr. Royster said.

“Not a thing out of place,” Mrs. Royster said. She waved her bread and peanut butter inclusively. “Everything just the way we left it,” she said.

“Do you know where he is now?”

“Not the slightest idea,” Mrs. Royster said cheerfully. “But, like I said, he left everything fine. Why?” she asked suddenly. “You looking for *him?*”

“It’s very important.”

“I’m sorry he’s not here,” Mrs. Royster said. She stepped forward politely when she saw her visitor turn toward the door.

“Maybe the super saw him,” Mr. Royster said into the magazine.

When the door was closed behind her the hall was dark again, but the sound of the radio was deadened. She was halfway down the first flight of stairs when the door was opened and Mrs. Royster shouted down the stairwell, “If I see him I’ll tell him you were looking for him.”

What can I do? she thought, out on the street again. It was impossible to go home, not with Jamie somewhere between here and there. She stood on the sidewalk so long that a woman, leaning out of a window across the way, turned and called to someone inside to come and see. Finally, on an impulse, she went into the small delicatessen next door to the apartment house, on the side that led to her own apartment. There was a small man reading a newspaper, leaning against the counter; when she came in he looked up and came down inside the counter to meet her.

Over the glass case of cold meats and cheese she said, timidly, “I’m trying to get in touch with a man who lived in the apartment house next door, and I just wondered if you know him.”

“Whyn’t you ask the people there?” the man said, his eyes narrow, inspecting her.

It’s because I’m not buying anything, she thought, and she said, “I’m sorry. I asked them, but they don’t know anything about him. They think he left this morning.”

“I don’t know what you want *me* to do,” he said, moving a little back toward his newspaper. “I’m not here to keep track of guys going in and out next door.”

She said quickly, “I thought you might have noticed, that’s all. He would have been coming past here, a little before ten o’clock. He was rather tall, and he usually wore a blue suit.”

“Now how many men in blue suits go past here every day, lady?” the man demanded. “You think I got nothing to do but—”

“I’m sorry,” she said. She heard him say, “For God’s sake,” as she went out the door.

As she walked toward the corner, she thought, he must have come this way, it’s the way he’d go to get to my house, it’s the only way for him to walk. She tried to think of Jamie: where would he have crossed the street? What sort of person was he actually — would he cross in front of his own apartment house, at random in the middle of the block, at the corner?

On the corner was a newsstand; they might have seen him there. She hurried on and waited while a man bought a paper and a woman asked directions. When the newsstand man looked at her she said, “Can you possibly tell me if a rather tall young man in a blue suit went past here this morning around ten o'clock?" When the man only looked at her, his eyes wide and his mouth a little open, she thought, he thinks it's a joke, or a trick, and she said urgently, "It's very important, please believe me. I'm not teasing you."

"*Look,* lady," the man began, and she said eagerly, "He's a writer. He might have bought magazines here."

"What you want him for?" the man asked. He looked at her, smiling, and she realized that there was another man waiting in back of her and the newsdealer's smile included him. "Never mind," she said, but the newsdealer said, "Listen, maybe he did come by here." His smile was knowing and his eyes shifted over her shoulder to the man in back of her. She was suddenly horribly aware of her over-young print dress, and pulled her coat around her quickly. The newsdealer said, with vast thoughtfulness, "Now I don't know for sure, mind you, but there might have been someone like your gentleman friend coming by this morning."

"About ten?"

"About ten," the newsdealer agreed. "Tall fellow, blue suit. I wouldn't be at all surprised."

"Which way did he go?" she said eagerly. "Uptown?"

"Uptown," the newsdealer said, nodding. "He went uptown. That's just exactly it. What can I do for you, sir?"

She stepped back, holding her coat around her. The man who had been standing behind her looked at her over his shoulder and then he and the newsdealer looked at one another. She wondered for a minute whether or not to tip the newsdealer but when both men began to laugh she moved hurriedly on across the street.

Uptown, she thought, that’s right, and she started up the avenue, thinking: He wouldn’t have to cross the avenue, just go up six blocks and turn down my street, so long as he started uptown. About a block farther on she passed a florist’s shop; there was a wedding display in the window and she thought, This is my wedding day after all, he might have gotten flowers to bring me, and she went inside. The florist came out of the back of the shop, smiling and sleek, and she said, before he could speak, so that he wouldn’t have a chance to think she was buying anything: “It’s *terribly* important that I get in touch with a gentleman who may have stopped in here to buy flowers this morning. *Jerribly* important.”

She stopped for breath, and the florist said, “Yes, what sort of flowers were they?”

“I don’t know,” she said, surprised. “He never—” She stopped and said, “He was a rather tall young man, in a blue suit. It was about ten o’clock.”

“I see,” the florist said. “Well, *really,* I’m afraid.…”

“But it’s *so* important,” she said. “He may have been in a hurry,” she added helpfully.

“Well,” the florist said. He smiled genially, showing all his small teeth. “For a *lady,*” he said. He went to a stand and opened a large book. “Where were they to be sent?” he asked.

“Why,” she said, “I don’t think he’d have sent them. You see, he was coming — that is, he’d *bring* them.”

“Madam,” the florist said; he was offended. His smile became deprecatory, and he went on, “Really, you must realize that unless I have *something* to go on.…”

“*Please* try to remember,” she begged. “He was tall, and had a blue suit, and it was about ten this morning.”

The florist closed his eyes, one finger to his mouth, and thought deeply. Then he shook his head. “I simply *can’t,*” he said.

“Thank you,” she said despondently, and started for the door, when the florist said, in a shrill, excited voice, “Wait! Wait just a moment, madam.” She turned and the florist, thinking again, said finally, “Chrysanthemums?” He looked at her inquiringly.

“Oh, *no,*” she said; her voice shook a little and she waited for a minute before she went on. “Not for an occasion like this, I’m sure.”

The florist tightened his lips and looked away coldly. “Well, of *course* I don’t know the *occasion,*” he said, “but I’m almost certain that the gentleman you were inquiring for came in this morning and purchased one dozen chrysanthemums. No delivery.”

“You’re *sure*?” she asked.

“Positive,” the florist said emphatically. “That was absolutely the man.” He smiled brilliantly, and she smiled back and said, “Well, thank you very much.”

He escorted her to the door. “Nice corsage?” he said, as they went through the shop. “Red roses? Gardenias?”

“It was very kind of you to help me,” she said at the door.

“Ladies always look their best in flowers,” he said, bending his head toward her. “Orchids, perhaps?”

“No, thank you,” she said, and he said, “I hope you find your young man,” and gave it a nasty sound.

Going on up the street she thought, Everyone thinks it’s so *funny:* and she pulled her coat tighter around her, so that only the ruffle around the bottom of the print dress was showing.

There was a policeman on the corner, and she thought, Why don’t I go to the police — you go to the police for a missing person. And then thought, What a fool I'd look like. She had a quick picture of herself standing in a police station, saying, "Yes, we were going to be married today, but he didn't come," and the policemen, three or four of them standing around listening, looking at her, at the print dress, at her too-bright make-up, smiling at one another. She couldn't tell them any more than that, could not say, "Yes, it looks silly, doesn't it, me all dressed up and trying to find the young man who promised to marry me, but what about all of it you don't know? I have more than this, more than you can see: talent, perhaps, and humor of a sort, and I'm a lady and I have pride and affection and delicacy and a certain clear view of life that might make a man satisfied and productive and happy; there's more than you think when you look at me."

The police were obviously impossible, leaving out Jamie and what he might think when he heard she'd set the police after him. "No, no," she said aloud, hurrying her steps, and someone passing stopped and looked after her.

On the coming corner — she was three blocks from her own street — was a shoeshine stand, an old man sitting almost asleep in one of the chairs. She stopped in front of him and waited, and after a minute he opened his eyes and smiled at her.

"Look," she said, the words coming before she thought of them, "I'm sorry to bother you, but I'm looking for a young man who came up this way about ten this morning, did you see him?" And she began her description, "Tall, blue suit, carrying a bunch of flowers?"

The old man began to nod before she was finished. "I saw him," he said. "Friend of yours?"

"Yes," she said, and smiled back involuntarily.

The old man blinked his eyes and said, "I remember I thought, You're going to see your girl, young fellow. They all go to see their girls," he said, and shook his head tolerantly.

"Which way did he go? Straight on up the avenue?"

"That's right," the old man said. "Got a shine, had his flowers, all dressed up, in an awful hurry. You got a girl, I thought."

"Thank you," she said, fumbling in her pocket for her loose change.

"She sure must of been glad to see him, the way he looked," the old man said.

"Thank you," she said again, and brought her hand empty from her pocket.

For the first time she was really sure he would be waiting for her, and she hurried up the three blocks, the skirt of the print dress swinging under her coat, and turned into her own block. From the corner she could not see her own windows, could not see Jamie looking out, waiting for her, and going down the block she was almost running to get to him. Her key trembled in her fingers at the downstairs door, and as she glanced into the drugstore she thought of her panic, drinking coffee there this morning, and almost laughed. At her own door she could wait no longer, but began to say, "Jamie, I'm here, I was so worried," even before the door was open.

Her own apartment was waiting for her, silent, barren, afternoon shadows lengthening from the window. For a minute she saw only the empty coffee cup, thought, He has been here waiting, before she recognized it as her own, left from the morning. She looked all over the room, into the closet, into the bathroom.

"I never saw him," the clerk in the drugstore said. "I know because I would of noticed the flowers. No one like that's been in."

The old man at the shoeshine stand woke up again to see her standing in front of him. "Hello again," he said, and smiled.

"Are you *sure*?" she demanded. "Did he go on up the avenue?"

“I watched him,” the old man said, dignified against her tone. “I thought, There’s a young man’s got a girl, and I watched him right into the house.”

“What house?” she said remotely.

“Right there,” the old man said. He leaned forward to point. “The next block. With his flowers and his shine and going to see his girl. Right into her house.”

“Which one?” she said.

“About the middle of the block,” the old man said. He looked at her with suspicion, and said, “What you trying to do, anyway?”

She almost ran, without stopping to say “Thank you.” Up on the next block she walked quickly, searching the houses from the outside to see if Jamie looked from a window, listening to hear his laughter somewhere inside.

A woman was sitting in front of one of the houses, pushing a baby carriage monotonously back and forth the length of her arm. The baby inside slept, moving back and forth.

The question was fluent, by now. “I’m sorry, but did you see a young man go into one of these houses about ten this morning? He was tall, wearing a blue suit, carrying a bunch of flowers.”

A boy about twelve stopped to listen, turning intently from one to the other, occasionally glancing at the baby.

“Listen,” the woman said tiredly, “the kid has his bath at ten. Would I see strange men walking around? I ask you.”

“Big bunch of flowers?” the boy asked, pulling at her coat. “Big bunch of flowers? I seen him, missus.”

She looked down and the boy grinned insolently at her. “Which house did he go in?” she asked wearily.

“You gonna divorce him?” the boy asked insistently.

“That’s not nice to ask the lady,” the woman rocking the carriage said.

“Listen,” the boy said, “I seen him. He went in there.” He pointed to the house next door. “I followed him,” the boy said. “He give me a quarter.” The boy dropped his voice to a growl, and said, “‘This is a big day for me, kid,’ he says. Give me a quarter.”

She gave him a dollar bill. “Where?” she said.

“Top floor,” the boy said. “I followed him till he give me the quarter. Way to the top.” He backed up the sidewalk, out of reach, with the dollar bill. “You gonna divorce him?” he asked again.

“Was he carrying flowers?”

“Yeah,” the boy said. He began to screech. “You gonna divorce him, missus? You got something on him?” He went careening down the street, howling, “She’s got something on the poor guy,” and the woman rocking the baby laughed.

The street door of the apartment house was unlocked; there were no bells in the outer vestibule, and no lists of names. The stairs were narrow and dirty; there were two doors on the top floor. The front one was the right one; there was a crumpled florist’s paper on the floor outside the door, and a knotted paper ribbon, like a clue, like the final clue in the paper-chase.

She knocked, and thought she heard voices inside, and she thought, suddenly, with terror, What shall I say if Jamie is there, if he comes to the door? The voices seemed suddenly still. She knocked again and there was silence, except for something that might have been laughter far away. He could have seen me from the window, she thought, it’s the front apartment and that little boy made a dreadful noise. She waited, and knocked again, but there was silence.

Finally she went to the other door on the floor, and knocked. The door swung open beneath her hand and she saw the empty attic room, bare lath on the walls, floorboards un-painted. She stepped just inside, looking around; the room was filled with bags of plaster, piles of old newspapers, a broken trunk. There was a noise which she suddenly realized as a rat, and then she saw it, sitting very close to her, near the wall, its evil face alert, bright eyes watching her. She stumbled in her haste to be out with the door closed, and the skirt of the print dress caught and tore.

She knew there was someone inside the other apartment, because she was sure she could hear low voices and sometimes laughter. She came back many times, every day for the first week. She came on her way to work, in the mornings; in the evenings, on her way to dinner alone, but no matter how often or how firmly she knocked, no one ever came to the door.

LIKE MOTHER USED TO MAKE

DAVID TURNER, WHO did everything in small quick movements, hurried from the bus stop down the avenue toward his street. He reached the grocery on the corner and hesitated; there had been something. Butter, he remembered with relief; this morning, all the way up the avenue to his bus stop, he had been telling himself butter, don’t forget butter coming home tonight, when you pass the grocery remember butter. He went into the grocery and waited his turn, examining the cans on the shelves. Canned pork sausage was back, and corned-beef hash. A tray full of rolls caught his eye, and then the woman ahead of him went out and the clerk turned to him.

“How much is butter?” David asked cautiously.

“Eighty-nine,” the clerk said easily.

“Eighty-nine?” David frowned.

“That’s what it is,” the clerk said. He looked past David at the next customer.

“Quarter of a pound, please,” David said. “And a half-dozen rolls.”

Carrying his package home he thought, I really ought not to trade there any more; you’d think they’d know me well enough to be more courteous.

There was a letter from his mother in the mailbox. He stuck it into the top of the bag of rolls and went upstairs to the third floor. No light in Marcia’s apartment, the only other apartment on the floor. David turned to his own door and unlocked it, snapping on the light as he came in the door. Tonight, as every night when he came home, the apartment looked warm and friendly and good; the little foyer, with the neat small table and four careful chairs, and the bowl of little marigolds against the pale green walls

David had painted himself; beyond, the kitchenette, and beyond that, the big room where David read and slept and the ceiling of which was a perpetual trouble to him; the plaster was falling in one corner and no power on earth could make it less noticeable. David consoled himself for the plaster constantly with the thought that perhaps if he had not taken an apartment in an old brownstone the plaster would not be falling, but then, too, for the money he paid he could not have a foyer and a big room and a kitchenette, anywhere else.

He put his bag down on the table and put the butter away in the refrigerator and the rolls in the breadbox. He folded the empty bag and put it in a drawer in the kitchenette. Then he hung his coat in the hall closet and went into the big room, which he called his living-room, and lighted the desk light. His word for the room, in his own mind, was “charming.” He had always been partial to yellows and browns, and he had painted the desk and the bookcases and the end tables himself, had even painted the walls, and had hunted around the city for the exact tweedish tan drapes he had in mind. The room satisfied him: the rug was a rich dark brown that picked up the darkest thread in the drapes, the furniture was almost yellow, the cover on the studio couch and the lampshades were orange. The rows of plants on the window sills gave the touch of green the room needed; right now David was looking for an ornament to set on the end table, but he had his heart set on a low translucent green bowl for more marigolds, and such things cost more than he could afford, after the silverware.

He could not come into this room without feeling that it was the most comfortable home he had ever had; tonight, as always, he let his eyes move slowly around the room, from couch to drapes to bookcase, imagined the green bowl on the end table, and sighed as he turned to the desk. He took his pen from the holder, and a sheet of the neat notepaper sitting in one of the desk cubbyholes, and wrote Carefully: “Dear Marcia, don’t forget you’re coming for dinner tonight. I’ll expect you about six.” He signed the note with a “D” and picked up the key to Marcia’s apartment which lay in the flat pencil tray on his desk. He had a key to Marcia’s apartment because she was never home when her laundryman came, or when the man came to fix the refrigerator or the telephone or the windows, and someone had to let them in because the landlord was reluctant to climb three flights of stairs with the pass key. Marcia had never suggested having a key to David’s apartment, and he had never offered her one; it pleased him to have only one key to his home, and that safely in his own pocket; it had a pleasant feeling to him, solid and small, the only way into his warm fine home.

He left his front door open and went down the dark hall to the other apartment. He opened the door with his key and turned on the light. This apartment was not agreeable for him to come into; it was exactly the same as his: foyer, kitchenette, living-room, and it reminded him constantly of his first day in his own apartment, when the thought of the careful homemaking to be done had left him very close to despair. Marcia’s home was bare and at random; an upright piano a friend had given her recently stood crookedly, half in the foyer, because the little room was too narrow and the big room was too cluttered for it to sit comfortably anywhere; Marcia’s bed was unmade and a pile of dirty laundry lay on the floor. The window had been open all day and papers had blown wildly around the floor. David closed the window, hesitated over the papers, and then moved away quickly. He put the note on the piano keys and locked the door behind him.

In his own apartment he settled down happily to making dinner. He had made a little pot roast for dinner the night before; most of it was still in the refrigerator and he sliced it in fine thin slices and arranged it on a plate with parsley. His plates were orange, almost the same color as the couch cover, and it was pleasant to him to arrange a salad, with the lettuce on the orange plate, and the thin slices of cucumber. He put coffee on to cook, and sliced potatoes to fry, and then, with his dinner cooking agreeably and the window open to lose the odor of the frying potatoes, he set lovingly to arranging his table. First, the tablecloth, pale green, of course. And the two fresh green napkins. The orange plates and the precise cup and saucer at each place. The plate of rolls in the center, and the odd salt and pepper shakers, like two green frogs. Two glasses — they came from the five-and-ten, but they had thin green bands around them — and finally, with great care, the silverware. Gradually, tenderly, David was buying himself a complete set of silverware; starting out modestly with a service for two, he had added to it until now he had well over a service for four, although not quite a service for six, lacking salad forks and soup spoons. He had chosen a sedate, pretty pattern, one that would be fine with any sort of table setting, and each morning he gloried in a breakfast that started with a shining silver spoon for his grapefruit, and had a compact butter knife for his toast and a solid heavy knife to break his eggshell, and a fresh silver spoon for his coffee, which he sugared with a particular spoon meant only for sugar. The silverware lay in a tarnish-proof box on a high shelf all to itself, and David lifted it down carefully to take out a service for two. It made a lavish display set out on the table — knives, forks, salad forks, more forks for the pie, a spoon to each place, and the special serving pieces — the sugar spoon, the large serving spoons for the potatoes and the salad, the fork for the meat, and the pie fork. When the table held as much silverware as two people could possibly use he put the box back on the shelf and stood back, checking everything and admiring the table, shining and clean. Then he went into his living-room to read his mother's letter and wait for Marcia.

The potatoes were done before Marcia came, and then suddenly the door burst open and Marcia arrived with a shout and fresh air and disorder. She was a tall handsome girl with a loud voice, wearing a dirty raincoat, and she said, “I didn’t forget, Davie, I’m just late as usual. What’s for dinner? You’re not mad, are you?”

David got up and came over to take her coat. “I left a note for you,” he said.

“Didn’t see it.” Marcia said. “Haven’t been home. Something smells good.”

“Fried potatoes,” David said. “Everything’s ready.”

“Golly.” Marcia fell into a chair to sit with her legs stretched out in front of her and her arms hanging. “I’m tired,” she said. “It’s cold out.”

“It was getting colder when I came home,” David said. He was putting dinner on the table, the platter of meat, the salad, the bowl of fried potatoes. He walked quietly back and forth from the kitchenette to the table, avoiding Marcia’s feet. “I don’t believe you’ve been here since I got my silverware,” he said.

Marcia swung around to the table and picked up a spoon. “It’s beautiful,” she said, running her finger along the pattern. “Pleasure to eat with it.”

“Dinner’s ready,” David said. He pulled her chair out for her and waited for her to sit down.

Marcia was always hungry; she put meat and potatoes and salad on her plate without admiring the serving silver, and started to eat enthusiastically. “Everything’s beautiful,” she said once. “Food is wonderful, Davie.”

“I’m glad you like it,” David said. He liked the feel of the fork in his hand, even the sight of the fork moving up to Marcia’s mouth.

Marcia waved her hand largely. “I mean everything,” she said, “furniture, and nice place you have here, and dinner, and everything.”

“I *like* things this way,” David said.

“I know you do.” Marcia’s voice was mournful. “Someone should teach me, I guess.”

“You *ought* to keep your home neater,” David said. “You ought to get curtains at least, and keep your windows shut.”

“I never remember,” she said. “Davie, you are the most *wonderful* cook.” She pushed her plate away, and sighed.

David blushed happily. “I’m glad you like it,” he said again, and then he laughed. “I made a pie last night.”

“A pie.” Marcia looked at him for a minute and then she said, “Apple?”

David shook his head, and she said, “Pineapple?” and he shook his head again, and, because he could not wait to tell her, said, “Cherry.”

“My *God*!” Marcia got up and followed him into the kitchen and looked over his shoulder while he took the pie carefully out of the breadbox. “Is this the first pie you ever made?”

“I’ve made two before.” David admitted, “but this one turned out better than the others.”

She watched happily while he cut large pieces of pie and put them on other orange plates, and then she carried her own plate back to the table, tasted the pie, and made wordless gestures of appreciation. David tasted his pie and said critically, “I think it’s a little sour. I ran out of sugar.”

“It’s perfect,” Marcia said. “I always loved a cherry pie really *sowr.* This isn’t sour enough, even.”

David cleared the table and poured the coffee, and as he was setting the coffeepot back on the stove Marcia said, “My doorbell’s ringing.” She opened the apartment door and listened, and they could both hear the ringing in her apartment. She pressed the buzzer in David’s apartment that opened the downstairs door, and far away they could hear heavy footsteps starting up the stairs. Marcia left the apartment door open and came back to her coffee. “Landlord, most likely,” she said. “I didn’t pay my rent again.” When the footsteps reached the top of the last staircase Marcia yelled, “Hello?” leaning back in her chair to see out the door into the hall. Then she said, “Why, Mr. Harris.” She got up and went to the door and held out her hand. “Come in,” she said.

“I just thought I’d stop by,” Mr. Harris said. He was a very large man and his eyes rested curiously on the coffee cups and empty plates on the table. “I don’t want to interrupt your dinner.”

“*That’s* all right,” Marcia said, pulling him into the room. “It’s just Davie. Davie, this is Mr. Harris, he works in my office. This is Mr. Turner.”

“How do you do,” David said politely, and the man looked at him carefully and said, “How do you do?”

“Sit down, sit down,” Marcia was saying, pushing a chair forward. “Davie, how about another cup for Mr. Harris?”

“Please don’t bother,” Mr. Harris said quickly, “I just thought I’d stop by.”

While David was taking out another cup and saucer and getting a spoon down from the tarnish-proof silverbox, Marcia said, “You like homemade pie?”

“Say,” Mr. Harris said admiringly, “I’ve forgotten what homemade pie *looks* like.”

“Davie,” Marcia called cheerfully, “how about cutting Mr. Harris a piece of that pie?”

Without answering, David took a fork out of the silverbox and got down an orange plate and put a piece of pie on it. His plans for the evening had been vague; they had involved perhaps a movie if it were not too cold out, and at least a short talk with Marcia about the state of her home; Mr. Harris was settling down in his chair and when David put the pie down silently in front of him he stared at it admiringly for a minute before he tasted it.

“Say,” he said finally, “this is certainly some pie.” He looked at Marcia. “This is really *good* pie,” he said.

“You like it?” Marcia asked modestly. She looked up at David and smiled at him over Mr. Harris’ head. “I haven’t made but two, three pies before,” she said.

David raised a hand to protest, but Mr. Harris turned to him and demanded, “Did you ever eat any better pie in your life?”

“I don’t think Davie liked it much,” Marcia said wickedly, “I think it was too sour for him.”

“I *like* a sour pie,” Mr. Harris said. He looked suspiciously at David. “A cherry pie’s *got* to be sour.”

“I’m glad you like it, anyway,” Marcia said. Mr. Harris ate the last mouthful of pie, finished his coffee, and sat back. “I’m sure glad I dropped in,” he said to Marcia.

David’s desire to be rid of Mr. Harris had slid imperceptibly into an urgency to be rid of them both; his clean house, his nice silver, were not meant as vehicles for the kind of fatuous banter Marcia and Mr. Harris were playing at together; almost roughly he took the coffee cup away from the arm Marcia had stretched across the table, took it out to the kitchenette and came back and put his hand on Mr. Harris’ cup.

“Don’t bother, Davie, honestly,” Marcia said. She looked up, smiling again, as though she and David were conspirators against Mr. Harris. “I’ll do them all tomorrow, honey,” she said.

“Sure,” Mr. Harris said. He stood up. “Let them wait. Let’s go in and sit down where we can be comfortable.”

Marcia got up and led him into the living-room and they sat down on the studio couch. “Come on in, Davie,” Marcia called.

The sight of his pretty table covered with dirty dishes and cigarette ashes held David. He carried the plates and cups and silverware into the kitchenette and stacked them in the sink and then, because he could not endure the thought of their sitting there any longer, with the dirt gradually hardening on them, he tied an apron on and began to wash them carefully. Now and then, while he was washing them and drying them and putting them away, Marcia would call to him, sometimes, “Davie, what *are* you doing?” or, “Davie, won’t you stop all that and come sit down?” Once she said, “Davie, I don’t want you to wash all those dishes,” and Mr. Harris said, “Let him work, he’s happy.”

David put the clean yellow cups and saucers back on the shelves — by now, Mr. Harris’ cup was unrecognizable; you could not tell, from the clean rows of cups, which one he had used or which one had been stained with Marcia’s lipstick or which one had held David’s coffee which he had finished in the kitchenette — and finally, taking the tarnish-proof box down, he put the silverware away. First the forks all went together into the little grooves which held two forks each — later, when the set was complete, each groove would hold four forks — and then the spoons, stacked up neatly one on top of another in their own grooves, and the knives in even order, all facing the same way, in the special tapes in the lid of the box. Butter knives and serving spoons and the pie knife all went into their own places, and then David put the lid down on the lovely shining set and put the box back on the shelf. After wringing out the dishcloth and hanging up the dish towel and taking off his apron he was through, and he went slowly into the living-room. Marcia and Mr. Harris were sitting close together on the studio couch, talking earnestly.

“My *father’s* name was James,” Marcia was saying as David came in, as though she were clinching an argument. She turned around when David came in and said, “Davie, you were so nice to do all those dishes yourself.”

“That’s all right,” David said awkwardly. Mr. Harris was looking at him impatiently.

“I should have helped you,” Marcia said. There was a silence, and then Marcia said, “Sit down, Davie, won’t you?”

David recognized her tone; it was the one hostesses used when they didn’t know what else to say to you, or when you had come too early or stayed too late. It was the tone he had expected to use on Mr. Harris.

“James and I were just talking about.…” Marcia began and then stopped and laughed. “What *were* we talking about?” she asked, turning to Mr. Harris.

“Nothing much,” Mr. Harris said. He was still watching David.

“Well,” Marcia said, letting her voice trail off. She turned to David and smiled brightly and then said, “Well,” again.

Mr. Harris picked up the ashtray from the end table and set it on the couch between himself and Marcia. He took a cigar out of his pocket and said to Marcia, “Do you mind cigars?” and when Marcia shook her head he unwrapped the cigar tenderly and bit off the end. “Cigar smoke’s good for plants,” he said thickly, around the cigar, as he lighted it, and Marcia laughed.

David stood up. For a minute he thought he was going to say something that might start, “Mr. Harris, I’ll thank you to.…” but what he actually said, finally, with both Marcia and Mr. Harris looking at him, was, “Guess I better be getting along, Marcia.”

Mr. Harris stood up and said heartily, “Certainly have enjoyed meeting you.” He held out his hand and David shook hands limply.

"Guess I better be getting along," he said again to Marcia, and she stood up and said, "I'm sorry you have to leave so soon."

"Lots of work to do," David said, much more genially than he intended, and Marcia smiled at him again as though they were conspirators and went over to the desk and said, "Don't forget your key."

Surprised, David took the key of her apartment from her, said good night to Mr. Harris, and went to the outside door.

"Good night, Davie honey," Marcia called out, and David said "Thanks for a simply *wonderful* dinner, Marcia," and closed the door behind him.

He went down the hall and let himself into Marcia's apartment; the piano was still awry, the papers were still on the floor, the laundry scattered, the bed unmade. David sat down on the bed and looked around. It was cold, it was dirty, and as he thought miserably of his own warm home he heard faintly down the hall the sound of laughter and the scrape of a chair being moved. Then, still faintly, the sound of his radio. Wearily, David leaned over and picked up a paper from the floor, and then he began to gather them up one by one.

TRIAL BY COMBAT

WHEN EMILY JOHNSON came home one evening to her furnished room and found three of her best handkerchiefs missing from the dresser drawer, she was sure who had taken them and what to do. She had lived in the furnished room for about six weeks and for the past two weeks she had been missing small things occasionally. There had been several handkerchiefs gone, and an initial pin which Emily rarely wore and which had come from the five-and-ten. And once she had missed a small bottle of perfume and one of a set of china dogs. Emily had known for some time who was taking the things, but it was only tonight that she had decided what to do. She had hesitated about complaining to the landlady because her losses were trivial and because she had felt certain that sooner or later she would know how to deal with the situation herself. It had seemed logical to her from the beginning that the one person in the rooming-house who was home all day was the most likely suspect, and then, one Sunday morning, coming downstairs from the roof, where she had been sitting in the sun, Emily had seen someone come out of her room and go down the stairs, and had recognized the visitor. Tonight, she felt, she knew just what to do. She took off her coat and hat, put her packages down, and, while a can of tamales was heating on her electric plate, she went over what she intended to say.

After her dinner, she closed and locked her door and went downstairs. She tapped softly on the door of the room directly below her own, and when she thought she heard someone say, “Come in,” she said, “Mrs. Allen?,” then opened the door carefully and stepped inside.

The room, Emily noticed immediately, was almost like her own — the same narrow bed with the tan cover, the same maple dresser and armchair; the closet was on the opposite side of the room, but the window was in the same relative position. Mrs. Allen was sitting in the armchair. She was about sixty. More than twice as old as I am, Emily thought, while she stood in the doorway, and a lady still. She hesitated for a few seconds, looking at Mrs. Allen's clean white hair and her neat, dark-blue house coat, before speaking. "Mrs. Allen," she said, "I'm Emily Johnson."

Mrs. Allen put down the *Woman's Home Companion* she had been reading and stood up slowly. "I'm very happy to meet you," she said graciously. "I've seen you, of course, several times, and thought how pleasant you looked. It's so seldom one meets anyone really" — Mrs. Allen hesitated— "really nice," she went on, "in a place like this."

"I've wanted to meet you, too," Emily said.

Mrs. Allen indicated the chair she had been sitting in. "Won't you sit down?"

"Thank you," Emily said. "You stay there. I'll sit on the bed." She smiled. "I feel as if I know the furniture so well. Mine's just the same."

"It's a shame," Mrs. Allen said, sitting down in her chair again. "I've told the landlady over and over, you can't make people feel at home if you put all the same furniture in the rooms. But she maintains that this maple furniture is clean-looking and cheap."

"It's better than most," Emily said. "You've made yours look much nicer than mine."

"I've been here for three years," Mrs. Allen said. "You've only been here a month or so, haven't you?"

"Six weeks," Emily said.

"The landlady's told me about you. Your husband's in the Army."

“Yes. I have a job here in New York.”

“My husband was in the Army,” Mrs. Allen said. She gestured at a group of pictures on her maple dresser. “That was a long time ago, of course. He’s been dead for nearly five years.” Emily got up and went over to the pictures. One of them was of a tall, dignified-looking man in Army uniform. Several were of children.

“He was a very distinguished-looking man,” Emily said. “Are those your children?”

“I had no children, to my sorrow,” the old lady said. “Those are nephews and nieces of my husband’s.”

Emily stood in front of the dresser, looking around the room. “I see you have flowers, too,” she said. She walked to the window and looked at the row of potted plants. “I love flowers,” she said. “I bought myself a big bunch of asters tonight to brighten up my room. But they fade so quickly.”

“I prefer plants just for that reason,” Mrs. Allen said. “But why don’t you put an aspirin in the water with your flowers? They’ll last much longer.”

“I’m afraid I don’t know much about flowers,” Emily said. “I didn’t know about putting an aspirin in the water, for instance.”

“I always do, with cut flowers,” Mrs. Allen said. “I think flowers make a room look so friendly.”

Emily stood by the window for a minute, looking out on Mrs. Allen’s daily view: the fire escape opposite, an oblique slice of the street below. Then she took a deep breath and turned around. “Actually, Mrs. Allen,” she said, “I had a reason for dropping in.”

“Other than to make my acquaintance?” Mrs. Allen said, smiling.

“I don’t know quite what to do,” Emily said. “I don’t like to say anything to the landlady.”

“The landlady isn’t much help in an emergency,” Mrs. Allen said.

Emily came back and sat on the bed, looking earnestly at Mrs. Allen, seeing a nice old lady. “It’s so slight,” she said, “but someone has been coming into my room.”

Mrs. Allen looked up.

“I’ve been missing things,” Emily went on, “like handkerchiefs and little inexpensive jewelry. Nothing important. But someone’s been coming into my room and helping themselves.”

“I’m sorry to hear it,” Mrs. Allen said.

“You see, I don’t like to make trouble,” Emily said. “It’s just that someone’s coming into my room. I haven’t missed anything of value.”

“I see,” Mrs. Allen said.

“I just noticed it a few days ago. And then last Sunday I was coming down from the roof and I saw someone coming out of my room.”

“Do you have any idea who it was?” Mrs. Allen asked.

“I believe I do,” Emily said.

Mrs. Allen was quiet for a minute. “I can see where you wouldn’t like to speak to the landlady,” she said finally.

“Of course not,” Emily said. “I just want it to stop.”

“I don’t blame you,” Mrs. Allen said.

“You see, it means someone has a key to my door,” Emily said pleadingly.

“All the keys in this house open all the doors,” Mrs. Allen said. “They’re all old-fashioned locks.”

“It *has* to stop,” Emily said. “If it doesn’t, I’ll have to do something about it.”

“I can see that,” Mrs. Allen said. “The whole thing is very unfortunate.” She rose. “You’ll have to excuse me,” she went on. “I tire very easily and I must be in bed early. I’m so happy you came down to see me.”

“I’m so glad to have met you at last,” Emily said. She went to the door. “I hope I won’t be bothered again,” she said. “Good night.”

“Good night,” Mrs. Allen said.

The following evening, when Emily came home from work, a pair of cheap earrings was gone, along with two packages of cigarettes which had been in her dresser drawer. That evening she sat alone in her room for a long time, thinking. Then she wrote a letter to her husband and went to bed. The next morning she got up and dressed and went to the corner drugstore, where she called her office from a phone booth and said that she was sick and would not be in that day. Then she went back to her room. She sat for almost an hour with the door slightly ajar before she heard Mrs. Allen’s door open and Mrs. Allen come out and go slowly down the stairs. When Mrs. Allen had had time to get out onto the street, Emily locked her door and, carrying her key in her hand, went down to Mrs. Allen’s room.

She was thinking, I just want to pretend it’s my own room, so that if anyone comes I can say I was mistaken about the floor. For a minute, after she had opened the door, it seemed as though she *were* in her own room. The bed was neatly made and the shade drawn down over the window. Emily left the door unlocked and went over and pulled up the shade. Now that the room was light, she looked around. She had a sudden sense of unbearable intimacy with Mrs. Allen, and thought, This is the way she must feel in my room. Everything was neat and plain. She looked in the closet first, but there was nothing in there but Mrs. Allen’s blue house coat and one or two plain dresses. Emily went to the dresser. She looked for a moment at the picture of Mrs. Allen’s husband, and then opened the top drawer and looked in. Her handkerchiefs were there, in a neat, small pile, and next to them the cigarettes and the earrings. In one corner the little china dog was sitting. Everything is here, Emily thought, all put away and very orderly. She closed the drawer and opened the next two. Both were empty. She opened the top one again. Besides her things, the drawer held a pair of black cotton gloves, and under the little pile of her handkerchiefs were two plain white ones. There was a box of Kleenex and a small tin of aspirin. For her plants, Emily thought.

Emily was counting the handkerchiefs when a noise behind her made her turn around. Mrs. Allen was standing in the doorway watching her quietly. Emily dropped the handkerchiefs she was holding and stepped back. She felt herself blushing and knew her hands were trembling. Now, she was thinking, now turn around and tell her. “Listen, Mrs. Allen,” she began, and stopped.

“Yes?” Mrs. Allen said gently.

Emily found that she was staring at the picture of Mrs. Allen’s husband; such a thoughtful-looking man, she was thinking. They must have had such a pleasant life together, and now she has a room like mine, with only two handkerchiefs of her own in the drawer.

“Yes?” Mrs. Allen said again.

What does she want me to say, Emily thought. What could she be waiting for with such a ladylike manner? “I came down,” Emily said, and hesitated. My voice is almost ladylike, too, she thought. “I had a terrible headache and I came down to borrow some aspirin,” she said quickly. “I had this awful headache and when I found you were out I thought surely you wouldn’t mind if I just borrowed some aspirin.”

“I’m so sorry,” Mrs. Allen said. “But I’m glad you felt you knew me well enough.”

“I never would have dreamed of coming in,” Emily said, “except for such a bad headache.”

“Of course,” Mrs. Allen said. “Let’s not say any more about it.” She went over to the dresser and opened the drawer. Emily, standing next to her, watched her hand pass over the handkerchiefs and pick up the aspirin. “You just take two of these and go to bed for an hour,” Mrs. Allen said.

“Thank you.” Emily began to move toward the door. “You’ve been very kind.”

“Let me know if there’s anything more I can do.”

“Thank you,” Emily said again, opening the door. She waited for a minute and then turned toward the stairs to her room.

“I’ll run up later today,” Mrs. Allen said, “just to see how you feel.”

THE VILLAGER

MISS CLARENCE STOPPED on the corner of Sixth Avenue and Eighth Street and looked at her watch. Two-fifteen; she was earlier than she thought. She went into Whelan's and sat at the counter, putting her copy of the *Villager* down on the counter next to her pocketbook and *The Charterhouse of Parma,* which she had read enthusiastically up to page fifty and only carried now for effect. She ordered a chocolate-frosted and while the clerk was making it she went over to the cigarette counter and bought a pack of Kools. Sitting again at the soda counter, she opened the pack and lit a cigarette.

Miss Clarence was about thirty-five, and had lived in Greenwich Village for twelve years. When she was twenty-three she had come to New York from a small town upstate because she wanted to be a dancer, and because everyone who wanted to study dancing or sculpture or book-binding had come to Greenwich Village then, usually with allowances from their families to live on and plans to work in Macy's or in a bookshop until they had enough money to pursue their art. Miss Clarence, fortunate in having taken a course in shorthand and typing, had gone to work as a stenographer in a coal and coke concern. Now, after twelve years, she was a private secretary in the same concern, and was making enough money to live in a good Village apartment by the park and buy herself smart clothes. She still went to an occasional dance recital with another girl from her office, and sometimes when she wrote to her old friends at home she referred to herself as a "Village die-hard." When Miss Clarence gave the matter any thought at all, she was apt to congratulate herself on her common sense in handling a good job competently and supporting herself better than she would have in her home town.

Confident that she looked very well in her gray tweed suit and the hammered copper lapel ornament from a Village jewelry store, Miss Clarence finished her frosted and looked at her watch again. She paid the cashier and went out into Sixth Avenue, and began to walk briskly uptown. She had estimated correctly; the house she was looking for was just west of Sixth Avenue, and she stopped in front of it for a minute, pleased with herself, and comparing the building with her own presentable apartment house. Miss Clarence lived in a picturesque brick and stucco modern; this house was wooden and old, with the very new front door that is deceptive until you look at the building above and see the turn-of-the-century architecture. Miss Clarence compared the address again with the ad in the *Villager,* and then opened the front door and went into the dingy hallway. She found the name Roberts and the apartment number, 4B. Miss Clarence sighed and started up the stairs.

She stopped and rested on the third landing, and lit another one of her cigarettes so as to enter the apartment effectively. At the head of the stairs on the fourth floor she found 4B, with a typed note pinned on the door. Miss Clarence pulled the note loose from the thumbtack that held it, and took it over into the light. “Miss Clarence—” she read, “I had to run out for a few minutes, but will be back about three-thirty. Please come on in and look around till I get back — all the furniture is marked with prices. Terribly sorry. Nancy Roberts.”

Miss Clarence tried the door and it was unlocked. Still holding the note, she went in and closed the door behind her. The room was in confusion: half-empty boxes of papers and books were on the floor, the curtains were down, and the furniture piled with half-packed suitcases and clothes. The first thing Miss Clarence did was go to the window; on the fourth floor, she thought, maybe they would have a view. But she could see only dirty roofs and, far off to the left, a high building crowned with flower gardens. Someday I'll live *there,* she thought, and turned back to the room.

She went into the kitchen, a tiny alcove with a two-burner stove and a refrigerator built underneath, with a small sink on one side. Don't do much cooking, Miss Clarence thought, stove's never been cleaned. In the refrigerator were a bottle of milk and three bottles of Coca Cola and a half-empty jar of peanut butter. Eat all their meals out, Miss Clarence thought. She opened the cupboard: a glass and a bottle opener. The other glass would be in the bathroom, Miss Clarence thought; no cups: she doesn't even make coffee in the morning. There was a roach inside the cupboard door; Miss Clarence closed it hurriedly and went back into the big room. She opened the bathroom door and glanced in: an old-fashioned tub with feet, no shower. The bathroom was dirty, and Miss Clarence was sure there would be roaches in there too.

Finally Miss Clarence turned to the crowded room. She lifted a suitcase and a typewriter off one of the chairs, took off her hat and coat, and sat down, lighting another one of her cigarettes. She had already decided that she could not use any of the furniture — the two chairs and the studio bed were maple; what Miss Clarence thought of as Village Modern. The small end-table bookcase was a nice piece of furniture, but there was a long scratch running across the top, and several glass stains. It was marked ten dollars, and Miss Clarence told herself she could get a dozen new ones if she wanted to pay that price. Miss Clarence, in a mild resentment of the coal and coke company, had done her quiet apartment in shades of beige and off-white, and the thought of introducing any of this shiny maple frightened her. She had a quick picture of young Village characters, frequenters of bookshops, lounging on the maple furniture and drinking rum and coke, putting their glasses down anywhere.

For a minute Miss Clarence thought of offering to buy some books, but the ones packed on top of the boxes were mostly art books and portfolios. Some of the books had “Arthur Roberts” written inside; Arthur and Nancy Roberts, Miss Clarence thought, a nice young couple. Arthur was the artist, then, and Nancy…Miss Clarence turned over a few of the books and came across a book of modern dance photographs; could Nancy, she wondered affectionately, be a dancer?

The phone rang and Miss Clarence, on the other side of the room, hesitated for a minute before walking over and answering it. When she said hello a man’s voice said, “Nancy?”

“No, I’m sorry, she’s not home,” Miss Clarence said.

“Who’s this?” the voice asked.

“I’m waiting to see Mrs. Roberts,” Miss Clarence said.

“Well,” the voice said, “this is Artie Roberts, her husband. When she comes back ask her to call me, will you?”

“Mr. Roberts,” Miss Clarence said. “Maybe you can help me, then. I came to look at the furniture.”

“Who are you?”

“My name is Clarence, Hilda Clarence. I was interested in buying the furniture.”

“Well, Hilda,” Artie Roberts said, “what do you think? Everything’s in good condition.”

“I can’t quite make up my mind,” Miss Clarence said.

“The studio bed’s as good as new,” Artie Roberts went on, “I’ve got this chance to go to Paris, you know. That’s why we’re selling the stuff.”

“That’s wonderful,” Miss Clarence said.

"Nancy's going on back to her family in Chicago. We've got to sell the stuff and get everything fixed up in such a short time."

"I know," Miss Clarence said. "It's too bad."

"Well, Hilda," Artie Roberts said, "you talk to Nancy when she gets back and she'll be glad to tell you all about it. You won't go wrong on any of it. I can guarantee that it's comfortable."

"I'm sure," Miss Clarence said.

"Tell her to call me, will you?"

"I certainly will," Miss Clarence said.

She said good-bye and hung up.

She went back to her chair and looked at her watch. Three-ten. I'll wait till just three-thirty, Miss Clarence thought, and then I'll leave. She picked up the book of dance photographs, slipping the pages through her fingers until a picture caught her eye and she turned back to it. I haven't seen this in years, Miss Clarence thought — Martha Graham. A sudden picture of herself at twenty came to Miss Clarence, before she ever came to New York, practicing the dancer's pose. Miss Clarence put the book down on the floor and stood up, raising her arms. Not as easy as it used to be, she thought, it catches you in the shoulders. She was looking down at the book over her shoulder, trying to get her arms right, when there was a knock and the door was opened. A young man — about Arthur's age, Miss Clarence thought — came in and stood just inside the door, apologetically.

"It was partly open," he said, "so I came on in."

"Yes?" Miss Clarence said, dropping her arms.

"You're Mrs. Roberts?" the young man asked.

Miss Clarence, trying to walk naturally over to her chair, said nothing.

"I came about the furniture," the man said. "I thought I might look at the chairs."

“Of course,” Miss Clarence said. “The price is marked on everything.”

“My name’s Harris. I’ve just moved to the city and I’m trying to furnish my place.”

“It’s very difficult to find things these days.”

“This must be the tenth place I’ve been. I want a filing cabinet and a big leather chair.”

“I’m afraid…” Miss Clarence said, gesturing at the room.

“I know,” Harris said. “Anybody who has that sort of thing these days is hanging on to it. I write,” he added.

“Really?”

“Or, rather, I *hope* to write,” Harris said. He had a round agreeable face and when he said this he smiled very pleasantly. “Going to get a job and write nights,” he said.

“I’m sure you won’t have much trouble,” Miss Clarence said.

“Some one here an artist?”

“Mr. Roberts,” Miss Clarence said.

“Lucky guy,” Harris said. He walked over to the window. “Easier to draw pictures than write any time. This place is certainly nicer than mine,” he added suddenly, looking out the window. “Mine’s a hole in the wall.”

Miss Clarence could not think of anything to say, and he turned again to look at her curiously. “You an artist, too?”

“No,” Miss Clarence said. She took a deep breath. “Dancer,” she said.

He smiled again, pleasantly. “I might have known,” he said. “When I came in.”

Miss Clarence laughed modestly.

“It must be wonderful,” he said.

“It’s hard,” Miss Clarence said.

“It must be. You had much luck so far?”

"Not much," Miss Clarence said.

"I guess that's the way everything is," he said. He wandered over and opened the bathroom door; when he glanced in Miss Clarence winced. He closed the door again without saying anything and opened the kitchen door.

Miss Clarence got up and walked over to stand next to him and look into the kitchen with him. "I don't cook a lot," she said.

"Don't blame you, so many restaurants." He closed the door again and Miss Clarence went back to her chair. "I can't eat breakfasts out, though. That's one thing I can't do," he said.

"Do you make your own?"

"I try to," he said. "I'm the worst cook in the world. But it's better than going out. What I need is a wife." He smiled again and started for the door. "I'm sorry about the furniture," he said. "Wish I could have found something."

"That's all right."

"You people giving up housekeeping?"

"We have to get rid of everything," Miss Clarence said. She hesitated. "Artie's going to Paris," she said finally.

"Wish I was." He sighed. "Well, good luck to both of you."

"You, too," Miss Clarence said, and closed the door behind him slowly. She listened for the sound of his steps going down the stairs and then looked at her watch. Three-twenty-five.

Suddenly in a hurry, she found the note Nancy Roberts had left for her and wrote on the back with a pencil taken from one of the boxes: "My dear Mrs. Roberts — I waited until three-thirty. I'm afraid the furniture is out of the question for me. Hilda Clarence." Pencil in hand, she thought for a minute. Then she added: "P.S. Your husband called, and wants you to call him back."

She collected her pocketbook, *The Charterhouse of Parma,* and the *Villager,* and closed the door. The thumbtack was still there, and she pried it loose and tacked her note up with it. Then she turned and went back down the stairs, home to her own apartment. Her shoulders ached.

MY LIFE WITH R. H. MACY

AND THE FIRST THING THEY DID was segregate me. They segregated me from the only person in the place I had even a speaking acquaintance with; that was a girl I had met going down the hall who said to me: “Are you as scared as I am?” And when I said, “Yes,” she said, “I’m in lingerie, what are you in?” and I thought for a while and then said, “Spun glass,” which was as good an answer as I could think of, and she said, “Oh. Well, I’ll meet you here in a see.” And she went away and was segregated and I never saw her again.

Then they kept calling my name and I kept trotting over to wherever they called it and they would say (“They” all this time being startlingly beautiful young women in tailored suits and with short-clipped hair), “Go with Miss Cooper, here. She’ll tell you what to do.” All the women I met my first day were named Miss Cooper. And Miss Cooper would say to me: “What are you in?” and I had learned by that time to say, “Books,” and she would say, “Oh, well, then, you belong with Miss Cooper here,” and then she would call “Miss Cooper?” and another young woman would come and the first one would say, “13-3138 here belongs with you,” and Miss Cooper would say, “What is she in?” and Miss Cooper would answer, “Books,” and I would go away and be segregated again.

Then they taught me. They finally got me segregated into a classroom, and I sat there for a while all by myself (that’s how far segregated I was) and then a few other girls came in, all wearing tailored suits (I was wearing a red velvet afternoon frock) and we sat down and they taught us. They gave us each a big book with R. H. Macy written on it, and inside this book were pads of little sheets saying (from left to right): “Comp. keep for ref. cust. d.a. no. or c.t. no. salesbook no. salescheck no. clerk no. dept. date M.” After M there was a long line for Mr. or Mrs. and the name, and then it began again with “No. item. class. at price. total.” And down at the bottom was written ORIGINAL and then again, “Comp. keep for ref. and “Paste yellow gift stamp here.” I read all this very carefully. Pretty soon a Miss Cooper came, who talked for a little while on the advantages we had in working at Macy’s, and she talked about the salesbooks, which it seems came apart into a sort of road map and carbons and things. I listened for a while, and when Miss Cooper wanted us to write on the little pieces of paper, I copied from the girl next to me. That was training.

Finally someone said we were going on the floor, and we descended from the sixteenth floor to the first. We were in groups of six by then, all following Miss Cooper doggedly and wearing little tags saying BOOK INFORMATION. I never did find out what that meant. Miss Cooper said I had to work on the special sale counter, and showed me a little book called *The Stage-Struck Seal,* which it seemed I would be selling. I had gotten about halfway through it before she came back to tell me I had to stay with my unit.

I enjoyed meeting the time clock, and spent a pleasant half-hour punching various cards standing around, and then someone came in and said I couldn’t punch the clock with my hat on. So I had to leave, bowing timidly at the time clock and its prophet, and I went and found out my locker number, which was 1773, and my time-clock number, which was 712, and my cash-box number, which was 1336, and my cash-register number, which was 253, and my cash-register-drawer number, which was K, and my cash-register-drawer-key number, which was 872, and my department number, which was 13. I wrote all these numbers down. And that was my first day.

My second day was better. I was officially on the floor. I stood in a corner of a counter, with one hand possessively on *The Stage-Struck Seal,* waiting for customers. The counter head was named 13-2246, and she was very kind to me. She sent me to lunch three times, because she got me confused with 13-6454 and 13-3141. It was after lunch that a customer came. She came over and took one of my stage-struck seals, and said “How much is this?” I opened my mouth and the customer said “I have a D. A. and I will have this sent to my aunt in Ohio. Part of that D. A. I will pay for with a book dividend of 32 cents, and the rest of course will be on my account. Is this book price-fixed?” That’s as near as I can remember what she said. I smiled confidently, and said “Certainly; will you wait just one moment?” I found a little piece of paper in a drawer under the counter: it had “Duplicate Triplicate” printed across the front in big letters. I took down the customer’s name and address, her aunt’s name and address, and wrote carefully across the front of the duplicate triplicate “I Stg. Strk. Sl.” Then I smiled at the customer again and said carelessly: “That will be seventy-five cents,” She said “But I have a D. A.” I told her that all D. A.’s were suspended for the Christmas rush, and she gave me seventy-five cents, which I kept. Then I rang up a “No Sale” on the cash register and I tore up the duplicate triplicate because I didn’t know what else to do with it.

Later on another customer came and said “Where would I find a copy of Ann Rutherford Gwynn’s *He Came Like Thunder?”* and I said “In medical books, right across the way,” but 13-2246 came and said “That’s philosophy, isn’t it?” and the customer said it was, and 13-2246 said “Right down this aisle, in dictionaries.” The customer went away, and I said to 13-2246 that her guess was as good as mine, anyway, and she stared at me and explained that philosophy, social sciences and Bertrand Russell were all kept in dictionaries.

So far I haven't been back to Macy's for my third day, because that night when I started to leave the store, I fell down the stairs and tore my stockings and the doorman said that if I went to my department head Macy's would give me a new pair of stockings and I went back and I found Miss Cooper and she said, "Go to the adjuster on the seventh floor and give him this," and she handed me a little slip of pink paper and on the bottom of it was printed "Comp. keep for ref. cust. d.a. no. or c.t. no. salesbook no. salescheck no. clerk no. dept. date M." And after M, instead of a name, she had written 13-3138. I took the little pink slip and threw it away and went up to the fourth floor and bought myself a pair of stockings for $.69 and then I came down and went out the customers' entrance.

I wrote Macy's a long letter, and I signed it with all my numbers added together and divided by 11,700, which is the number of employees in Macy's. I wonder if they miss me.

PART II

THE IGNORANT *LOOKER-ON* can't imagine what the *Limner* means by those seemingly *rude Lines* and *Scrawls,* which he intends for the *Rudiments* of a *Picture,* and the *figures of Mathematick Operation* are *Nonsense,* and *Dashes* at a *Venture,* to one un-instructed in *Mechanicks.* We are in the Dark to *one another's* Purposes and Intendments; and there are a thousand Intrigues in our little Matters, which will not presently confess their Design, even to *sagacious Inquisitors.*

Joseph Glanvil: Sadducismus Triumphatus

THE WITCH

THE COACH WAS so nearly empty that the little boy had a seat all to himself, and his mother sat across the aisle on the seat next to the little boy's sister, a baby with a piece of toast in one hand and a rattle in the other. She was strapped securely to the seat so she could sit up and look around, and whenever she began to slip slowly sideways the strap caught her and held her halfway until her mother turned around and straightened her again. The little boy was looking out the window and eating a cookie, and the mother was reading quietly, answering the little boy's questions without looking up.

"We're on a river," the little boy said. "This is a river and we're on it."

"Fine," his mother said.

"We're on a bridge over a river," the little boy said to himself.

The few other people in the coach were sitting at the other end of the car; if any of them had occasion to come down the aisle the little boy would look around and say, "Hi," and the stranger would usually say, "Hi," back and sometimes ask the little boy if he were enjoying the train ride, or even tell him he was a fine big fellow. These comments annoyed the little boy and he would turn irritably back to the window.

"There's a cow," he would say, or, sighing, "How far do we have to go?"

"Not much longer now," his mother said, each time.

Once the baby, who was very quiet and busy with her rattle and her toast, which the mother would renew constantly, fell over too far sideways and banged her head. She began to cry, and for a minute there was noise and movement around the mother's seat. The little boy slid down from his own seat and ran across the aisle to pet his sister’s feet and beg her not to cry, and finally the baby laughed and went back to her toast, and the little boy received a lollipop from his mother and went back to the window.

“I saw a witch,” he said to his mother after a minute. “There was a big old ugly old bad old witch outside.”

“Fine,” his mother said.

“A big old ugly witch and I told her to go away and she went away,” the little boy went on, in a quiet narrative to himself, “she came and said, ‘I’m going to eat you up,’ and I said, ‘no, you’re not,’ and I chased her away, the bad old mean witch.”

He stopped talking and looked up as the outside door of the coach opened and a man came in. He was an elderly man, with a pleasant face under white hair; his blue suit was only faintly touched by the disarray that comes from a long train trip. He was carrying a cigar, and when the little boy said, “Hi,” the man gestured at him with the cigar and said, “Hello yourself, son.” He stopped just beside the little boy’s seat, and leaned against the back, looking down at the little boy, who craned his neck to look upward. “What you looking for out that window?” the man asked.

“Witches,” the little boy said promptly. “Bad old mean witches.”

“I see,” the man said. “Find many?”

“My father smokes cigars,” the little boy said.

“All men smoke cigars,” the man said. “Someday you’ll smoke a cigar, too.”

“I’m a man already,” the little boy said.

“How old are you?” the man asked.

The little boy, at the eternal question, looked at the man suspiciously for a minute and then said, “Twenty-six. Eight hunnerd and forty eighty.”

His mother lifted her head from the book. “Four,” she said, smiling fondly at the little boy.

“Is that so?” the man said politely to the little boy. “Twenty-six.” He nodded his head at the mother across the aisle. “Is that your mother?”

The little boy leaned forward to look and then said, “Yes, that’s her.”

“What’s your name?” the man asked.

The little boy looked suspicious again. “Mr. Jesus,” he said.

“Johnny,” the little boy’s mother said. She caught the little boy’s eye and frowned deeply.

“That’s my sister over there,” the little boy said to the man. “She’s twelve-and-a-half.”

“Do you love your sister?” the man asked. The little boy stared, and the man came around the side of the seat and sat down next to the little boy. “Listen,” the man said, “shall I tell you about my little sister?”

The mother, who had looked up anxiously when the man sat down next to her little boy, went peacefully back to her book.

“Tell me about your sister,” the little boy said. “Was she a witch?”

“Maybe,” the man said.

The little boy laughed excitedly, and the man leaned back and puffed at his cigar. “Once upon a time,” he began, “I had a little sister, just like yours.” The little boy looked up at the man, nodding at every word. “My little sister,” the man went on, “was so pretty and so nice that I loved her more than anything else in the world. So shall I tell you what I did?”

The little boy nodded more vehemently, and the mother lifted her eyes from her book and smiled, listening.

“I bought her a rocking-horse and a doll and a million lollipops,” the man said, “and then I took her and I put my hands around her neck and I pinched her and I pinched her until she was dead.”

The little boy gasped and the mother turned around, her smile fading. She opened her mouth, and then closed it again as the man went on, “And then I took and I cut her head off and I took her head—”

“Did you cut her all in pieces?” the little boy asked breathlessly.

“I cut off her head and her hands and her feet and her hair and her nose,” the man said, “and I hit her with a stick and I killed her.”

“Wait a minute,” the mother said, but the baby fell over sideways just at that minute and by the time the mother had set her up again the man was going on.

“And I took her head and I pulled out all her hair and—”

“Your little *sister*?” the little boy prompted eagerly.

“My little sister,” the man said firmly. “And I put her head in a cage with a bear and the bear ate it all up.”

“Ate her *head* all up?” the little boy asked.

The mother put her book down and came across the aisle. She stood next to the man and said, “Just what do you think you’re doing?” The man looked up courteously and she said, “Get out of here.”

“Did I frighten you?” the man said. He looked down at the little boy and nudged him with an elbow and he and the little boy laughed.

“This man cut up his little sister,” the little boy said to his mother.

“I can very easily call the conductor,” the mother said to the man.

“The conductor will *eat* my mommy,” the little boy said. “We’ll chop her head off.”

“And little sister’s head, too,” the man said. He stood up, and the mother stood back to let him get out of the seat. “Don’t ever come back in this car,” she said.

“My mommy will eat *you,*” the little boy said to the man.

The man laughed, and the little boy laughed, and then the man said, “Excuse me,” to the mother and went past her out of the car. When the door had closed behind him the little boy said, “How much longer do we have to stay on this old train?”

“Not much longer,” the mother said. She stood looking at the little boy, wanting to say something, and finally she said, “You sit still and be a good boy. You may have another lollipop.”

The little boy climbed down eagerly and followed his mother back to her seat. She took a lollipop from a bag in her pocketbook and gave it to him. “What do you say?” she asked.

“Thank you,” the little boy said. “Did that man really cut his little sister up in pieces?”

“He was just teasing,” the mother said, and added urgently, “Just *teasing*.”

“Prob’ly,” the little boy said. With his lollipop he went back to his own seat, and settled himself to look out the window again. “Prob’ly he was a witch.”

THE RENEGADE

IT WAS EIGHT-TWENTY in the morning. The twins were loitering over their cereal, and Mrs. Walpole, with one eye on the clock and the other on the kitchen window past which the school bus would come in a matter of minutes, felt the unreasonable irritation that comes with being late on a school morning, the wading-through-molasses feeling of trying to hurry children.

"You'll have to walk," she said ominously, for perhaps the third time. "The bus won't wait."

"I'm hurrying," Judy said. She regarded her full glass of milk smugly. "I'm closer to through than Jack."

Jack pushed his glass across the table and they measured meticulously, precisely. "No," he said. "Look how much more you have than me."

"It doesn't *matter,*" Mrs. Walpole said, "it doesn't *matter.* Jack, *eat* your cereal."

"She didn't have any more than me to start with," Jack said. "Did she have any more than me, Mom?"

The alarm clock had not gone off at seven as it should. Mrs. Walpole heard the sound of the shower upstairs and calculated rapidly; the coffee was slower than usual this morning, the boiled eggs a shade too soft. She had only had time to pour herself a glass of fruit juice and no time to drink it. *Someone* — Judy or Jack or Mr. Walpole — was going to be late.

"Judy," Mrs. Walpole said mechanically, *"Jack."*

Judy's hair was not accurately braided. Jack would get off without his handkerchief. Mr. Walpole would certainly be irritable.

The yellow-and-red bulk of the school bus filled the road outside the kitchen window, and Judy and Jack streaked for the door, cereal uneaten, books most likely forgotten. Mrs. Walpole followed them to the kitchen door, calling, “Jack, your milk money; come straight home at noon.” She watched them climb into the school bus and then went briskly to work clearing their dishes from the table and setting a place for Mr. Walpole. She would have to have breakfast herself later, in the breathing-spell that came after nine o’clock. That meant her wash would be late getting on the line, and if it rained that afternoon, as it certainly might, nothing would be dry. Mrs. Walpole made an effort, and said, “Good morning, dear,” as her husband came into the kitchen. He said, “Morning,” without glancing up and Mrs. Walpole, her mind full of unfinished sentences that began, “Don’t you think other people ever have any feelings or—” started patiently to set his breakfast before him. The soft-boiled eggs in their dish, the toast, the coffee. Mr. Walpole devoted himself to his paper, and Mrs. Walpole, who wanted desperately also to say, “I don’t suppose you notice that I haven’t had a chance to eat—” set the dishes down as softly as she could.

Everything was going smoothly, although half-an-hour late, when the telephone rang. The Walpoles were on a party line, and Mrs. Walpole usually let the phone ring her number twice before concluding that it was really their number; this morning, before nine o’clock, with Mr. Walpole not half-through his breakfast, it was an unbearable intrusion, and Mrs. Walpole went reluctantly to answer it. “Hello,” she said forbiddingly.

“Mrs. Walpole,” the voice said, and Mrs. Walpole said, “Yes?” The voice — it was a woman — said, “I’m sorry to bother you, but this is—” and gave an unrecognizable name. Mrs. Walpole said, “Yes?” again. She could hear Mr. Walpole taking the coffeepot off the stove to pour himself a second cup.

“Do you have a dog? Brown-and-black hound?” the voice continued. With the word *dog* Mrs. Walpole, in the second before she answered, “Yes,” comprehended the innumerable aspects of owning a dog in the country (six dollars for spaying, the rude barking late at night, the watchful security of the dark shape sleeping on the rug beside the double-decker beds in the twins’ room, the inevitability of a dog in the house, as important as a stove, or a front porch, or a subscription to the local paper; more, and above any of these things, the dog herself, known among the neighbors as Lady Walpole, on an exact par with Jack Walpole or Judy Walpole; quiet, competent, exceedingly tolerant), and found in none of them a reason for such an early morning call from a voice which she realized now was as irritable as her own.

“Yes,” Mrs. Walpole said shortly, “I own a dog. Why?”

“Big brown-and-black hound?”

Lady’s pretty markings, her odd face. “Yes,” Mrs. Walpole said, her voice a little more impatient, “yes, that is certainly my dog. Why?”

“He’s been killing my chickens.” The voice sounded satisfied now; Mrs. Walpole had been cornered.

For several seconds Mrs. Walpole was quiet, so that the voice said, “Hello?”

“That’s perfectly ridiculous,” Mrs. Walpole said.

“This morning,” the voice said with relish, “your dog was chasing our chickens. We heard the chickens at about eight o’clock, and my husband went out to see what was the matter and found two chickens dead and he saw a big brown-and-black hound down with the chickens and he took a stick and chased the dog away and then he found two more dead ones. He says,” the voice went on flatly, “that it’s lucky he didn’t think to take his shotgun out with him because you wouldn’t have any more dog. Most awful mess you ever saw,” the voice said, “blood and feathers everywhere.”

“What makes you think it’s *my* dog?” Mrs. Walpole said weakly.

“Joe White — he’s a neighbor of yours — was passing at the time and saw my husband chasing the dog. Said it was your dog.”

Old man White lived in the next house but one to the Walpoles. Mrs. Walpole had always made a point of being courteous to him, inquired amiably about his health when she saw him on the porch as she passed, had regarded respectfully the pictures of his grandchildren in Albany.

“I see,” Mrs. Walpole said, suddenly shifting her ground. “Well, if you’re absolutely *sure.* I just can’t believe it of Lady. She’s so gentle.”

The other voice softened, in response to Mrs. Walpole’s concern. “It *is* a shame,” the other woman said. “I can’t tell you how sorry I am that it happened. But…” her voice trailed off significantly.

“Of *course* we’ll take care of the damage,” Mrs. Walpole said quickly>.

“No, no,” the woman said, almost apologetically. “Don’t even *think* about it.”

“But of *course*—” Mrs. Walpole began, bewildered.

“The dog,” the voice said. “You’ll have to do something about the dog.”

A sudden unalterable terror took hold of Mrs. Walpole. Her morning had gone badly, she had not yet had her coffee, she was faced with an evil situation she had never known before, and now the voice, its tone, its inflection, had managed to frighten Mrs. Walpole with a word like “something.”

“How?” Mrs. Walpole said finally. “I mean, what do you want me to do?”

There was a brief silence on the other end of the wire, and then the voice said briskly, “I’m sure I don’t know, missus. I’ve always heard that there’s no way to stop a chicken-killing dog. As I say, there was no damage to speak of. As a matter of fact, the chickens the dog killed are plucked and in the oven now."

Mrs. Walpole's throat tightened and she closed her eyes for a minute, but the voice went inflexibly on. "We wouldn't ask you to do anything except take care of the dog. Naturally, you understand that we can't have a dog killing our chickens?"

Realizing that she was expected to answer, Mrs. Walpole said, "Certainly."

"So…" the voice said.

Mrs. Walpole saw over the top of the phone that Mr. Walpole was passing her on his way to the door. He waved briefly to her and she nodded at him. He was late; she had intended to ask him to stop at the library in the city. Now she would have to call him later. Mrs. Walpole said sharply into the phone, "First of all, of course, I'll have to make sure it's my dog. If it *is* my dog I can promise you you'll have no more trouble."

"It's your dog all right." The voice had assumed the country flatness; if Mrs. Walpole wanted to fight, the voice implied, she had picked just the right people.

"Good-bye," Mrs. Walpole said, knowing that she was making a mistake in parting from this woman angrily; knowing that she should stay on the phone for an interminable apologetic conversation, try to beg her dog's life back from this stupid inflexible woman who cared so much for *her* stupid chickens.

Mrs. Walpole put the phone down and went out into the kitchen. She poured herself a cup of coffee and made herself some toast.

I am not going to let this bother me until after I have had my coffee, Mrs. Walpole told herself firmly. She put extra butter on her toast and tried to relax, moving her back against the chair, letting her shoulders sag. Feeling like this at nine-thirty in the morning, she thought, it's a feeling that belongs with eleven o'clock at night. The bright sun outside was not as cheerful as it might be; Mrs. Walpole decided suddenly to put her wash off until tomorrow. They had not lived in the country town long enough for Mrs. Walpole to feel the disgrace of washing on Tuesday as mortal; they were still city folk and would probably always be city folk, people who owned a chicken-killing dog, people who washed on Tuesday, people who were not able to fend for themselves against the limited world of earth and food and weather that the country folk took so much for granted. In this situation as in all such others — the disposal of rubbish, the weather stripping, the baking of angel-food cake — Mrs. Walpole was forced to look for advice. In the country it is extremely difficult to "get a man" to do things for you, and Mr. and Mrs. Walpole had early fallen into the habit of consulting their neighbors for information which in the city would have belonged properly to the superintendent, or the janitor, or the man from the gas company. When Mrs. Walpole's glance fell on Lady's water dish under the sink, and she realized that she was indescribably depressed, she got up and put on her jacket and a scarf over her head and went next door.

Mrs. Nash, her next-door neighbor, was frying doughnuts, and she waved a fork at Mrs. Walpole at the open door and called, "Come in, can't leave the stove." Mrs. Walpole, stepping into Mrs. Nash's kitchen, was painfully aware of her own kitchen with the dirty dishes in the sink. Mrs. Nash was wearing a shockingly clean house dress and her kitchen was freshly washed; Mrs. Nash was able to fry doughnuts without making any sort of a mess.

"The men do like fresh doughnuts with their lunch," Mrs. Nash remarked without any more preamble than her nod and invitation to Mrs. Walpole. "I always try to get enough made ahead, but I never do.”

“I wish I could make doughnuts,” Mrs. Walpole said. Mrs. Nash waved the fork hospitably at the stack of still-warm doughnuts on the table and Mrs. Walpole helped herself to one, thinking: This will give me indigestion.

“Seems like they all get eaten by the time I finish making them,” Mrs. Nash said. She surveyed the cooking doughnuts and then, satisfied that she could look away for a minute, took one herself and began to eat it standing by the stove. “What’s wrong with you?” she asked. “You look sort of peaked this morning.”

“To tell you the truth,” Mrs. Walpole said, “it’s our dog. Someone called me this morning that she’s been killing chickens.”

Mrs. Nash nodded. “Up to Harris’,” she said. “I know.”

Of course she’d know by now, Mrs. Walpole thought.

“You know,” Mrs. Nash said, turning again to the doughnuts, “they do say there’s nothing to do with a dog kills chickens. My brother had a dog once killed sheep, and I don’t know *what* they didn’t do to break that dog, but of course nothing would do it. Once they get the taste of blood.” Mrs. Nash lifted a golden doughnut delicately out of the frying kettle, and set it down on a piece of brown paper to drain. “They get so’s they’d rather kill than eat, hardly.”

“But what can I *do*?” Mrs. Walpole asked. “Isn’t there *anything*?”

“You can try, of course,” Mrs. Nash said. “Best thing to do first is tie her up. Keep her tied, with a good stout chain. Then at least she won’t go chasing no more chickens for a while, save you getting her killed *for* you.”

Mrs. Walpole got up reluctantly and began to put her scarf on again. “I guess I’d better get a chain down at the store,” she said.

“You going downstreet?”

“I want to do my shopping before the kids come home for lunch.”

“Don’t buy any store doughnuts,” Mrs. Nash said. “I’ll run up later with a dishful for you. You get a good stout chain for that dog.”

“Thank you,” Mrs. Walpole said. The bright sunlight across Mrs. Nash’s kitchen doorway, the solid table bearing its plates of doughnuts, the pleasant smell of the frying, were all symbols somehow of Mrs. Nash’s safety, her confidence in a way of life and a security that had no traffic with chicken-killing, no city fears, an assurance and cleanliness so great that she was willing to bestow its overflow on the Walpoles, bring them doughnuts and overlook Mrs. Walpole’s dirty kitchen. “Thank you,” Mrs. Walpole said again, inadequately.

“You tell Tom Kittredge I’ll be down for a pork roast later this morning,” Mrs. Nash said. “Tell him to save it for me.”

“I shall.” Mrs. Walpole hesitated in the doorway and Mrs. Nash waved the fork at her.

“See you later,” Mrs. Nash said.

Old man White was sitting on his front porch in the sun. When he saw Mrs. Walpole he grinned broadly and shouted to her, “Guess you’re not going to have any more dog.”

I’ve got to be nice to him, Mrs. Walpole thought, he’s not a traitor or a bad man by country standards; anyone would tell on a chicken-killing dog; but he doesn’t have to be so pleased about it, she thought, and tried to make her voice pleasant when she said, “Good morning, Mr. White.”

“Gonna have her shot?” Mr. White asked. “Your man got a gun?”

“I’m so worried about it,” Mrs. Walpole said. She stood on the walk below the front porch and tried not to let her hatred show in her face as she looked up at Mr. White.

“It’s too bad about a dog like that,” Mr. White said.

At least he doesn’t blame *me,* Mrs. Walpole thought “Is there anything I can do?” she said.

Mr. White thought. “Believe you might be able to cure a chicken-killer,” he said. “You get a dead chicken and tie it around the dog’s neck, so he can’t shake it loose, see?”

“Around her neck?” Mrs. Walpole asked, and Mr. White nodded, grinning toothlessly.

“See, when he can’t shake it loose at first he tries to play with it and then it starts to bother him, see, and then he tries to roll it off and it won’t come and then he tries to bite it off and it won’t come and then when he sees it won’t come he thinks he’s never gonna get rid of it, see, and he gets scared. And then you’ll have him coming around with his tail between his legs and this thing hanging around his neck and it gets worse and worse.”

Mrs. Walpole put one hand on the porch railing to steady herself. “What do you do then?” she asked.

“Well,” Mr. White said, “the way I heard it, see, the chicken gets riper and riper and the more the dog sees it and feels it and smells it, see, the more he gets to hate chicken. And he can’t ever get rid of it, see?”

“But the dog,” Mrs. Walpole said. “Lady, I mean. How long do we have to leave it around her neck?”

“Well,” Mr. White said with enthusiasm, “I guess you leave it on until it gets ripe enough to fall off by itself. See, the head.…”

“I see,” Mrs. Walpole said. “Would it work?”

“Can’t say,” Mr. White said. “Never tried it myself.” His voice said that *he* had never had a chicken-killing dog.

Mrs. Walpole left him abruptly; she could not shake the feeling that if it were not for Mr. White, Lady would not have been identified as the dog killing the chickens; she wondered briefly if Mr. White had maliciously blamed Lady because they were city folk, and then thought, No, no man around here would bear false witness against a dog.

When she entered the grocery it was almost empty; there was a man at the hardware counter and another man leaning against the meat counter talking to Mr. Kittredge, the grocer. When Mr. Kittredge saw Mrs. Walpole come in he called across the store, “Morning, Mrs. Walpole. Fine day.”

“Lovely,” Mrs. Walpole said, and the grocer said, “Bad luck about the dog.”

“I don’t know what to do about it,” Mrs. Walpole said, and the man talking to the grocer looked at her reflectively, and then back at the grocer.

“Killed three chickens up to Harris’s this morning,” the grocer said to the man and the man nodded solemnly and said, “Heard about that.”

Mrs. Walpole came across to the meat counter and said, “Mrs. Nash said would you save her a roast of pork. She’ll be down later to get it.”

“Going up that way,” the man standing with the grocer said. “Drop it off.”

“Right,” the grocer said.

The man looked at Mrs. Walpole and said, “Gonna have to shoot him, I guess?”

“I hope not,” Mrs. Walpole said earnestly. “We’re all so fond of the dog.”

The man and the grocer looked at one another for a minute, and then the grocer said reasonably, “Won’t do to have a dog going around killing chickens, Mrs. Walpole.”

“First thing you know,” the man said, “someone’ll put a load of buckshot into him, he won’t come home no more.” He and the grocer both laughed.

“Isn’t there any way to cure the dog?” Mrs. Walpole asked.

“Sure,” the man said. “Shoot him.”

“Tie a dead chicken around his neck,” the grocer suggested. “That might do it.”

“Heard of a man did that,” the other man said.

“Did it help?” Mrs. Walpole asked eagerly.

The man shook his head slowly and with determination.

“You know,” the grocer said. He leaned his elbow on the meat counter; he was a great talker. “You know,” he said again, “my father had a dog once used to eat eggs. Got into the chicken-house and used to break the eggs open and lick them up. Used to eat maybe half the eggs we got.”

“That’s a bad business,” the other man said. “Dog eating eggs.”

“Bad business,” the grocer said in confirmation. Mrs. Walpole found herself nodding. “Last, my father couldn’t stand it no more. Here half his eggs were getting eaten,” the grocer said. “So he took an egg once, set it on the back of the stove for two, three days, till the egg got good and ripe, good and hot through, and that egg smelled pretty bad. Then — I was there, boy twelve, thirteen years old — he called the dog one day, and the dog come running. So I held the dog, and my daddy opened the dog’s mouth and put in the egg, red-hot and smelling to heaven, and then he held the dog’s mouth closed so’s the dog couldn’t get rid of the egg anyway except swallow it.” The grocer laughed and shook his head reminiscently.

“Bet that dog never ate another egg,” the man said.

“Never touched another egg,” the grocer said firmly. “You put an egg down in front of that dog, he’d run’s though the devil was after him.”

“But how did he feel about you?” Mrs. Walpole asked. “Did he ever come near *you* again?”

The grocer and the other man both looked at her. “How do you mean?” the grocer said.

“Did he ever *like* you again?”

“Well,” the grocer said, and thought. “No,” he said finally, “I don’t believe you could say’s he ever did. Not much of a dog, though.”

“There’s one thing you ought to try,” the other man said suddenly to Mrs. Walpole, “you really want to cure that dog, there’s one thing you ought to try.”

“What’s that?” Mrs. Walpole said.

“You want to take that dog,” the man said, leaning forward and gesturing with one hand, “take him and put him in a pen with a mother hen’s got chicks to protect. Time she’s through with him he won’t never chase another chicken.”

The grocer began to laugh and Mrs. Walpole looked, bewildered, from the grocer to the other man, who was looking at her without a smile, his eyes wide and yellow, like a cat’s.

“What would happen?” she asked uncertainly.

“Scratch his eyes out,” the grocer said succinctly. “He wouldn’t ever be able to *see* another chicken.”

Mrs. Walpole realized that she felt faint. Smiling over her shoulder, in order not to seem discourteous, she moved quickly away from the meat counter and down to the other end of the store. The grocer continued talking to the man behind the meat counter and after a minute Mrs. Walpole went outside, into the air. She decided that she would go home and lie down until nearly lunchtime, and do her shopping later in the day.

At home she found that she could not lie down until the breakfast table was cleared and the dishes washed, and by the time she had done that it was almost time to start lunch. She was standing by the pantry shelves, debating, when a dark shape crossed the sunlight in the doorway and she realized that Lady was home. For a minute she stood still, watching Lady. The dog came in quietly, harmlessly, as though she had spent the morning frolicking on the grass with her friends, but there were spots of blood on her legs and she drank her water eagerly. Mrs. Walpole's first impulse was to scold her, to hold her down and beat her for the deliberate, malicious pain she had inflicted, the murderous brutality a pretty dog like Lady could keep so well hidden in their home; then Mrs. Walpole, watching Lady go quietly and settle down in her usual spot by the stove, turned helplessly and took the first cans she found from the pantry shelves and brought them to the kitchen table.

Lady sat quietly by the stove until the children came in noisily for lunch, and then she leaped up and jumped on them, welcoming them as though they were the aliens and she the native to the house. Judy, pulling Lady's ears, said, "Hello, Mom, do you know what Lady did? You're a bad bad dog," she said to Lady, "you're going to get shot."

Mrs. Walpole felt faint again and set a dish down hastily on the table. "Judy Walpole," she said.

"She *is,* Mom," Judy said. "She's going to get shot."

Children don't realize, Mrs. Walpole told herself, death is never real to them. Try to be sensible, she told herself. "Sit down to lunch, children," she said quietly.

"But, *Mother,*" Judy said, and Jack said, "She *is,* Mom."

They sat down noisily, unfolding their napkins and attacking their food without looking at it, eager to talk.

"You *know* what Mr. Shepherd said, Mom?" Jack demanded, his mouth full.

"Listen," Judy said, "we'll tell you what he said."

Mr. Shepherd was a genial man who lived near the Walpoles and gave the children nickels and took the boys fishing. "He says Lady's going to get shot," Jack said.

"But the spikes," Judy said. "Tell about the spikes."

"The *spikes,*" Jack said. "Listen, Mommy. He says you got to get a collar for Lady.…"

"A strong collar," Judy said.

"And you get big thick nails, like spikes, and you hammer them into the collar."

"All around," Judy said. "Let *me* tell it, Jack. You hammer these nails all around so's they make spikes inside the collar."

"But it's loose," Jack said. "Let *me* tell this part. It's loose and you put it around Lady's neck.…"

"And—" Judy put her hand on her throat and made a strangling noise.

"Not *yet,*" Jack said. "Not *yet,* dopey. First you get a long long long long rope."

"A *real* long rope," Judy amplified.

"And you fasten it to the collar and then we put the collar on Lady," Jack said. Lady was sitting next to him and he leaned over and said, "Then we put this real sharp spiky collar around your neck," and kissed the top of her head while Lady regarded him affectionately.

"And then we take her where there are chickens," Judy said, "and we show her the chickens, and we turn her loose."

"And make her chase the chickens," Jack said. "And *then,* and then, when she gets right up close to the chickens, we puuuuuuull on the rope—"

"And—" Judy made her strangling noise again.

"The spikes cut her head off," Jack finished dramatically.

They both began to laugh and Lady, looking from one to the other, panted as though she were laughing too.

Mrs. Walpole looked at them, at her two children with their hard hands and their sunburned faces laughing together, their dog with blood still on her legs laughing with them. She went to the kitchen doorway to look outside at the cool green hills, the motion of the apple tree in the soft afternoon breeze.

"Cut your head right off," Jack was saying.

Everything was quiet and lovely in the sunlight, the peaceful sky, the gentle line of the hills. Mrs. Walpole closed her eyes, suddenly feeling the harsh hands pulling her down, the sharp points closing in on her throat.

AFTER YOU, MY DEAR ALPHONSE

MRS. WILSON WAS just taking the gingerbread out of the oven when she heard Johnny outside talking to someone.

“Johnny,” she called, “you’re late. Come in and get your lunch.”

“Just a minute, Mother,” Johnny said. “After you, my dear Alphonse.”

“After *you,* my dear Alphonse,” another voice said.

“No, after *you,* my dear Alphonse,” Johnny said.

Mrs. Wilson opened the door. “Johnny,” she said, “you come in this minute and get your lunch. You can play after you’ve eaten.”

Johnny came in after her, slowly. “Mother,” he said, “I brought Boyd home for lunch with me.”

“Boyd?” Mrs. Wilson thought for a moment. “I don’t believe I’ve met Boyd. Bring him in, dear, since you’ve invited him. Lunch is ready.”

“Boyd!” Johnny yelled. “Hey, Boyd, come on in!”

“I’m coming. Just got to unload this stuff.”

“Well, hurry, or my mother’ll be sore.”

“Johnny, that’s not very polite to either your friend or your mother,” Mrs. Wilson said. “Come sit down, Boyd.”

As she turned to show Boyd where to sit, she saw he was a Negro boy, smaller than Johnny but about the same age. His arms were loaded with split kindling wood. “Where’ll I put this stuff, Johnny?” he asked.

Mrs. Wilson turned to Johnny. “Johnny,” she said, “what did you make Boyd do? What is that wood?”

“Dead Japanese,” Johnny said mildly. “We stand them in the ground and run over them with tanks.”

“How do you do, Mrs. Wilson?” Boyd said.

“How do you do, Boyd? You shouldn’t let Johnny make you carry all that wood. Sit down now and eat lunch, both of you.”

“Why shouldn’t he carry the wood, Mother? It’s his wood. We got it at his place.”

“Johnny,” Mrs. Wilson said, “go on and eat your lunch.”

“Sure,” Johnny said. He held out the dish of scrambled eggs to Boyd. “After you, my dear Alphonse.”

“After *you,* my dear Alphonse,” Boyd said.

“After *you,* my dear Alphonse,” Johnny said. They began to giggle.

“Are you hungry, Boyd?” Mrs. Wilson asked.

“Yes, Mrs. Wilson.”

“Well, don’t you let Johnny stop you. He always fusses about eating, so you just see that you get a good lunch. There’s plenty of food here for you to have all you want.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Wilson.”

“Come on, Alphonse,” Johnny said. He pushed half the scrambled eggs on to Boyd’s plate. Boyd watched while Mrs. Wilson put a dish of stewed tomatoes beside his plate.

“Boyd don’t eat tomatoes, do you, Boyd?” Johnny said.

“Doesn’t eat tomatoes, Johnny. And just because you don’t like them, don’t say that about Boyd. Boyd will eat *anything.*”

“Bet he won’t,” Johnny said, attacking his scrambled eggs.

“Boyd wants to grow up and be a big strong man so he can work hard,” Mrs. Wilson said. “I’ll bet Boyd’s father eats stewed tomatoes.”

“My father eats anything he wants to,” Boyd said.

“So does mine,” Johnny said. “Sometimes he doesn’t eat hardly anything. He’s a little guy, though. Wouldn’t hurt a flea.”

“Mine’s a little guy, too,” Boyd said.

“I’ll bet he’s strong, though,” Mrs. Wilson said. She hesitated. “Does he…work?”

“Sure,” Johnny said. “Boyd’s father works in a factory.”

“There, you see?” Mrs. Wilson said. “And he certainly has to be strong to do that — all that lifting and carrying at a factory.”

“Boyd’s father doesn’t have to,” Johnny said. “He’s a foreman.”

Mrs. Wilson felt defeated. “What does your mother do, Boyd?”

“My mother?” Boyd was surprised. “She takes care of us kids.”

“Oh. She doesn’t work, then?”

“Why should she?” Johnny said through a mouthful of eggs. “You don’t work.”

“You really don’t want any stewed tomatoes, Boyd?”

“No, thank you, Mrs. Wilson,” Boyd said.

“No, thank you, Mrs. Wilson, no, thank you, Mrs. Wilson, no, thank you, Mrs. Wilson,” Johnny said. “Boyd’s sister’s going to work, though. She’s going to be a teacher.”

“That’s a very fine attitude for her to have, Boyd.” Mrs. Wilson restrained an impulse to pat Boyd on the head. “I imagine you’re all very proud of her?”

“I guess so,” Boyd said.

“What about all your other brothers and sisters? I guess all of you want to make just as much of yourselves as you can.”

“There’s only me and Jean,” Boyd said. “I don’t know yet what I want to be when I grow up.”

“We’re going to be tank drivers, Boyd and me,” Johnny said. “Zoom.” Mrs. Wilson caught Boyd’s glass of milk as Johnny’s napkin ring, suddenly transformed into a tank, plowed heavily across the table.

“Look, Johnny,” Boyd said. “Here’s a foxhole. I’m shooting at you.”

Mrs. Wilson, with the speed born of long experience, took the gingerbread off the shelf and placed it carefully between the tank and the foxhole.

“Now eat as much as you want to, Boyd,” she said. “I want to see you get filled up.”

“Boyd eats a lot, but not as much as I do,” Johnny said. “I’m bigger than he is.”

“You’re not much bigger,” Boyd said. “I can beat you running.”

Mrs. Wilson took a deep breath. “Boyd,” she said. Both boys turned to her. “Boyd, Johnny has some suits that are a little too small for him, and a winter coat. It’s not new, of course, but there’s lots of wear in it still. And I have a few dresses that your mother or sister could probably use. Your mother can make them over into lots of things for all of you, and I’d be very happy to give them to you. Suppose before you leave I make up a big bundle and then you and Johnny can take it over to your mother right away…” Her voice trailed off as she saw Boyd’s puzzled expression.

“But I have plenty of clothes, thank you,” he said. “And I don’t think my mother knows how to sew very well, and anyway I guess we buy about everything we need. Thank you very much, though.”

“We don’t have time to carry that old stuff around, Mother,” Johnny said. “We got to play tanks with the kids today.”

Mrs. Wilson lifted the plate of gingerbread off the table as Boyd was about to take another piece. “There are many little boys like you, Boyd, who would be very grateful for the clothes someone was kind enough to give them.”

“Boyd will take them if you want him to, Mother,” Johnny said.

“I didn’t mean to make you mad, Mrs. Wilson,” Boyd said.

"Don't think I'm angry, Boyd. I'm just disappointed in you, that's all. Now let's not say anything more about it."

She began clearing the plates off the table, and Johnny took Boyd's hand and pulled him to the door. "'Bye, Mother," Johnny said. Boyd stood for a minute, staring at Mrs. Wilson's back.

"After you, my dear Alphonse," Johnny said, holding the door open.

"Is your mother still mad?" Mrs. Wilson heard Boyd ask in a low voice.

"I don't know," Johnny said. "She's screwy sometimes."

"So's mine," Boyd said. He hesitated. "After *you,* my dear Alphonse."

CHARLES

THE DAY MY SON LAURIE started kindergarten he renounced corduroy overalls with bibs and began wearing blue jeans with a belt; I watched him go off the first morning with the older girl next door, seeing clearly that an era of my life was ended, my sweet-voiced nursery-school tot replaced by a long-trousered, swaggering character who forgot to stop at the corner and wave good-bye to me.

He came home the same way, the front door slamming open, his cap on the floor, and the voice suddenly become raucous shouting, “Isn’t anybody *here*?”

At lunch he spoke insolently to his father, spilled his baby sister’s milk, and remarked that his teacher said we were not to take the name of the Lord in vain.

“How *was* school today?” I asked, elaborately casual.

“All right,” he said.

“Did you learn anything?” his father asked.

Laurie regarded his father coldly. “I didn’t learn nothing,” he said.

“Anything,” I said. “Didn’t learn anything.”

“The teacher spanked a boy, though,” Laurie said, addressing his bread and butter. “For being fresh,” he added, with his mouth full.

“What did he do?” I asked. “Who was it?”

Laurie thought. “It was Charles,” he said. “He was fresh. The teacher spanked him and made him stand in a corner. He was awfully fresh.”

“What did he do?” I asked again, but Laurie slid off his chair, took a cookie, and left, while his father was still saying, “See here, young man.”

The next day Laurie remarked at lunch, as soon as he sat down, “Well, Charles was bad again today.” He grinned enormously and said, “Today Charles hit the teacher.”

“Good heavens,” I said, mindful of the Lord’s name, “I suppose he got spanked again?”

“He sure did,” Laurie said. “Look up,” he said to his father.

“What?” his father said, looking up.

“Look down,” Laurie said. “Look at my thumb. Gee, you’re dumb.” He began to laugh insanely.

“Why did Charles hit the teacher?” I asked quickly.

“Because she tried to make him color with red crayons,” Laurie said. “Charles wanted to color with green crayons so he hit the teacher and she spanked him and said nobody play with Charles but everybody did.”

The third day — it was Wednesday of the first week — Charles bounced a see-saw on to the head of a little girl and made her bleed, and the teacher made him stay inside all during recess. Thursday Charles had to stand in a corner during story-time because he kept pounding his feet on the floor. Friday Charles was deprived of blackboard privileges because he threw chalk.

On Saturday I remarked to my husband, “Do you think kindergarten is too unsettling for Laurie? All this toughness, and bad grammar, and this Charles boy sounds like such a bad influence.”

“It’ll be all right,” my husband said reassuringly. “Bound to be people like Charles in the world. Might as well meet them now as later.”

On Monday Laurie came home late, full of news. “Charles,” he shouted as he came up the hill; I was waiting anxiously on the front steps. “Charles,” Laurie yelled all the way up the hill, “Charles was bad again.”

“Come right in,” I said, as soon as he came close enough. “Lunch is waiting.”

“You know what Charles did?” he demanded, following me through the door. “Charles yelled so in school they sent a boy in from first grade to tell the teacher she had to make Charles keep quiet, and so Charles had to stay after school. And so all the children stayed to watch him.”

“What did he do?” I asked.

“He jusr sat there,” Laurie said, climbing into his chair at the table. “Hi, Pop, y’old dust mop.”

“Charles had to stay after school today,” I told my husband. “Everyone stayed with him.”

“What does this Charles look like?” my husband asked Laurie. “What’s his other name?”

“He’s bigger than me,” Laurie said. “And he doesn’t have any rubbers and he doesn’t ever wear a jacket.”

Monday night was the first Parent-Teachers meeting, and only the fact that the baby had a cold kept me from going; I wanted passionately to meet Charles’s mother. On Tuesday Laurie remarked suddenly, “Our teacher had a friend come to see her in school today.”

“Charles’s mother?” my husband and I asked simultaneously.

“Naaah,” Laurie said scornfully. “It was a man who came and made us do exercises, we had to touch our toes. Look.” He climbed down from his chair and squatted down and touched his toes. “Like this,” he said. He got solemnly back into his chair and said, picking up his fork, “Charles didn’t even *do* exercises.”

“That’s fine,” I said heartily. “Didn’t Charles want to do exercises?”

“Naaah,” Laurie said. “Charles was so fresh to the teacher’s friend he wasn’t *let* do exercises.”

“Fresh again?” I said.

“He kicked the teacher’s friend,” Laurie said. “The teacher’s friend told Charles to touch his toes like I just did and Charles kicked him.”

“What are they going to do about Charles, do you suppose?” Laurie’s father asked him.

Laurie shrugged elaborately. “Throw him out of school, I guess,” he said.

Wednesday and Thursday were routine; Charles yelled during story hour and hit a boy in the stomach and made him cry. On Friday Charles stayed after school again and so did all the other children.

With the third week of kindergarten Charles was an institution in our family; the baby was being a Charles when she cried all afternoon; Laurie did a Charles when he filled his wagon full of mud and pulled it through the kitchen; even my husband, when he caught his elbow in the telephone cord and pulled telephone, ashtray, and a bowl of flowers off the table, said, after the first minute, “Looks like Charles.”

During the third and fourth weeks it looked like a reformation in Charles; Laurie reported grimly at lunch on Thursday of the third week, “Charles was so good today the teacher gave him an apple.”

“What?” I said, and my husband added warily, “You mean Charles?”

“Charles,” Laurie said. “He gave the crayons around and he picked up the books afterward and the teacher said he was her helper.”

“What happened?” I asked incredulously.

“He was her helper, that’s all,” Laurie said, and shrugged.

“Can this be true, about Charles?” I asked my husband that night. “Can something like this happen?”

“Wait and see,” my husband said cynically. “When you’ve got a Charles to deal with, this may mean he’s only plotting.”

He seemed to be wrong. For over a week Charles was the teacher's helper; each day he handed things out and he picked things up; no one had to stay after school.

"The P.T.A. meeting's next week again," I told my husband one evening. "I'm going to find Charles's mother there."

"Ask her what happened to Charles," my husband said. "I'd like to know."

"I'd like to know myself," I said.

On Friday of that week things were back to normal. "You know what Charles did today?" Laurie demanded at the lunch table, in a voice slightly awed. "He told a little girl to say a word and she said it and the teacher washed her mouth out with soap and Charles laughed."

"What word?" his father asked unwisely, and Laurie said, "I'll have to whisper it to you, it's so bad." He got down off his chair and went around to his father. His father bent his head down and Laurie whispered joyfully. His father's eyes widened.

"Did Charles tell the little girl to say *that*?" he asked respectfully.

"She said it *twice,*" Laurie said. "Charles told her to say it *twice.*"

"What happened to Charles?" my husband asked.

"Nothing," Laurie said. "He was passing out the crayons."

Monday morning Charles abandoned the little girl and said the evil word himself three or four times, getting his mouth washed out with soap each time. He also threw chalk.

My husband came to the door with me that evening as I set out for the P.T.A. meeting. "Invite her over for a cup of tea after the meeting," he said. "I want to get a look at her."

"If only she's there," I said prayerfully.

“She’ll be there,” my husband said. “I don’t see how they could hold a P.T.A. meeting without Charles’s mother.”

At the meeting I sat restlessly, scanning each comfortable matronly face, trying to determine which one hid the secret of Charles. None of them looked to me haggard enough. No one stood up in the meeting and apologized for the way her son had been acting. No one mentioned Charles.

After the meeting I identified and sought out Laurie’s kindergarten teacher. She had a plate with a cup of tea and a piece of chocolate cake; I had a plate with a cup of tea and a piece of marshmallow cake. We maneuvered up to one another cautiously, and smiled.

“I’ve been so anxious to meet you,” I said. “I’m Laurie’s mother.”

“We’re all so interested in Laurie,” she said.

“Well, he certainly likes kindergarten,” I said. “He talks about it all the time.”

“We had a little trouble adjusting, the first week or so,” she said primly, “but now he’s a fine little helper. With occasional lapses, of course.”

“Laurie usually adjusts very quickly,” I said. “I suppose this time it’s Charles’s influence.”

“Charles?”

“Yes,” I said, laughing, “you must have your hands full in that kindergarten, with Charles.”

“Charles?” she said. “We don’t have any Charles in the kindergarten.”

AFTERNOON IN LINEN

IT WAS A long, cool room, comfortably furnished and happily placed, with hydrangea bushes outside the large windows and their pleasant shadows on the floor. Everyone in it was wearing linen — the little girl in the pink linen dress with a wide blue belt, Mrs. Kator in a brown linen suit and a big, yellow linen hat, Mrs. Lennon, who was the little girl's grandmother, in a white linen dress, and Mrs. Kator's little boy, Howard, in a blue linen shirt and shorts. Like in *Alice through the Looking-Glass,* the little girl thought, looking at her grandmother; like the gentleman all dressed in white paper. I'm a gentleman all dressed in pink paper, she thought. Although Mrs. Lennon and Mrs. Kator lived on the same block and saw each other every day, this was a formal call, and so they were drinking tea.

Howard was sitting at the piano at one end of the long room, in front of the biggest window. He was playing "Humoresque" in careful, unhurried tempo. I played that last year, the little girl thought; it's in G. Mrs. Lennon and Mrs. Kator were still holding their teacups, listening to Howard and looking at him, and now and then looking at each other and smiling. I could still play that if I wanted to, the little girl thought.

When Howard had finished playing "Humoresque," he slid off the piano bench and came over and gravely sat down beside the little girl, waiting for his mother to tell him whether to play again or not. He's bigger than I am, she thought, but I'm older. I'm ten. If they ask me to play the piano for them now, I'll say no.

"I think you play very nicely, Howard," the little girl's grandmother said. There were a few moments of leaden silence. Then Mrs. Kator said, "Howard, Mrs. Lennon spoke to you." Howard murmured and looked at his hands on his knees.

"I think he's coming along very well," Mrs. Kator said to Mrs. Lennon. "He doesn't like to practise, but I think he's coming along well."

"Harriet loves to practise," the little girl's grandmother said. "She sits at the piano for hours, making up little tunes and singing."

"She probably has a real talent for music," Mrs. Kator said. "I often wonder whether Howard is getting as much out of his music as he should."

"Harriet," Mrs. Lennon said to the little girl, "won't you play for Mrs. Kator? Play one of your own little tunes."

"I don't know any," the little girl said.

"Of course you do, dear," her grandmother said.

"I'd like very much to hear a little tune you made up yourself, Harriet," Mrs. Kator said.

"I don't know any," the little girl said.

Mrs. Lennon looked at Mrs. Kator and shrugged. Mrs. Kator nodded, mouthing "Shy," and turned to look proudly at Howard.

The little girl's grandmother set her lips firmly in a tight, sweet smile. "Harriet dear," she said, "even if we don't want to play our little tunes, I think we ought to tell Mrs. Kator that music is not our forte. I think we ought to show her our really fine achievements in another line. Harriet," she continued, turning to Mrs. Kator, "has written some poems. I'm going to ask her to recite them to you, because I feel, even though I may be prejudiced" — she laughed modestly— "even though I probably *am* prejudiced, that they show real merit."

“Well, for heaven’s sake!” Mrs. Kator said. She looked at Harriet, pleased. “Why, dear, I didn’t know you could do anything like that! I’d really *love* to hear them.”

“Recite one of your poems for Mrs. Kator, Harriet.”

The little girl looked at her grandmother, at the sweet smile, and at Mrs. Kator, leaning forward, and at Howard, sitting with his mouth open and a great delight growing in his eyes. “Don’t know any,” she said.

“Harriet,” her grandmother said, “even if you don’t remember any of your poems, you have some written down. I’m sure Mrs. Kator won’t mind if you read them to her.”

The huge merriment that had been gradually taking hold of Howard suddenly overwhelmed him. “Poems,” he said, doubling up with laughter on the couch. “Harriet writes poems.” He’ll tell all the kids on the block, the little girl thought.

“I do believe Howard’s jealous,” Mrs. Kator said.

“Aw,” Howard said. “I wouldn’t write a poem. Bet you couldn’t make *me* write a poem if you *tried,*”

“You couldn’t make me, either,” the little girl said. “That’s all a lie about the poems.”

There was a long silence. Then “Why, Harriet!” the little girl’s grandmother said in a sad voice. “What a thing to say about your grandmother!” Mrs. Kator said. “I think you’d better apologize, Harriet,” the little girl’s grandmother said. Mrs. Kator said, “Why, you certainly *had* better.”

“I didn’t do anything,” the little girl muttered. “I’m sorry.”

The grandmother’s voice was stern. “Now bring your poems out and read them to Mrs. Kator.”

“I don’t have any, honestly, Grandma,” the little girl said desperately. “Honestly, I don’t have any of those poems.”

“Well, *I* have,” the grandmother said. “Bring them to me from the top desk drawer.”

The little girl hesitated for a minute, watching her grandmother’s straight mouth and frowning eyes.

“Howard will get them for you, Mrs. Lennon,” Mrs. Kator said.

“Sure,” Howard said. He jumped up and ran over to the desk, pulling open the drawer. “What do they look like?” he shouted.

“In an envelope,” the grandmother said tightly. “In a brown envelope with ‘Harriet’s poetry’ written on the front.”

“Here it is,” Howard said. He pulled some papers out of the envelope and studied them a moment. “Look,” he said. “Harriet’s poems — about stars.” He ran to his mother, giggling and holding out the papers. “Look, Mother, Harriet’s poetry’s about stars!”

“Give them to Mrs. Lennon, dear,” Howard’s mother said. “It was very rude to open the envelope first.”

Mrs. Lennon took the envelope and the papers and held them out to Harriet. “Will you read them or shall I?” she asked kindly. Harriet shook her head. The grandmother sighed at Mrs. Kator and took up the first sheet of paper. Mrs. Kator leaned forward eagerly and Howard settled down at her feet, hugging his knees and putting his face against his leg to keep from laughing. The grandmother cleared her throat, smiled at Harriet, and began to read.

“‘The Evening Star,’” she announced.

“When evening shadows are falling,
And dark gathers closely around,
And all the night creatures are calling,

And the wind makes a lonesome sound,
"I wait for the first star to come out,
And look for its silvery beams,
When the blue and green twilight is all about,
And grandly a lone star gleams."

Howard could contain himself no longer. "Harriet writes poems about stars!"

"Why, it's lovely, Harriet dear!" Mrs. Kator said. "I think it's really lovely, honestly. I don't see what you're so shy about it for."

"There, you see, Harriet?" Mrs. Lennon said. "Mrs. Kator thinks your poetry is very nice. Now aren't you sorry you made such a fuss about such a little thing?"

He'll tell all the kids on the block, Harriet thought. "I didn't write it," she said.

"Why, Harriet!" Her grandmother laughed. "You don't need to be so modest, child. You write very nice poems."

"I copied it out of a book," Harriet said. "I found it in a book and I copied it and gave it to my old grandmother and said I wrote it."

"I don't believe you'd do anything like that, Harriet," Mrs. Kator said, puzzled.

"I did *so,*" Harriet maintained stubbornly. "I copied it right out of a book."

"Harriet, I don't believe you," her grandmother said.

Harriet looked at Howard, who was staring at her in admiration. "I copied it out of a book," she said to him. "I found the book in the library one day."

"I can't imagine her saying she did such a thing," Mrs. Lennon said to Mrs. Kator. Mrs. Kator shook her head.

“It was a book called” — Harriet thought a moment— “called *The Home Book of Verse,*” she said. “That’s what it was. And I copied every single word. I didn’t make up *one.*”

“Harriet, is this true?” her grandmother said. She turned to Mrs. Kator. “I’m afraid I must apologize for Harriet and for reading you the poem under false pretenses. I never dreamed she’d deceive me.”

“Oh, they do,” Mrs. Kator said deprecatingly. “They want attention and praise and sometimes they’ll do almost anything. I’m sure Harriet didn’t mean to be — well, dishonest.”

“I did *so,*” Harriet said. “I wanted everyone to think I wrote it. I said I wrote it on purpose.” She went over and took the papers out of her grandmother’s unresisting hand. “And you can’t look at them any more, either,” she said, and held them in back of her, away from everyone.

FLOWER GARDEN

AFTER LIVING IN an old Vermont manor house together for almost eleven years, the two Mrs. Winnings, mother and daughter-in-law, had grown to look a good deal alike, as women will who live intimately together, and work in the same kitchen and get things done around the house in the same manner. Although young Mrs. Winning had been a Talbot, and had dark hair which she wore cut short, she was now officially a Winning, a member of the oldest family in town and her hair was beginning to grey where her mother-in-law's hair had greyed first, at the temples; they both had thin sharp-featured faces and eloquent hands, and sometimes when they were washing dishes or shelling peas or polishing silverware together, their hands, moving so quickly and similarly, communicated more easily and sympathetically than their minds ever could. Young Mrs. Winning thought sometimes, when she sat at the breakfast table next to her mother-in-law, with her baby girl in the high-chair close by, that they must resemble some stylized block print for a New England wallpaper; mother, daughter, and granddaughter, with perhaps Plymouth Rock or Concord Bridge in the background.

On this, as on other cold mornings, they lingered over their coffee, unwilling to leave the big kitchen with the coal stove and the pleasant atmosphere of food and cleanliness, and they sat together silently sometimes until the baby had long finished her breakfast and was playing quietly in the special baby corner, where uncounted Winning children had played with almost identical toys from the same heavy wooden box.

"It seems as though spring would never come," young Mrs. Winning said. "I get so tired of the cold."

"Got to be cold some of the time," her mother-in-law said. She began to move suddenly and quickly, stacking plates, indicating that the time for sitting was over and the time for working had begun. Young Mrs. Winning, rising immediately to help, thought for the thousandth time that her mother-in-law would never relinquish the position of authority in her own house until she was too old to move before anyone else.

"And I wish someone would move into the old cottage," young Mrs. Winning added. She stopped halfway to the pantry with the table napkins and said longingly, "If only *someone* would move in before spring." Young Mrs. Winning had wanted, long ago, to buy the cottage herself, for her husband to make with his own hands into a home where they could live with their children, but now, accustomed as she was to the big old house at the top of the hill where her husband's family had lived for generations, she had only a great kindness left toward the little cottage, and a wistful anxiety to see some happy young people living there. When she heard it was sold, as all the old houses were being sold in these days when no one could seem to find a newer place to live, she had allowed herself to watch daily for a sign that someone new was coming; every morning she glanced down from the back porch to see if there was smoke coming out of the cottage chimney, and every day going down the hill on her way to the store she hesitated past the cottage, watching carefully for the least movement within. The cottage had been sold in January and now, nearly two months later, even though it seemed prettier and less worn with the snow gently covering the overgrown garden and icicles in front of the blank windows, it was still forlorn and empty, despised since the day long ago when Mrs. Winning had given up all hope of ever living there.

Mrs. Winning deposited the napkins in the pantry and turned to tear the leaf off the kitchen calendar before selecting a dish towel and joining her mother-in-law at the sink. “March already,” she said despondently.

“They *did* tell me down at the store yesterday,” her mother-in-law said, “that they were going to start painting the cottage this week.”

“Then that *must* mean someone’s coming!”

“Can’t take more than a couple of weeks to paint inside that little house,” old Mrs. Winning said.

It was almost April, however, before the new people moved in. The snow had almost melted and was running down the street in icy, half-solid rivers. The ground was slushy and miserable to walk on, the skies grey and dull. In another month the first amazing green would start in the trees and on the ground, but for the better part of April there would be cold rain and perhaps more snow. The cottage had been painted inside, and new paper put on the walls. The front steps had been repaired and new glass put into the broken windows. In spite of the grey sky and the patches of dirty snow the cottage looked neater and firmer, and the painters were coming back to do the outside when the weather cleared. Mrs. Winning, standing at the foot of the cottage walk, tried to picture the cottage as it stood now, against the picture of the cottage she had made years ago, when she had hoped to live there herself. She had wanted roses by the porch; that could be done, and the neat colorful garden she had planned. She would have painted the outside white, and that too might still be done. Since the cottage had been sold she had not gone inside, but she remembered the little rooms, with the windows over the garden that could be so bright with gay curtains and window boxes, the small kitchen she would have painted yellow, the two bedrooms upstairs with slanting ceilings under the eaves. Mrs. Winning looked at the cottage for a long time, standing on the wet walk, and then went slowly on down to the store.

The first news she had of the new people came, at last, from the grocer a few days later. As he was tieing the string around the three pounds of hamburger the large Winning family would consume in one meal, he asked cheerfully, “Seen your new neighbors yet?”

“Have they moved in?” Mrs. Winning asked. “The people in the cottage?”

“Lady in here this morning,” the grocer said. “Lady and a little boy, seem like nice people. They say her husband’s dead. Nice-looking lady.”

Mrs. Winning had been born in the town and the grocer’s father had given her jawbreakers and licorice in the grocery store while the present grocer was still in high school. For a while, when she was twelve and the grocer’s son was twenty, Mrs. Winning had hoped secretly that he would want to marry her. He was fleshy now, and middle-aged, and although he still called her Helen and she still called him Tom, she belonged now to the Winning family and had to speak critically to him, no matter how unwillingly, if the meat were tough or the butter price too high. She knew that when he spoke of the new neighbor as a “lady” he meant something different than if he had spoken of her as a “woman” or a “person.” Mrs. Winning knew that he spoke of the two Mrs. Winnings to his other customers as “ladies.” She hesitated and then asked, “Have they really moved in to stay?”

“She’ll have to stay for a while,” the grocer said drily. “Bought a week’s worth of groceries.”

Going back up the hill with her package Mrs. Winning watched all the way to detect some sign of the new people in the cottage. When she reached the cottage walk she slowed down and tried to watch not too obviously.

There was no smoke coming from the chimney, and no sign of furniture near the house, as there might have been if people were still moving in, but there was a middle-aged car parked in the street before the cottage and Mrs. Winning thought she could see figures moving past the windows. On a sudden irresistible impulse she turned and went up the walk to the front porch, and then, after debating for a moment, on up the steps to the door. She knocked, holding her bag of groceries in one arm, and then the door opened and she looked down on a little boy, about the same age, she thought happily, as her own son.

"Hello," Mrs. Winning said.

"Hello," the boy said. He regarded her soberly.

"Is your mother here?" Mrs. Winning asked. "I came to see if I could help her move in."

"We're all moved in," the boy said. He was about to close the door, but a woman's voice said from somewhere in the house, "Davey? Are you talking to someone?"

"That's my mommy," the little boy said. The woman came up behind him and opened the door a little wider. "Yes?" she said.

Mrs. Winning said, "I'm Helen Winning. I live about three houses up the street, and I thought perhaps I might be able to help you."

"Thank you," the woman said doubtfully. She's younger than I am, Mrs. Winning thought, she's about thirty. And pretty. For a clear minute Mrs. Winning saw why the grocer had called her a lady.

"It's so nice to have someone living in this house," Mrs. Winning said shyly. Past the other woman's head she could see the small hallway, with the larger living-room beyond and the door on the left going into the kitchen, the stairs on the right, with the delicate stair-rail newly painted; they had done the hall in light green, and Mrs. Winning smiled with friendship at the woman in the doorway, thinking, She *has* done it right; this is the way it should look after all, she knows about pretty houses.

After a minute the other woman smiled back, and said, “Will you come in?”

As she stepped back to let Mrs. Winning in, Mrs. Winning wondered with a suddenly stricken conscience if perhaps she had not been too forward, almost pushing herself in.…”I hope I’m not making a nuisance of myself,” she said unexpectedly, turning to the other woman. “It’s just that I’ve been wanting to live here myself for so long.” Why did I say that, she wondered; it had been a very long time since young Mrs. Winning had said the first thing that came into her head.

“Come see *my* room,” the little boy said urgently, and Mrs. Winning smiled down at him.

“I have a little boy just about your age,” she said. “What’s your name?”

“Davey,” the little boy said, moving closer to his mother. “Davey William MacLane.”

“My little boy,” Mrs. Winning said soberly, “is named Howard Talbot Winning.”

The little boy looked up at his mother uncertainly, and Mrs. Winning, who felt ill at ease and awkward in this little house she so longed for, said, “How old are you? My little boy is five.”

“I’m five,” the little boy said, as though realizing it for the first time. He looked again at his mother and she said graciously, “Will you come in and see what we’ve done to the house?”

Mrs. Winning put her bag of groceries down on the slim-legged table in the green hall, and followed Mrs. MacLane into the living-room, which was L-shaped and had the windows Mrs. Winning would have fitted with gay curtains and flower-boxes. As she stepped into the room Mrs. Winning realized, with a quick wonderful relief, that it was really going to be all right, after all. Everything, from the andirons in the fireplace to the books on the table, was exactly as Mrs. Winning might have done if she were eleven years younger; a little more informal, perhaps, nothing of quite such good quality as young Mrs. Winning might have chosen, but still richly, undeniably right. There was a picture of Davey on the mantel, flanked by a picture which Mrs. Winning supposed was Davey's father; there was a glorious blue bowl on the low coffee table, and around the corner of the L stood a row of orange plates on a shelf, and a polished maple table and chairs.

"It's lovely," Mrs. Winning said. This could have been mine, she was thinking, and she stood in the doorway and said again, "It's perfectly lovely."

Mrs. MacLane crossed over to the low armchair by the fireplace and picked up the soft blue material that lay across the arm. "I'm making curtains," she said, and touched the blue bowl with the tip of one finger. "Somehow I always make my blue bowl the center of the room," she said. "I'm having the curtains the same blue, and my rug — when it comes! — will have the same blue in the design."

"It matches Davey's eyes," Mrs. Winning said, and when Mrs. MacLane smiled again she saw that it matched Mrs. MacLane's eyes too. Helpless before so much that was magic to her, Mrs. Winning said "*Have* you painted the kitchen yellow?"

"Yes," Mrs. MacLane said, surprised. "Come and see." She led the way through the L, around past the orange plates to the kitchen, which caught the late morning sun and shone with clean paint and bright aluminum; Mrs. Winning noticed the electric coffeepot, the waffle iron, the toaster, and thought, *she* couldn't have much trouble cooking, not with just the two of them.

"When I have a garden," Mrs. MacLane said, "we'll be able to see it from almost all the windows." She gestured to the broad kitchen windows, and added, "I love gardens. I imagine I'll spend most of my time working in this one, as soon as the weather is nice."

"It's a good house for a garden," Mrs. Winning said. "I've heard that it used to be one of the prettiest gardens on the block."

"I thought so too," Mrs. MacLane said. "I'm going to have flowers on all four sides of the house. With a cottage like this you can, you know."

Oh, I know, I know, Mrs. Winning thought wistfully, remembering the neat charming garden she could have had, instead of the row of nasturtiums along the side of the Winning house, which she tended so carefully; no flowers would grow well around the Winning house, because of the heavy old maple trees which shaded all the yard and which had been tall when the house was built.

Mrs. MacLane had had the bathroom upstairs done in yellow, too, and the two small bedrooms with overhanging eaves were painted green and rose. "All garden colors," she told Mrs. Winning gaily, and Mrs. Winning, thinking of the oddly-matched, austere bedrooms in the big Winning house, sighed and admitted that it would be wonderful to have window seats under the eaved windows. Davey's bedroom was the green one, and his small bed was close to the window. "This morning," he told Mrs. Winning solemnly, "I looked out and there were four icicles hanging by my bed."

Mrs. Winning stayed in the cottage longer than she should have; she felt certain, although Mrs. MacLane was pleasant and cordial, that her visit was extended past courtesy and into curiosity. Even so, it was only her sudden guilt about the three pounds of hamburger and dinner for the Winning men that drove her away. When she left, waving good-bye to Mrs. MacLane and Davey as they stood in the cottage doorway, she had invited Davey up to play with Howard, Mrs. MacLane up for tea, both of them to come for lunch some day, and all without the permission of her mother-in-law.

Reluctantly she came to the big house and turned past the bolted front door to go up the walk to the back door, which all the family used in the winter. Her mother-in-law looked up as she came into the kitchen and said irritably, “I called the store and Tom said you left an hour ago.”

“I stopped off at the old cottage,” Mrs. Winning said. She put the package of groceries down on the table and began to take things out quickly, to get the doughnuts on to a plate and the hamburger into the pan before too much time was lost. With her coat still on and her scarf over her head she moved as fast as she could while her mother-in-law, slicing bread at the kitchen table, watched her silently.

“Take your coat off,” her mother-in-law said finally. “Your husband will be home in a minute.”

By twelve o’clock the house was noisy and full of mud tracked across the kitchen floor. The oldest Howard, Mrs. Winning’s father-in-law, came in from the farm and went silently to hang his hat and coat in the dark hall before speaking to his wife and daughter-in-law; the younger Howard, Mrs. Winning’s husband, came in from the barn after putting the truck away and nodded to his wife and kissed his mother; and the youngest Howard, Mrs. Winning’s son, crashed into the kitchen, home from kindergarten, shouting, “Where’s dinner?”

The baby, anticipating food, banged on her high-chair with the silver cup which had first been used by the oldest Howard Winning’s mother. Mrs. Winning and her mother-in-law put plates down on the table swiftly, knowing after many years the exact pause between the latest arrival and the serving of food, and with a minimum of time three generations of the Winning family were eating silently and efficiently, all anxious to be back about their work: the farm, the mill, the electric train; the dishes, the sewing, the nap. Mrs. Winning, feeding the baby, trying to anticipate her mother-in-law's gestures of serving, thought, today more poignantly than ever before, that she had at least given them another Howard, with the Winning eyes and mouth, in exchange for her food and her bed.

After dinner, after the men had gone back to work and the children were in bed, the baby for her nap and Howard resting with crayons and coloring book, Mrs. Winning sat down with her mother-in-law over their sewing and tried to describe the cottage.

"It's just perfect," she said helplessly. "Everything is so pretty. She invited us to come down some day and see it when it's all finished, the curtains and everything."

"I was talking to Mrs. Blake," the elder Mrs. Winning said, as though in agreement. "She says the husband was killed in an automobile accident. *She* had some money in her own name and I guess she decided to settle down in the country for the boy's health. Mrs. Blake said he looked peakish."

"She loves gardens," Mrs. Winning said, her needle still in her hand for a moment. "She's going to have a big garden all around the house."

"She'll need help," the elder woman said humorlessly, "that's a mighty big garden she'll have."

"She has the *most* beautiful blue bowl, Mother Winning. You'd love it, it's almost like silver."

"Probably," the elder Mrs. Winning said after a pause, "probably her people came from around here a ways back, and *that's* why she's settled in these parts."

The next day Mrs. Winning walked slowly past the cottage, and slowly the next, and the day after, and the day after that. On the second day she saw Mrs. MacLane at the window, and waved, and on the third day she met Davey on the sidewalk. “When are you coming to visit my little boy?” she asked him, and he stared at her solemnly and said, “Tomorrow.”

Mrs. Burton, next-door to the MacLanes, ran over on the third day they were there with a fresh apple pie, and then told all the neighbors about the yellow kitchen and the bright electric utensils. Another neighbor, whose husband had helped Mrs. MacLane start her furnace, explained that Mrs. MacLane was only very recently widowed. One or another of the townspeople called on the MacLanes almost daily, and frequently, as young Mrs. Winning passed, she saw familiar faces at the windows, measuring the blue curtains with Mrs. MacLane, or she waved to acquaintances who stood chatting with Mrs. MacLane on the now firm front steps. After the MacLanes had been in the cottage for about a week Mrs. Winning met them one day in the grocery and they walked up the hill together, and talked about putting Davey into the kindergarten. Mrs. MacLane wanted to keep him home as long as possible, and Mrs. Winning asked her, “Don’t you feel terribly tied down, having him with you all the time?”

“I like it,” Mrs. MacLane said cheerfully, “we keep each other company,” and Mrs. Winning felt clumsy and ill-mannered, remembering Mrs. MacLane’s widowhood.

As the weather grew warmer and the first signs of green showed on the trees and on the wet ground, Mrs. Winning and Mrs. MacLane became better friends. They met almost daily at the grocery and walked up the hill together, and twice Davey came up to play with Howard’s electric train, and once Mrs. MacLane came up to get him and stayed for a cup of coffee in the great kitchen while the boys raced round and round the table and Mrs. Winning's mother-in-law was visiting a neighbor.

"It's such an old house," Mrs. MacLane said, looking up at the dark ceiling. "I love old houses; they feel so secure and warm, as though lots of people had been perfectly satisfied with them and they *knew* how useful they were. You don't get that feeling with a new house."

"This dreary old place," Mrs. Winning said. Mrs. MacLane, with a rose-colored sweater and her bright soft hair, was a spot of color in the kitchen that Mrs. Winning knew she could never duplicate. "I'd give anything in the world to live in your house," Mrs. Winning said.

"*I* love it," Mrs. MacLane said. "I don't think I've ever been so happy. Everyone around here is so nice, and the house is so pretty, and I planted a lot of bulbs yesterday." She laughed. "I used to sit in that apartment in New York and dream about planting bulbs again."

Mrs. Winning looked at the boys, thinking how Howard was half-a-head taller, and stronger, and how Davey was small and weak and loved his mother adoringly. "It's been good for Davey already," she said. "There's color in his cheeks."

"Davey loves it," Mrs. MacLane agreed. Hearing his name Davey came over and put his head in her lap and she touched his hair, bright like her own. "We'd better be getting on home, Davey boy," she said.

"Maybe our flowers have grown some since yesterday," said Davey.

Gradually the days became miraculously long and warm, and Mrs. MacLane's garden began to show colors and became an ordered thing, still very young and unsure, but promising rich brilliance for the end of the summer, and the next summer, and summers ten years from now.

"It's even better than I hoped," Mrs. MacLane said to Mrs. Winning, standing at the garden gate. "Things grow so much better here than almost anywhere else."

Davey and Howard played daily after the school was out for the summer, and Howard was free all day. Sometimes Howard stayed at Davey's house for lunch, and they planted a vegetable patch together in the MacLane back yard. Mrs. Winning stopped for Mrs. MacLane on her way to the store in the mornings and Davey and Howard frolicked ahead of them down the street. They picked up their mail together and read it walking back up the hill, and Mrs. Winning went more cheerfully back to the big Winning house after walking most of the way home with Mrs. MacLane.

One afternoon Mrs. Winning put the baby in Howard's wagon and with the two boys they went for a long walk in the country. Mrs. MacLane picked Queen Anne's lace and put it into the wagon with the baby, and the boys found a garter snake and tried to bring it home. On the way up the hill Mrs. MacLane helped pull the wagon with the baby and the Queen Anne's lace, and they stopped halfway to rest and Mrs. MacLane said, "Look, I believe you can see my garden all the way from here."

It was a spot of color almost at the top of the hill and they stood looking at it while the baby threw the Queen Anne's lace out of the wagon. Mrs. MacLane said, "I always want to stop here to look at it," and then, "Who is that *beautiful* child?"

Mrs. Winning looked, and then laughed. "He *is* attractive, isn't he," she said. "It's Billy Jones." She looked at him herself, carefully, trying to see him as Mrs. MacLane would. He was a boy about twelve, sitting quietly on a wall across the street, with his chin in his hands, silently watching Davey and Howard.

"He's like a young statue," Mrs. MacLane said. "So brown, and will you look at that face?" She started to walk again to see him more clearly, and Mrs. Winning followed her. "Do I know his mother and fath —?"

"The Jones children are half-Negro," Mrs. Winning said hastily. "But they're all beautiful children; you should see the girl. They live just outside town."

Howard's voice reached them clearly across the summer air. "Nigger," he was saying, "nigger, nigger boy."

"Nigger," Davey repeated, giggling.

Mrs. MacLane gasped, and then said, *"Davey,"* in a voice that made Davey turn his head apprehensively; Mrs. Winning had never heard her friend use such a voice, and she too watched Mrs. MacLane.

"Davey," Mrs. MacLane said again, and Davey approached slowly. "What did I hear you say?"

"Howard," Mrs. Winning said, "leave Billy alone."

"Go tell that boy you're sorry," Mrs. MacLane said. "Go at once and tell him you're sorry."

Davey blinked tearfully at his mother and then went to the curb and called across the street, "I'm sorry."

Howard and Mrs. Winning waited uneasily, and Billy Jones across the street raised his head from his hands and looked at Davey and then, for a long time, at Mrs. MacLane. Then he put his chin on his hands again.

Suddenly Mrs. MacLane called, "Young man — Will you come here a minute, please?"

Mrs. Winning was surprised, and stared at Mrs. MacLane, but when the boy across the street did not move Mrs. Winning said sharply, "Billy! Billy Jones! Come here at once!"

The boy raised his head and looked at them, and then slid slowly down from the wall and started across the street. When he was across the street and about five feet from them he stopped, waiting.

"Hello," Mrs. MacLane said gently, "what's your name?"

The boy looked at her for a minute and then at Mrs. Winning, and Mrs. Winning said, “He’s Billy Jones. Answer when you’re spoken to, Billy.”

“Billy,” Mrs. MacLane said, “I’m sorry my little boy called you a name, but he’s very little and he doesn’t always know what he’s saying. But he’s sorry, too.”

“Okay,” Billy said, still watching Mrs. Winning. He was wearing an old pair of blue jeans and a torn white shirt, and he was barefoot. His skin and hair were the same color, the golden shade of a very heavy tan, and his hair curled lightly; he had the look of a garden statue.

“Billy,” Mrs. MacLane said, “how would you like to come and work for me? Earn some money?”

“Sure,” Billy said.

“Do you like gardening?” Mrs. MacLane asked. Billy nodded soberly. “Because,” Mrs. MacLane went on enthusiastically, “I’ve been needing someone to help me with my garden, and it would be just the thing for you to do.” She waited a minute and then said, “Do you know where I live?”

“Sure,” Billy said. He turned his eyes away from Mrs. Winning and for a minute looked at Mrs. MacLane, his brown eyes expressionless. Then he looked back at Mrs. Winning, who was watching Howard up the street.

“Fine,” Mrs. MacLane said. “Will you come tomorrow?”

“Sure,” Billy said. He waited for a minute, looking from Mrs. MacLane to Mrs. Winning, and then ran back across the street and vaulted over the wall where he had been sitting. Mrs. MacLane watched him admiringly. Then she smiled at Mrs. Winning and gave the wagon a tug to start it up the hill again. They were nearly at the MacLane cottage before Mrs. MacLane finally spoke. “I just can’t stand that,” she said, “to hear children attacking people for things they can’t help.”

“They’re strange people, the Joneses,” Mrs. Winning said readily. “The father works around as a handyman; maybe you’ve seen him. You see—” she dropped her voice— “the mother was white, a girl from around here. A local girl,” she said again, to make it more clear to a foreigner. “She left the whole litter of them when Billy was about two, and went off with a white man.”

“Poor children,” Mrs. MacLane said.

“*They’re* all right,” Mrs. Winning said. “The church takes care of them, of course, and people are always giving them things. The girl’s old enough to work now, too. She’s sixteen, but.…”

“But what?” Mrs. MacLane said, when Mrs. Winning hesitated.

“Well, people talk about her a lot, you know,” Mrs. Winning said. “Think of her mother, after all. And there’s another boy, couple of years older than Billy.”

They stopped in front of the MacLane cottage and Mrs. MacLane touched Davey’s hair. “Poor unfortunate child,” she said.

“Children *will* call names,” Mrs. Winning said. “There’s not much you can do.”

“Well…” Mrs. MacLane said. “Poor child.”

The next day, after the dinner dishes were washed, and while Mrs. Winning and her mother-in-law were putting them away, the elder Mrs. Winning said casually, “Mrs. Blake tells me your friend Mrs. MacLane was asking around the neighbors how to get hold of the Jones boy.”

“She wants someone to help in the garden, I think,” Mrs. Winning said weakly. “She needs help in that big garden.”

“Not *that* kind of help,” the elder Mrs. Winning said. “You tell her about them?”

"She seemed to feel sorry for them," Mrs. Winning said, from the depths of the pantry. She took a long time settling the plates in even stacks in order to neaten her mind. She *shouldn't* have done it, she was thinking, but her mind refused to tell her why. She should have asked me first, though, she thought finally.

The next day Mrs. Winning stopped off at the cottage with Mrs. MacLane after coming up the hill from the store. They sat in the yellow kitchen and drank coffee, while the boys played in the back yard. While they were discussing the possibilities of hammocks between the apple trees there was a knock at the kitchen door and when Mrs. MacLane opened it she found a man standing there, so that she said, "Yes?" politely, and waited.

"Good morning," the man said. He took off his hat and nodded his head at Mrs. MacLane. "Billy told me you was looking for someone to work your garden," he said.

"Why…" Mrs. MacLane began, glancing sideways uneasily at Mrs. Winning.

"I'm Billy's father," the man said. He nodded his head toward the back yard and Mrs. MacLane saw Billy Jones sitting under one of the apple trees, his arms folded in front of him, his eyes on the grass at his feet.

"How do you do," Mrs. MacLane said inadequately.

"Billy told me you said for him to come work your garden," the man said. "Well, now, I think maybe a summer job's too much for a boy his age, he ought to be out playing in the good weather. And that's the kind of work I do anyway, so's I thought I'd just come over and see if you found anyone yet."

He was a big man, very much like Billy, except that where Billy's hair curled only a little, his father's hair curled tightly, with a line around his head where his hat stayed constantly and where Billy's skin was a golden tan, his father's skin was darker, almost bronze. When he moved, it was gracefully, like Billy, and his eyes were the same fathomless brown. "Like to work this garden," Mr. Jones said, looking around. "Could be a mighty nice place."

"You were very nice to come," Mrs. MacLane said. "I certainly do need help."

Mrs. Winning sat silently, not wanting to speak in front of Mr. Jones. She was thinking, I wish she'd ask me first, this is impossible…and Mr. Jones stood silently, listening courteously, with his dark eyes on Mrs. MacLane while she spoke. "I guess a lot of the work would be too much for a boy like Billy," she said. "There are a lot of things I can't even do myself, and I was sort of hoping I could get someone to give me a hand."

"That's fine, then," Mr. Jones said. "Guess I can manage most of it," he said, and smiled.

"Well," Mrs. MacLane said, "I guess that's all settled, then. When do you want to start?"

"How about right now?" he said.

"Grand," Mrs. MacLane said enthusiastically, and then, "Excuse me for a minute," to Mrs. Winning over her shoulder. She took down her gardening gloves and wide straw hat from the shelf by the door. "Isn't it a lovely day?" she asked Mr. Jones as she stepped out into the garden while he stood back to let her pass.

"You go along home now, Bill," Mr. Jones called as they went toward the side of the house.

"Oh, why not let him stay?" Mrs. MacLane said. Mrs. Winning heard her voice going on as they went out of sight. "He can play around the garden, and he'd probably enjoy…"

For a minute Mrs. Winning sat looking at the garden, at the corner around which Mr. Jones had followed Mrs. MacLane, and then Howard's face appeared around the side of the door and he said, "Hi, is it nearly time to eat?"

"Howard," Mrs. Winning said quietly, and he came in through the door and came over to her. "It's time for you to run along home," Mrs. Winning said. "I'll be along in a minute."

Howard started to protest, but she added, "I want you to go right away. Take my bag of groceries if you think you can carry it."

Howard was impressed by her conception of his strength, and he lifted down the bag of groceries; his shoulders, already broad out of proportion, like his father's and his grandfather's, strained under the weight, and then he steadied on his feet. "Aren't I strong?" he asked exultantly.

"*Very* strong," Mrs. Winning said. "Tell Grandma I'll be right up. I'll just say good-bye to Mrs. MacLane."

Howard disappeared through the house; Mrs. Winning heard him walking heavily under the groceries, out through the open front door and down the steps. Mrs. Winning rose and was standing by the kitchen door when Mrs. MacLane came back.

"You're not ready to go?" Mrs. MacLane exclaimed when she saw Mrs. Winning with her jacket on. "Without finishing your coffee?"

"I'd better catch Howard," Mrs. Winning said. "He ran along ahead."

"I'm sorry I left you like that," Mrs. MacLane said. She stood in the doorway beside Mrs. Winning, looking out into the garden. "How *wonderful* it all is," she said, and laughed happily.

They walked together through the house; the blue curtains were up by now, and the rug with the touch of blue in the design was on the floor.

"Good-bye," Mrs. Winning said on the front steps.

Mrs. MacLane was smiling, and following her look Mrs. Winning turned and saw Mr. Jones, his shirt off and his strong back shining in the sun as he bent with a scythe over the long grass at the side of the house. Billy lay nearby, under the shade of the bushes; he was playing with a grey kitten. “I’m going to have the finest garden in town,” Mrs. MacLane said proudly.

“You won’t have him working here past today, will you?” Mrs. Winning asked. “Of course you won’t have him any longer than just today?”

“But surely—” Mrs. MacLane began, with a tolerant smile, and Mrs. Winning, after looking at her for an incredulous minute, turned and started, indignant and embarrassed, up the hill.

Howard had brought the groceries safely home and her mother-in-law was already setting the table.

“Howard says you sent him home from MacLane’s,” her mother-in-law said, and Mrs. Winning answered briefly, “I thought it was getting late.”

The next morning when Mrs. Winning reached the cottage on her way down to the store she saw Mr. Jones swinging the scythe expertly against the side of the house, and Billy Jones and Davey sitting on the front steps watching him. “Good morning, Davey,” Mrs. Winning called, “is your mother ready to go downstreet?”

“Where’s Howard?” Davey asked, not moving.

“He stayed home with his grandma today,” Mrs. Winning said brightly. “Is your mother ready?”

“She’s making lemonade for Billy and me,” Davey said. “We’re going to have it in the garden.”

“Then tell her,” Mrs. Winning said quickly, “tell her that I said I was in a hurry and that I had to go on ahead. I’ll see her later.” She hurried on down the hill.

In the store she met Mrs. Harris, a lady whose mother had worked for the elder Mrs. Winning nearly forty years before. “Helen,” Mrs. Harris said, “you get greyer every year. You ought to stop all this running around.”

Mrs. Winning, in the store without Mrs. MacLane for the first time in weeks, smiled shyly and said that she guessed she needed a vacation.

“Vacation!” Mrs. Harris said. “Let that husband of yours do the housework for a change. He doesn’t have nuthin’ else to do.”

She laughed richly, and shook her head. “Nuthin’ else to do,” she said. “The Winnings!”

Before Mrs. Winning could step away Mrs. Harris added, her laughter penetrated by a sudden sharp curiosity: “Where’s that dressed-up friend of yours get to? Usually downstreet together, ain’t you?”

Mrs. Winning smiled courteously, and Mrs. Harris said, laughing again, “Just couldn’t believe those shoes of hers, first time I seen them. Them shoes!”

While she was laughing again Mrs. Winning escaped to the meat counter and began to discuss the potentialities of pork shoulder earnestly with the grocer. Mrs. Harris only says what everyone else says, she was thinking, are they talking like that about Mrs. MacLane? Are they laughing at her? When she thought of Mrs. MacLane she thought of the quiet house, the soft colors, the mother and son in the garden; Mrs. MacLane’s shoes were green and yellow platform sandals, odd-looking certainly next to Mrs. Winning’s solid white oxfords, but so inevitably right for Mrs. MacLane’s house, and her garden.…Mrs. Harris came up behind her and said, laughing again, “What’s she got, that Jones fellow working for her now?”

When Mrs. Winning reached home, after hurrying up the hill past the cottage, where she saw no one, her mother-in-law was waiting for her in front of the house, watching her come the last few yards. “Early enough today,” her mother-in-law said. “MacLane out of town?”

Resentful, Mrs. Winning said only, “Mrs. Harris nearly drove me out of the store, with her jokes.”

“Nothing wrong with Lucy Harris getting away from that man of hers wouldn’t cure,” the elder Mrs. Winning said. Together, they began to walk around the house to the back door. Mrs. Winning, as they walked, noticed that the grass under the trees had greened up nicely, and that the nasturtiums beside the house were bright.

“I’ve got something to say to you, Helen,” the elder Mrs. Winning said finally.

“Yes?” her daughter-in-law said.

“It’s the MacLane girl, about her, I mean. You know her so well, you ought to talk to her about that colored man working there.”

“I suppose so,” Mrs. Winning said.

“You *sure* you told her? You told her about those people?”

“I told her,” Mrs. Winning said.

“He’s there every blessed day,” her mother-in-law said. “And working out there without his shirt on. He goes in the house.”

And that evening Mr. Burton, next-door neighbor to Mrs. MacLane, dropped in to see the Howard Winnings about getting a new lot of shingles at the mill; he turned, suddenly, to Mrs. Winning, who was sitting sewing next to her mother-in-law at the table in the front room, and raised his voice a little when he said, “Helen, I wish you’d tell your friend Mrs. MacLane to keep that kid of hers out of my vegetables.”

“Davey?” Mrs. Winning said involuntarily.

“No,” Mr. Burton said, while all the Winnings looked at the younger Mrs. Winning, “no, the other one, the colored boy. He’s been running loose through our back yard. Makes me sort of mad, that kid coming in spoiling other people's property. You know," he added, turning to the Howard Winnings, "you know, that does make a person mad." There was a silence, and then Mr. Burton added, rising heavily, "Guess I'll say good-night to you people."

They all attended him to the door and came back to their work in silence. I've got to do something, Mrs. Winning was thinking, pretty soon they'll stop coming to me first, they'll tell someone else to speak to *me.* She looked up, found her mother-in-law looking at her, and they both looked down quickly.

Consequently Mrs. Winning went to the store the next morning earlier than usual, and she and Howard crossed the street just above the MacLane house, and went down the hill on the other side.

"Aren't we going to see Davey?" Howard asked once, and Mrs. Winning said carelessly, "Not today, Howard. Maybe your father will take you out to the mill this afternoon."

She avoided looking across the street at the MacLane house, and hurried to keep up with Howard.

Mrs. Winning met Mrs. MacLane occasionally after that at the store or the post office, and they spoke pleasantly. When Mrs. Winning passed the cottage after the first week or so, she was no longer embarrassed about going by, and even looked at it frankly once or twice. The garden was going beautifully; Mr. Jones's broad back was usually visible through the bushes, and Billy Jones sat on the steps or lay on the grass with Davey.

One morning on her way down the hill Mrs. Winning heard a conversation between Davey MacLane and Billy Jones; they were in the bushes together and she heard Davey's high familiar voice saying, "Billy, you want to build a house with me today?"

“Okay,” Billy said. Mrs. Winning slowed her steps a little to hear.

“We’ll build a big house out of branches,” Davey said excitedly, “and when it’s finished we’ll ask my mommy if we can have lunch out there.”

“You can’t build a house just out of branches,” Billy said. “You ought to have wood, and boards.”

“And chairs and tables and dishes,” Davey agreed. “And walls.”

“Ask your mommy can we have two chairs out here,” Billy said. “Then we can pretend the whole garden is our house.”

“And I’ll get us some cookies, too,” Davey said. “And we’ll ask my mommy and your daddy to come in our house.” Mrs. Winning heard them shouting as she went down along the sidewalk.

You have to admit, she told herself as though she were being strictly just, you have to admit that he’s doing a lot with that garden; it’s the prettiest garden on the street. And Billy acts as though he had as much right there as Davey.

As the summer wore on into long hot days undistinguishable one from another, so that it was impossible to tell with any real accuracy whether the light shower had been yesterday or the day before, the Winnings moved out into their yard to sit after supper, and in the warm darkness Mrs. Winning sometimes found an opportunity of sitting next to her husband so that she could touch his arm; she was never able to teach Howard to run to her and put his head in her lap, or inspire him with other than the perfunctory Winning affection, but she consoled herself with the thought that at least they were a family, a solid respectable thing.

The hot weather kept up, and Mrs. Winning began to spend more time in the store, postponing the long aching walk up the hill in the sun. She stopped and chatted with the grocer, with other young mothers in the town, with older friends of her mother-in-law’s, talking about the weather, the reluctance of the town to put in a decent swimming pool, the work that had to be done before school started in the fall, chickenpox, the P.T.A. One morning she met Mrs. Burton in the store, and they spoke of their husbands, the heat, and the hot-weather occupations of their children before Mrs. Burton said: “By the way, Johnny will be six on Saturday and he’s having a birthday party; can Howard come?”

“Wonderful,” Mrs. Winning said, thinking, His good white shorts, the dark blue shirt, a carefully-wrapped present.

“Just about eight children,” Mrs. Burton said, with the loving carelessness mothers use in planning the birthday parties of their children. “They’ll stay for supper, of course — send Howard down about three-thirty.”

“That sounds so nice,” Mrs. Winning said. “He’ll be delighted when I tell him.”

“I thought I’d have them all play outdoors most of the time,” Mrs. Burton said. “In this weather. And then perhaps a few games indoors, and supper. Keep it simple — *you* know.” She hesitated, running her finger around and around the top rim of a can of coffee. “Look,” she said, “I hope you won’t mind me asking, but would it be all right with you if I didn’t invite the MacLane boy?”

Mrs. Winning felt sick for a minute, and had to wait for her voice to even out before she said lightly, “It’s all right with me if it’s all right with *you;* why do you have to ask *me*?”

Mrs. Burton laughed. “I just thought you might mind if he didn’t come.”

Mrs. Winning was thinking. Something bad has happened, somehow people think they know something about me that they won’t say, they all pretend it’s nothing, but this never happened to me before; I live with the Winnings, don’t I? “Really,” she said, putting the weight of the old Winning house into her voice, “why in the *world* would it bother me?” Did I take it too seriously, she was wondering, did I seem too anxious, should I have let it go?

Mrs. Burton was embarrassed, and she set the can of coffee down on the shelf and began to examine the other shelves studiously. “I’m sorry I mentioned it at all,” she said.

Mrs. Winning felt that she had to say something further, something to state her position with finality, so that no longer would Mrs. Burton, at least, dare to use such a tone to a Winning, presume to preface a question with “I hope you don’t mind me asking.” “After all,” Mrs. Winning said carefully, weighing the words, “she’s like a second mother to Billy.”

Mrs. Burton, turning to look at Mrs. Winning for confirmation, grimaced and said, “Good Lord, Helen!”

Mrs. Winning shrugged and then smiled and Mrs. Burton smiled and then Mrs. Winning said, “I do feel so sorry for the little boy, though.”

Mrs. Burton said, “Such a sweet little thing, too.”

Mrs. Winning had just said, “He and Billy are together *all* the time now,” when she looked up and saw Mrs. MacLane regarding her from the end of the aisle of shelves; it was impossible to tell whether she had heard them or not. For a minute Mrs. Winning looked steadily back at Mrs. MacLane, and then she said, with just the right note of cordiality, “Good morning, Mrs. MacLane. Where is your little boy this morning?”

“Good morning, Mrs. Winning,” Mrs. MacLane said, and moved on past the aisle of shelves, and Mrs. Burton caught Mrs. Winning’s arm and made a desperate gesture of hiding her face and, unable to help themselves, both she and Mrs. Winning began to laugh.

Soon after that, although the grass in the Winning yard under the maple trees stayed smooth and green, Mrs. Winning began to notice in her daily trips past the cottage that Mrs. MacLane’s garden was suffering from the heat. The flowers wilted under the morning sun, and no longer stood up fresh and bright; the grass was browning slightly and the rose bushes Mrs. MacLane had put in so optimistically were noticeably dying. Mr. Jones seemed always cool, working steadily; sometimes bent down with his hands in the earth, sometimes tall against the side of the house, setting up a trellis or pruning a tree, but the blue curtains hung lifelessly at the windows. Mrs. MacLane still smiled at Mrs. Winning in the store, and then one day they met at the gate of Mrs. MacLane’s garden and, after hesitating for a minute, Mrs. MacLane said, “Can you come in for a few minutes? I’d like to have a talk, if you have time.”

“Surely,” Mrs. Winning said courteously, and followed Mrs. MacLane up the walk, still luxuriously bordered with flowering bushes, but somehow disenchanted, as though the summer heat had baked away the vivacity from the ground. In the familiar living-room Mrs. Winning sat down on a straight chair, holding herself politely stiff, while Mrs. MacLane sat as usual in her armchair.

“How is Davey?” Mrs. Winning asked finally, since Mrs. MacLane did not seem disposed to start any conversation.

“He’s very well,” Mrs. MacLane said, and smiled as she always did when speaking of Davey. “He’s out back with Billy.”

There was a quiet minute, and then Mrs. MacLane said, staring at the blue bowl on the coffee table, “What I wanted to ask you is, what on earth is gone wrong?”

Mrs. Winning had been holding herself stiff in readiness for some such question, and when she said, “I don’t know what you mean,” she thought, I sound exactly like Mother Winning, and realized, I’m enjoying this, just as *she* would; and no matter what she thought of herself she was unable to keep from adding, “*Is* something wrong?”

“Of course,” Mrs. MacLane said. She stared at the blue bowl, and said slowly, “When I first came, everyone was so nice, and they seemed to like Davey and me and want to help us.”

That’s wrong, Mrs. Winning was thinking, you mustn’t ever talk about whether people like you, that’s bad taste.

“And the garden was going so well,” Mrs. MacLane said helplessly. “And now, no one ever does more than just speak to us — I used to say ‘Good morning’ over the fence to Mrs. Burton, and she’d come to the fence and we’d talk about the garden, and now she just says ‘Morning’ and goes in the house — and no one ever smiles, or anything.”

This is dreadful, Mrs. Winning thought, this is childish, this is complaining. People treat you as you treat them, she thought; she wanted desperately to go over and take Mrs. MacLane’s hand and ask her to come back and be one of the nice people again; but she only sat straighter in the chair and said, “I’m sure you must be mistaken. I’ve never heard anyone speak of it.”

“*Are* you sure?” Mrs. MacLane turned and looked at her. “Are you sure it isn’t because of Mr. Jones working here?”

Mrs. Winning lifted her chin a little higher and said, “Why on earth would anyone around here be rude to you because of Jones?”

Mrs. MacLane came with her to the door, both of them planning vigorously for the days some time next week, when they would all go swimming, when they would have a picnic, and Mrs. Winning went down the hill thinking, The nerve of her, trying to blame the colored folks.

Toward the end of the summer there was a bad thunderstorm, breaking up the prolonged hot spell. It raged with heavy wind and rain over the town all night, sweeping without pity through the trees, pulling up young bushes and flowers ruthlessly; a barn was struck on one side of town, the wires pulled down on another. In the morning Mrs. Winning opened the back door to find the Winning yard littered with small branches from the maples, the grass bent almost flat to the ground.

Her mother-in-law came to the door behind her. “Quite a storm,” she said, “did it wake you?”

“I woke up once and went to look at the children,” Mrs. Winning said. “It must have been about three o’clock.”

“I was up later,” her mother-in-law said. “I looked at the children too; they were both asleep.”

They turned together and went in to start breakfast.

Later in the day Mrs. Winning started down to the store; she had almost reached the MacLane cottage when she saw Mrs. MacLane standing in the front garden with Mr. Jones standing beside her and Billy Jones with Davey in the shadows of the front porch. They were all looking silently at a great branch from one of the Burtons’ trees that lay across the center of the garden, crushing most of the flowering bushes and pinning down what was to have been a glorious tulip bed. As Mrs. Winning stopped, watching, Mrs. Burton came out on to her front porch to survey the storm-damage, and Mrs. MacLane called to her, “Good morning, Mrs. Burton, it looks like we have part of your tree over here.”

“Looks so,” Mrs. Burton said, and she went back into her house and closed the door flatly.

Mrs. Winning watched while Mrs. MacLane stood quietly for a minute. Then she looked up at Mr. Jones almost hopefully and she and Mr. Jones looked at one another for a long time. Then Mrs. MacLane said, her clear voice carrying lightly across the air washed clean by the storm: “Do you think I ought to give it up, Mr. Jones? Go back to the city where I'll never have to see another garden?"

Mr. Jones shook his head despondently, and Mrs. MacLane, her shoulders tired, went slowly over and sat on her front steps and Davey came and sat next to her. Mr. Jones took hold of the great branch angrily and tried to move it, shaking it and pulling until his shoulders tensed with the strength he was bringing to bear, but the branch only gave slightly and stayed, clinging to the garden.

"Leave it alone, Mr. Jones," Mrs. MacLane said finally. "Leave it for the next people to move!"

But still Mr. Jones pulled against the branch, and then suddenly Davey stood up and cried out, 'There's Mrs. Winning! Hi, Mrs. Winning!'

Mrs. MacLane and Mr. Jones both turned, and Mrs. Mac-Lane waved and called out, "Hello!"

Mrs. Winning swung around without speaking and started, with great dignity, back up the hill toward the old Winning house.

DOROTHY AND MY GRANDMOTHER AND THE SAILORS

THERE USED TO BE a time of year in San Francisco — in late March, I believe — when there was fine long windy weather, and the air all over the city had a touch of salt and the freshness of the sea. And then, some time after the wind first started, you could look around Market Street and Van Ness and Kearney, and the fleet was in. That, of course, was some time ago, but you could look out around the Golden Gate, unbridged at that time, and there would be the battleships. There may have been aircraft carriers and destroyers, and I believe I recall one submarine, but to Dot and me then they were battleships, all of them. They would be riding out there on the water, quiet and competently grey, and the streets would be full of sailors, walking with the roll of the sea and looking in shop windows.

I never knew what the fleet came in for; my grandmother said positively that it was for refueling; but from the time the wind first started, Dot and I would become more aware, walking closer together, and dropping our voices when we talked. Although we were all of thirty miles from where the fleet lay, when we walked with our backs to the ocean we could feel the battleships riding somewhere behind and beyond us, and when we looked toward the ocean we narrowed our eyes, almost able to see across thirty miles and into a sailor’s face.

It *was* the sailors, of course. My mother told us about the kind of girls who followed sailors, and my grandmother told us about the kind of sailors who followed girls. When we told Dot’s mother the fleet was in, she would say earnestly, “Don’t go near any sailors, you two.” Once, when Dot and I were about twelve, and the fleet was in, my mother stood us up and looked at us intensely for a minute, and then she turned around to my grandmother and said, “I don’t approve of young girls going to the movies alone at night,” and my grandmother said, “Nonsense, they won’t come this far down the peninsula; I *know* sailors.”

Dot and I were permitted only one movie at night a week, anyway, and even then they sent my ten-year-old brother along with us. The first time the three of us started off to the movies together my mother looked at Dot and me again and then speculatively at my brother, who had red curly hair, and started to say something, and then looked at my grandmother and changed her mind.

We lived in Burlingame, which is far enough away from San Francisco to have palm trees in the gardens, but near enough so that Dot and I were taken into San Francisco, to the Emporium, to get our spring coats each year. Dot’s mother usually gave Dot her coat money, which Dot handed over to my mother, and then Dot and I got identical coats, with my mother officiating. This was because Dot’s mother was never well enough to go into San Francisco shopping, and particularly not with Dot and me. Consequently every year, some time after the wind started and the fleet came in, Dot and I, in service-weight silk stockings which we kept for that occasion, and each with a cardboard pocketbook containing a mirror, a dime for luck, and a chiffon handkerchief caught at one side and hanging down, got into the back seat of my mother’s car with my mother and grandmother in the front, and headed for San Francisco and the fleet.

We always got our coats in the morning, went to the Pig’n’-Whistle for lunch, and then, while Dot and I were finishing our chocolate ice cream with chocolate sauce and walnuts, my grandmother phoned my Uncle Oliver and arranged to meet him at the launch which took us out to the fleet.

My Uncle Oliver was taken along partly because he was a man and partly because in the previous war he had been a radio operator on a battleship and partly because another uncle of mine, an Uncle Paul, was still with the Navy (my grandmother thought he had something to do with a battleship named the *Santa Volita,* or *Bonita,* or possibly *Carmelita*) and my Uncle Oliver was handy for asking people who looked like they might know my Uncle Paul if they did know him. As soon as we got on a boat my grandmother would say, as though she had never thought of it before, "Look, that one over there seems to be an officer; Ollie, just go over casually and ask him if he knows old Paul."

Oliver, having been one himself, didn't think that sailors were particularly dangerous to Dot and me if we had my mother and my grandmother with us, but he loved ships, and so he went with us and left us the minute we were on board; while we stepped cautiously over the clean decks eyeing the lifeboats apprehensively, my Uncle Oliver would touch the grey paint affectionately and go off in search of the radio apparatus.

When we met my Uncle Oliver at the launch he would usually buy Dot and me an ice-cream cone each and on the launch he would point out various boats around and name them for us. He usually got into a conversation with the sailor running the launch, and sooner or later he managed to say modestly, "I was to sea, back in '17," and the sailor would nod respectfully. When it came time for us to leave the launch and go up a stairway on to the battleship, my mother whispered to Dot and me, "Keep your skirts down," and Dot and I climbed the ladder, holding on with one hand and with the other wrapping our skirts tight around us into a bunch in front which we held on to. My grandmother always preceded us onto the battleship and my mother and Uncle Oliver followed us. When we got on board my mother took one of us by the arm and my grandmother took the other and we walked slowly around all of the ship they allowed us to see, excepting only the lowest levels, which alarmed my grandmother. We looked solemnly at cabins, decks which my grandmother said were aft, and lights which she said were port (both sides were port to my grandmother; she believed that starboard was up, in the sense that the highest mast always pointed at the north star.) Usually we saw cannon — all guns were cannon — which my Uncle Oliver, in what must have been harmless teasing, assured my grandmother were kept loaded all the time. “In case of mutiny,” he told my grandmother.

There were always a great many sight-seers on the battleships, and my Uncle Oliver was fond of gathering a little group of boys and young men around him to explain how the radio system worked. When he said he had been a radio operator back in ’17 someone was sure to ask him, “Did you ever send out an S.O.S.?” and my Uncle Oliver would nod heavily, and say, “But I’m still here to tell about it.”

Once, while my Uncle Oliver was telling about ’17 and my mother and my grandmother and Dot were looking over the rail at the ocean, I saw a dress that looked like my mother’s and followed it for quite a way down the battleship before the lady turned around and I realized that it was not my mother and I was lost. Remembering what my grandmother had told me, that I was always safe if I didn’t lose my head, I stood still and looked around until I isolated a tall man in a uniform with lots of braid. That will be a captain, I thought, and he will certainly take care of me. He was very polite. I told him I was lost and thought my mother and my grandmother and my friend Dot and my Uncle Oliver were down the boat a ways but I was afraid to go back alone. He said he would help me find them, and he took my arm and led me down the boat. Before very long we met my mother and my grandmother hurrying along looking for me with Dot coming along behind them as fast as she could. When my grandmother saw me she ran forward and seized my arm, pulling me away from the captain and shaking me. “You gave us the scare of our lives,” she said.

“She was just lost, that’s all,” the captain said.

“I’m glad we found her in time,” my grandmother said, walking backward with me to my mother.

The captain bowed and went away, and my mother took my other arm and shook me. “Aren’t you ashamed?” she said. Dot stared at me solemnly.

“But he was a captain—” I began.

“He might have *said* he was a captain,” my grandmother said, “but he was a marine.”

“A marine!” my mother said, looking over the side to see if the launch was there to take us back. “Get Oliver and tell him we’ve seen enough,” she said to my grandmother.

Because of what happened that evening, that was the last year we were allowed to see the fleet. We dropped Uncle Oliver off at home, as usual, and my mother and my grandmother took Dot and me to the Merry-Go-Round for dinner. We always had dinner in San Francisco after the fleet, and went to a movie and got home to Burlingame late in the evening. We always had dinner in the Merry-Go-Round, where the food came along on a moving platform and you grabbed it as it went by. We went there because Dot and I loved it, and next to the battleships it was the most dangerous place in San Francisco, because you had to pay fifteen cents for every dish you took and didn’t finish, and Dot and I were expected to pay for these mistakes out of our allowances. This last evening Dot and I lost forty-five cents, mainly because of a mocha cream dessert that Dot hadn’t known was full of coconut. The movie Dot and I chose was full, although the usher outside told my grandmother there were plenty of seats. My mother refused to wait in line to get our money back, so my grandmother said we had to go on in and take our chances on seats. As soon as two seats were vacant my grandmother shoved Dot and me toward them, and we sat down. The picture was well under way when the two seats next to Dot emptied, and we were looking for my grandmother and my mother when Dot looked around suddenly and then grabbed my arm. “Look,” she said in a sort of groan, and there were two sailors coming along the row of seats toward the empty ones. They reached the seats just as my mother and grandmother got down to the other end of the row, and my grandmother had just time to say loudly, “You leave those girls alone,” when two seats a few aisles away were vacated and they had to go sit down.

Dot moved far over in her seat next to me and clung to my arm.

“What are they doing?” I whispered.

“They’re just sitting there,” Dot said. “What do you think I ought to do?”

I leaned cautiously around Dot and looked. “Don’t pay any attention,” I said. “Maybe they’ll go away.”

“*You* can talk,” Dot said tragically, “they’re not next to *you.*”

“I’m next to *you,*” I said reasonably, “that’s pretty close.”

“What are they doing now?” Dot asked.

I leaned forward again. “They’re looking at the picture,” I said.

“I can’t stand it,” Dot said. “I want to go home.”

Panic overwhelmed both of us at once, and fortunately my mother and my grandmother saw us running up the aisle and caught us outside.

“What did they say?” my grandmother demanded. “I’ll tell the usher.”

My mother said if Dot would calm down enough to talk she would take us into the tea room next door and get us each a hot chocolate. When we got inside and were sitting down we told my mother and my grandmother we were fine now and instead of a hot chocolate we would have a chocolate sundae apiece. Dot had even started to cheer up a little when the door of the tea room opened and two sailors walked in. With one wild bound Dot was in back of my grandmother's chair, cowering and clutching my grandmother's arm. "Don't let them get me," she wailed.

"They followed us," my mother said tautly.

My grandmother put her arms around Dot. "Poor child," she said, "you're safe with us."

Dot had to stay at my house that night. We sent my brother over to Dot's mother to tell her that Dot was staying with me and that Dot had bought a grey tweed coat with princess lines, very practical and warmly interlined. She wore it all that year.

PART III

THE CONFESSION OF *Margaret Jackson,* relict of *Tho. Stuart* in *Shaws,* who being examined by the Justices anent her being guilty of Witchcraft, declares…That forty years ago, or thereabout, she was at *Pollockshaw-croft,* with some few sticks on her back, and that the black Man came to her, and that she did give up herself unto the black Man, from the top of her head to the sole of her foot; and that this was after the Declarant's renouncing of her Baptism; and that the Spirit's name, which he designed her, was *Locas.* And that about the third or fourth of *January,* instant, or thereby, in the night-time, when she awaked, she found a Man to be in bed with her, whom she supposed to be her Husband; though her Husband had been dead twenty years, or thereby, and that the Man immediately disappeared: And declares, That this Man who disappeared was the Devil.

Joseph Glanvil: Sadducismus Triumphatus

COLLOQUY

THE DOCTOR WAS competent-looking and respectable. Mrs. Arnold felt vaguely comforted by his appearance, and her agitation lessened a little. She knew that he noticed her hand shaking when she leaned forward for him to light her cigarette, and she smiled apologetically, but he looked back at her seriously.

"You seem to be upset," he said gravely.

"I'm very much upset," Mrs. Arnold said. She tried to talk slowly and intelligently. "That's one reason I came to you instead of going to Doctor Murphy — our regular doctor, that is."

The doctor frowned slightly. "My husband," Mrs. Arnold went on. "I don't want him to know that I'm worried, and Doctor Murphy would probably feel it was necessary to tell him." The doctor nodded, not committing himself, Mrs. Arnold noted.

"What seems to be the trouble?"

Mrs. Arnold took a deep breath. "Doctor," she said, "how do people tell if they're going crazy?"

The doctor looked up.

"Isn't that silly," Mrs. Arnold said. "I hadn't meant to say it like that. It's hard enough to explain anyway, without making it so dramatic."

"Insanity is more complicated than you think," the doctor said.

"I *know* it's complicated," Mrs. Arnold said. "That's the only thing I'm really *sure* of. Insanity is one of the things I mean."

"I beg your pardon?"

“That’s my trouble, Doctor.” Mrs. Arnold sat back and took her gloves out from under her pocketbook and put them carefully on top. Then she took them and put them underneath the pocketbook again.

“Suppose you just tell me all about it,” the doctor said.

Mrs. Arnold sighed. “Everyone else seems to understand,” she said, “and I don’t. Look.” She leaned forward and gestured with one hand while she spoke. “I don’t understand the way people live. It all used to be so simple. When I was a little girl I used to live in a world where a lot of other people lived too and they all lived together and things went along like that with no fuss.” She looked at the doctor. He was frowning again, and Mrs. Arnold went on, her voice rising slightly. “Look. Yesterday morning my husband stopped on his way to his office to buy a paper. He always buys the *Times* and he always buys it from the same dealer, and yesterday the dealer didn’t have a *Times* for my husband and last night when he came home for dinner he said the fish was burned and the dessert was too sweet and he sat around all evening talking to himself.”

“He could have tried to get it at another dealer,” the doctor said. “Very often dealers downtown have papers later than local dealers.”

“No,” Mrs. Arnold said, slowly and distinctly, “I guess I’d better start over. When I was a little girl—” she said. Then she stopped. “Look,” she said, “did there use to be words like psychosomatic medicine? Or international cartels? Or bureaucratic centralization?”

“Well,” the doctor began.

“What do they *mean*?” Mrs. Arnold insisted.

“In a period of international crisis,” the doctor said gently, “when you find, for instance, cultural patterns rapidly disintegrating…”

“International crisis,” Mrs. Arnold said. “Patterns.” She began to cry quietly. “He said the man had no *right* not to save him a *Times,*” she said hysterically, fumbling in her pocket for a handkerchief, “and he started talking about social planning on the local level and surtax net income and geopolitical concepts and deflationary inflation.” Mrs. Arnold’s voice rose to a wail. “He really said deflationary inflation.”

“Mrs. Arnold,” the doctor said, coming around the desk, “we’re not going to help things any this way.”

“What is going to help?” Mrs. Arnold said. “Is everyone really crazy but me?”

“Mrs. Arnold,” the doctor said severely, “I want you to get hold of yourself. In a disoriented world like ours today, alienation from reality frequently—”

“Disoriented,” Mrs. Arnold said. She stood up. “Alienation,” she said. “Reality.” Before the doctor could stop her she walked to the door and opened it. “Reality,” she said, and went out.

ELIZABETH

JUST BEFORE THE alarm went off she was lying in a hot sunny garden, with green lawns around her and stretching as far as she could see. The bell of the clock was an annoyance, a warning which had to be reckoned with; she moved uneasily in the hot sun and knew she was awake. When she opened her eyes and it was raining and she saw the white outline of the window against the grey sky, she tried to turn over and bury her face in the green grass, but it was morning and habit was lifting her up and dragging her away into the rainy dull day.

It was definitely past eight o'clock. The clock said so, the radiator was beginning to crackle, and on the street two stories below she could hear the ugly morning noises of people stirring, getting out to work. She put her feet reluctantly out from under the blankets and on to the floor, and swung herself up to sit on the edge of the bed. By the time she was standing up and in her bathrobe the day had fallen into its routine; after the first involuntary rebellion against every day's alarm she subsided regularly into the shower, make-up, dress, breakfast schedule which would take her through the beginning of the day and out into the morning where she could forget the green grass and the hot sun and begin to look forward to dinner and the evening.

Because it was raining and the day seemed unimportant she put on the first things she came to; a grey tweed suit that she knew was shapeless and heavy on her now that she was so thin, a blue blouse that never felt comfortable. She knew her own face too well to enjoy the long careful scrutiny that went with putting on make-up; toward four o'clock in the afternoon her pale narrow cheeks would warm up and fill out, and the lipstick that looked too purple with her dark hair and eyes would take on a rosier touch in spite of the blue blouse, but this morning she thought, as she had thought nearly every morning standing in front of her mirror, I wish I'd been a blonde; never realizing quite that it was because there were thin hints of grey in her hair.

She walked quickly around her one-room apartment, with a sureness that came of habit rather than conviction; after more than four years in this one home she knew all its possibilities, how it could put on a sham appearance of warmth and welcome when she needed a place to hide in, how it stood over her in the night when she woke suddenly, how it could relax itself into a disagreeable unmade, badly-put-together state, mornings like this, anxious to drive her out and go back to sleep. The book she had read the night before lay face down on the end table, the ashtray next to it dirtied: the clothes she had taken off lay over the back of a chair, to be taken to the cleaner this morning.

With her coat and hat on, she made the bed quickly, pulling it straight on top over the wrinkles beneath, stuffed the clothes to go to the cleaner into the back of the closet, and thought, I'll dust and straighten and maybe wash the bathroom tonight, come home and take a hot bath and wash my hair and do my nails; by the time she had locked the apartment door behind her and started down the stairs, she was thinking, Maybe today I'll stop in and get some bright material for slip-covers and drapes. I could make them evenings and the place wouldn't look so dreary when I wake up mornings; yellow, I could get some yellow dishes and put them along the wall in a row. Like in *Mademoiselle* or something, she told herself ironically as she stopped at the front door, the brisk young businesswoman and her one-room home. Suitable for entertaining brisk young businessmen. I wish I had something that folded up into a bookcase on one side and a Sheraton desk on the other and opened out into a dining-room table big enough to seat twelve.

While she was standing just inside the door, pulling on her gloves and hoping the rain might stop in these few seconds, the door next to the stairway opened and a woman said, “Who’s that?”

“It’s Miss Style,” she said, “Mrs. Anderson?”

The door opened wide and an old woman put her head out. “I thought it was that fellow has the apartment right over you,” she said. “I been meaning to catch him about leaving them skis outside his door. Nearly broke my leg.”

“I’ve been wishing I didn’t have to go out. It’s such a bad day.”

The old woman came out of her room and went to the front door. She pulled aside the door curtain and looked out, wrapping her arms around herself. She was wearing a dirty house dress and the sight of her made Miss Style’s grey tweed suit suddenly seem clean and warm.

“I been trying to catch that fellow for two days now,” the old woman said. “He goes in and out so quiet” She giggled, looking sideways at Miss Style. “I nearly caught that man of yours night before last,” she said. “He comes down the stairs quiet, too. I saw who it was in time,” and she giggled again. “I guess all the men come downstairs quiet. All afraid of something.”

“Well, if I’m going to go out I might as well do it,” Miss Style said. She still stood in the doorway for a minute, hesitating before walking out into the day and the rain and the people. She lived on a fairly quiet street, where later there would be children shouting at each other and on a nice day an organ-grinder, but today in the rain everything looked dirty. She hated to wear rubbers because she had graceful slim feet; on a day like this she went slowly, stepping carefully between puddles.

It was very late; there were only a few people still sitting at the counter in the corner drugstore. She sat on a stool, reconciled to the time, and waited patiently until the clerk came down the counter with her orange juice. “Hello, Tommy,” she said dismally.

“Morning, Miss Style,” he said, “lousy day.”

“Isn’t it,” she said. “A fine day not to go out.”

“I came in this morning,” Tommy said. “I would have given my right arm to stay home in bed. There ought to be a law against rain.”

Tommy was little and ugly and alert; looking at him, Miss Style thought, He has to get up and come to work in the mornings just like I do and just like everyone else in the world; the rain is just another break in the millions of lousy things, in getting up and going to work.

“I don’t mind snow,” Tommy was saying, “and I don’t mind the hot weather, but I sure do hate rain.”

He turned suddenly when someone called him, and went dancing down to the other end of the counter, bringing up with a flourish before his customer. “Lousy day, isn’t it?” he said. “Sure do wish I was in Florida.”

Miss Style drank her orange juice, remembering her dream. A sharp recollection of flowers and warmth came into her mind, and then was lost before the cold driving rain outside.

Tommy came back with her coffee and a plate of toast. “Nothing like coffee to cheer you up in the morning,” he said.

“Thanks, Tommy,” she said, unenthusiastic. “How’s your play coming, by the way?”

Tommy looked up eagerly. “Hey,” he said, “I finished it, I meant to tell you. Finished the whole thing and sent it away day before yesterday.”

Funny thing, she thought, a clerk in a drugstore, he gets up in the morning and eats and walks around and writes a play just like it was real, just like the rest of us, like me. “Fine,” she said.

“I sent it to an agent a guy told me about, he said it was the best agent he knew.”

“Tommy,” she said, “why didn’t you give it right to me?”

He laughed, looking down at the sugar bowl he was holding for her. “Listen,” he said, “my friend said you didn’t want stuff like mine, you want people, like, from out of town or something, they don’t know if they’re any good or not. Hell,” he went on anxiously, “I’m not one of these guys fall for ads in the magazines.”

“I see,” she said.

Tommy leaned over the counter. “Don’t get sore,” he said, “You know what I mean, you know your business better than I do.”

“I’m not sore,” she said. She watched Tommy hurry away again, and she thought — Wait till I tell Robbie. Wait till I tell him the soda jerk thinks he’s a bum.

“Listen,” Tommy said to her, from halfway down the counter, “how long do you think I ought to wait? How long will they take to read it, these agents?”

“Couple of weeks, maybe,” she said. “Maybe longer.”

“I figured it might be,” he said. “You want more coffee today?”

“No, thanks,” she said. She slid down from the stool and walked across the store to pay her check. They’re probably going to buy that play, she was thinking, and I’m going to start eating in the hamburg joint across the street.

She went out into the rain again to see her bus just pulling up across the street. She ran for it, against the light, and pushed into the crowd of people getting on. With a kind of fury left over from Tommy and his play she thrust her way against the people, and a woman turned to her and said, “Who do you think you’re pushing?” Vengefully she put her elbow into the woman’s ribs and got on the bus first. She dropped her nickel in and got to the last available seat, and heard the woman behind her. “These people who think they can shove anybody around, they think they’re important.” She looked around to see if anyone knew who the woman was talking about; the man beside her on the seat next to the window was staring straight ahead with the infinitely tired expression of the early-morning bus passenger; two girls in the seat in front were looking out the window after a man passing, and in the aisle next to her the woman was standing, still talking about her. “People who think their business is the only important thing in the world. Think they can just push anyone around.” No one in the bus was listening: everyone was wet and uncomfortable and crowded, but the woman went on monotonously— “Think no one else has a right to ride on buses.”

She stared past the man out the window until the crowds coming into the bus pushed the woman past her down the aisle. When she came to her stop she was timid for a minute about pushing her way out, and when she reached the door the woman was near it, staring at her as though wanting to remember her face. “Dried-up old maid,” the woman said loudly, and the people around her in the bus laughed.

Miss Style put on an expression of contempt, stepping carefully down to the curb, looking up just as the bus pulled away to see the woman’s face still watching her from the window. She walked through the rain to the old building where her office was, thinking, That woman was just waiting for anyone to cross her path this morning, I wish I’d said something back to her.

“Morning, Miss Style,” the elevator operator said.

“Morning,” she said. She walked into the open-work iron elevator and leaned against the back wall.

"Bad day," the operator said. He waited for a minute and then closed the door. "Fine day not to go out," he said.

"Sure is," she said. I wish I'd said something to that woman in the bus, she was thinking. I shouldn't have let her get away with it, let the day start off like that, with a nasty incident, I should have answered her back and got to feeling good and pleased with myself. Start the day off right.

"Here you are," the operator said. "You don't have to go out again for quite a while."

"Glad of that," she said. She got out of the elevator and walked down the hall to her office. There was a light on inside, making the *ROBERT SHAX, Literary Agents,* stand out against the door. Looks almost cheerful, she thought, Robbie must be in early.

She had worked for Robert Shax for nearly eleven years. When she came to New York the Christmas she was twenty, a thin dark girl with neat clothes and hair and moderate ambition, holding on to her pocketbook with both hands, afraid of subways, she answered an ad, and met Robert Shax before she had even found a room to live in. It had been one of those windfall ads, an assistant wanted in a literary agency, and there was no one around to tell Elizabeth Style, asking people timidly how to find the address, that if she got the job it wasn't worth getting. The literary agency was Robert Shax and a thin clever man who had disliked Elizabeth so violently that after two years she had taken Robert Shax away to start his own agency. Robert Shax was on the door and on all the checks, and Elizabeth Style hid away in her office, wrote the letters, kept the records, and came out occasionally to consult the files she allowed Robert Shax to keep on display.

They had spent much time in the eight years trying to make this office look like a severe environment for a flourishing business: a miserable place that its owners were too busy to pretty up more than enough to meet the purposes of its clients. The door opened into a tight little reception room, painted tan the year before, with two cheap chrome and brown chairs, a brown linoleum floor, and a framed picture of a vase of flowers over the small desk which was occupied five afternoons a week by a Miss Wilson, a colorless girl who answered the phone sniffling. Beyond Miss Wilson's desk were two doors, which did not give the effect of limitless offices, stretching on down the building, that Robert Shax had hoped they might; the one on the left had, on the door, "Robert Shax," and the one on the right had, on the door, "Elizabeth Style," and through the pebbled glass doors you could see, dimly, the shape of the narrow window each office owned, crowding close enough to the door and walls to admit that the two offices together were no wider than the reception room, and to hint darkly that all that protected the privacy of Mr. Shax and Miss Style was a beaverboard partition painted to look like the walls.

Every morning Elizabeth Style came into the office with the idea that something might be done for it still, that somehow there might be a way to make it look respectable, with Venetian blinds or paneling or an efficient-looking bookcase with sets of classics and the newest books that Robert Shax had presumably sold to their publishers. Or even an end table with expensive magazines. Miss Wilson thought it would be nice to have a radio, but Robert Shax wanted an expensive office with heavy carpeting and desks sitting solidly on the floor and a battery of secretaries.

This morning the office looked more cheerful than usual, probably because it was still raining outside, or else because the lights were already on and the radiators were going. Elizabeth Style went over to the door of her office and opened it, saying, "Morning, Robbie," because, since there was no one in the office, there was no need to pretend that the beaver-board partitions were walls.

“Morning, Liz,” Robbie said, and then, “Come on in, will you?”

“I’ll take my coat off,” she said. There was a tiny closet in the corner of her office where she hung up her coat, squeezing in back of the desk to do it. She noticed that there was mail on her desk, four or five letters and a bulky envelope that would be a manuscript. She spread the letters out to make sure there was nothing of any particular interest, and then went out of her office and opened the door of Robbie’s.

He was leaning down over his desk, in an attitude meant to show extreme concentration; the faintly bald top of his head was toward her and his heavy round shoulders cut off the lower half of the window. His office was almost exactly like hers; it had a small filing cabinet and an autographed photograph of one of the few reasonably successful writers the firm had handled. The photograph was signed “To Bob, with deepest gratitude, Jim,” and Robert Shax was fond of using it as a happy example in his office conversations with eager authors. When she had closed the door Elizabeth was only a step away from the straight visitor’s chair slanting at the desk; she sat down and stretched her feet out in front of her.

“I got soaked coming in this morning,” she said.

“It’s an awful day,” Robbie said, without looking up. When he was alone with her he relaxed the heartiness that he usually stocked in his voice: he let his face look tired and worried. He was wearing his good grey suit that day, and later, with other people around, he would look like a golfer, a man who ate good rare roast beef and liked pretty girls. “It’s one hell of a day,” he repeated. He looked up at her. “Liz,” he said, “that goddamned minister is in town again.”

"No wonder you look so worried," she said. She had been ready to complain at him, to tell him about the woman on the bus, to ask him to sit up straight and behave, but there was nothing to say. "Poor old Robbie," she said.

"There's a note from him," Robbie said. "I've got to go up there this morning. He's in that goddamned rooming-house again."

"What are you planning to tell him?"

Robbie got up and turned around to the window. When he got out of his chair he had just room to turn around to get to the window of the closet or the filing cabinet; on a pleasanter day she might have an amiable remark about his weight. "I don't know what in hell I'm planning to tell him," Robbie said. "I'll promise him something."

I know you will, she thought. She had the familiar picture of Robbie's maneuvers to escape an awkward situation in the back of her mind: she could see Robbie shaking the old man's hand briskly, calling him "sir" and keeping his shoulders back, saying that the old man's poems were "fine, sir, really magnificent," promising anything, wildly, just to get away. "You'll come back in some kind of trouble," she said mildly.

Robbie laughed suddenly, happily. "But he won't bother us for a while."

"You ought to call him up or something. Write him a letter," she said.

"Why?" She could see that he was pleased with the idea of coming back in trouble, of being irresponsible and what he would call carefree; he would make the long trip uptown to the minister's rooming-house by subway and take a taxi for the last two blocks to arrive in style, and sit for a tiresome hour talking to the old man, just to be carefree and what he might call gallant.

Make him feel good, she thought. He has to go, not me. "You shouldn't be trusted to run a business by yourself," she said. "You're too silly."

He laughed again and walked around the desk to pat her head. “We get along pretty well, don’t we, Liz?”

“Fine,” she said.

He was beginning to think about it now; he was holding his head up and his voice was filling out. “I’ll tell him someone wants one of his poems for an anthology,” he said.

“Just don’t give him any money,” she said. “He has more than we have now.”

He went back to his closet and took out his coat, his good coat today, and threw it carelessly over his arm. He put his hat on the back of his head and picked up his brief case from the desk. “Got all the old guy’s poems in here,” he said. “I figured I could kill some time reading them aloud to him.”

“Have a nice trip,” she said.

He patted her on the head again, and then reached out for the door. “You’ll take care of everything here?”

“I’ll try to cope with it,” she said.

She followed him out the door and started into her own office. Halfway across the outer office he stopped, not turning. “Liz?” he said.

“Well?”

He thought for a minute. “Seems like there was something I wanted to tell you,” he said. “It doesn’t matter.”

“See you for lunch?” she asked.

“I’ll be back about twelve-thirty,” he said.

He closed the door and she heard his footsteps going emphatically down the hall to the elevator; busy footsteps, she thought, in case anyone was listening in this fearful old building.

She sat for a minute at her desk, smoking and wishing she could paint her office walls a light green. If she wanted to stay late at night she could do it herself. It would only take one can of paint, she told herself bitterly, to do an office like this, with enough left over to do the front of the building. Then she put out her cigarette and thought, I've worked in it this long, maybe some day we'll get a million-dollar client and can move into a real office building where they have soundproof walls.

The mail on her desk was bad. A bill from her dentist, a letter from a client in Oregon, a couple of ads, a letter from her father, and the bulky envelope that was certainly a manuscript. She threw out the ads and the dentist's bill, which was marked "Please remit," set the manuscript and the other letter aside, and opened the letter from her father.

It was in his own peculiar style, beginning, "Dearest Daughter," and ending, "Yr. Afft. Father," and told her that the feed store was doing badly, that her sister in California was pregnant again, that old Mrs. Gill had asked after her the other day, and that he found himself very much alone since her mother's death. And he hoped she was well. She threw the letter into the wastebasket on top of the dentist's bill.

The letter from the client in Oregon wanted to know what had happened to a manuscript sent in three months before; the large bulky envelope contained a manuscript written in longhand, from a young man in Allentown who wanted it sold immediately and their fee taken out of the editor's check. She glanced through the manuscript carelessly, turning over the pages and reading a few words on each; halfway through she stopped and read a whole page, and then turned back a little and read more. With her eyes still on the manuscript, she leaned over and reached into the bottom drawer of her desk, stirring papers around until she found a small, ten-cent notebook, partly filled with notes. She opened the notebook to a blank page, copied out a paragraph from the manuscript, thinking, I can switch that around and make it a woman instead of a man; and she made another note, "make W. use any name but Helen," which was the name of the woman in the story. Then she put the notebook away and set the manuscript to one side of her desk in order to swing up the panel of the desk that brought the typewriter upright. She took out a sheet of notepaper labeled "ROBERT SHAX, Literary Agents, Elizabeth Style, Fiction Department," and put it into the typewriter; she was just typing the young man's name and the address: General Delivery, Allentown, when she heard the outer door open and close.

"Hello," she called, without looking up.

"Good morning."

She looked up then; it was such a high, girlish voice. The girl who had come in was big and blonde, and walked across the little reception room as though she were prepared to be impressed no matter what happened to her there.

"Did you want to see me?" Elizabeth asked, her hands still resting on the typewriter keys. If God should have sent me a client, she thought, it won't hurt to look literary.

"I wanted Mr. Shax," the girl said. She waited in the doorway of Elizabeth's office.

"He was called out on very pressing business," Elizabeth said. "Did you have an appointment?"

The girl hesitated, as though doubting Elizabeth's authority. "Not exactly," she said finally. "I'm supposed to be working here, I guess."

Seemed like there was something he wanted to tell me, Elizabeth thought, that coward. "I see," she said. "Come in and sit down."

The girl came in shyly, although with no apparent timidity. She figured it was his business to tell me, not hers, Elizabeth thought. "Did Mr. Shax tell you to come to work here?"

"Well," the girl said, deciding it was all right to trust Elizabeth, "on Monday about five o'clock I was asking for a job in all the offices in this building and I came here and Mr. Shax showed me around the office and he said he thought I could do the work all right." She thought back over what she had said. "You weren't here," she added.

"I couldn't have been," Elizabeth agreed. He's known since Monday and I find out, she thought, what is this, Wednesday? I find out on Wednesday when she shows up for work. "I didn't ask your name."

"Daphne Hill," the girl said meekly.

Elizabeth wrote "Daphne Hill" down on her memorandum and looked at it, partly to seem as if she was coming to an important decision and partly to see what "Daphne Hill" looked like written down.

"Mr. Shax said," the girl began, and stopped. Her voice was high and when she was anxious she opened her small brown eyes wide and blinked. Except for her hair, which was a pale blonde and curled all over the top of her head, she was clumsy and awkward, all dressed up for her first day at work.

"What did Mr. Shax say?" Elizabeth asked when the girl seemed to have subsided permanently.

"He said he wasn't satisfied with the girl he had now and I was to learn her job and get to do it and I was to come today because he was going to tell her yesterday that I was coming."

"Fine," Elizabeth said. "Can you type, do you suppose?"

"I guess so," the girl said.

Elizabeth looked at the letter in the typewriter on her desk and then said, "Well, you go on outside and sit at the desk out there and if the phone rings you answer it. Read or something."

"Yes, Miss Style," the girl said.

"And please close my office door," Elizabeth said. She watched the girl go out and close the door carefully. The things she had wanted to say to the girl were waiting to be said: maybe she could rephrase some of them for Robbie at lunch.

What does this mean, she thought suddenly in panic, Miss Wilson has been here almost as long as I have. Is he trying in his own heavy-handed fashion to beautify the office? He might better buy a bookcase; who is going to teach this incredible girl to answer the phone and write letters, even as well as Miss Wilson? Me, she thought at last. I'm going to have to drag Robbie out of this last beautiful impulsive gesture like always; the things I do for a miserable little office and a chance to make money. Anyway, maybe Daphne will help me paint the walls after five some day; maybe the one thing Daphne knows how to do is paint.

She turned back to the letter in the typewriter. An encouraging letter to a new client; it fell into a simple formula in her mind and she wrote it without hesitating, typing clumsily and amateurishly, but quickly. "Dear Mr. Burton," she wrote. "We have read your story with a good deal of interest. Your plot is well thought out, and we believe that the character of—" She stopped for a minute and turned back to the manuscript, opening it at random— "Lady Montague, in particular, is of more than usual merit. Naturally, in order to appeal to the better-paying markets, the story needs touching up by a skilled professional editor, a decisive selling service we are able to offer our clients. Our rates—"

"Miss Style?"

In spite of the beaverboard partitions, Elizabeth said, "If you want to talk to me, Miss Hill, come in."

After a minute Miss Hill opened the door and came in. Elizabeth could see her pocketbook on the desk outside, the lipstick and compact sitting next to it. “When does Mr. Shax get back?”

“Probably not till this afternoon. He went out on important business with a client,” Elizabeth said. “Why, did anyone call?”

“No, I just wondered,” Miss Hill said. She closed the door and went heavily back to her desk. Elizabeth looked again at the letter in the typewriter and then turned her chair around to put her still-wet feet on the radiator under the window. After a minute she opened the bottom drawer of her desk again and this time took out a pocket reprint of a mystery story. With her feet on the radiator she settled down to read.

Because it was raining, and because she was depressed and out of sorts, and because Robbie had not come by quarter to one, Elizabeth treated herself to a Martini while she was waiting, sitting uncomfortably on a narrow chair in the restaurant, watching other unimpressive people go in and out. The restaurant was crowded, the floors wet from the feet coming in from the rain, and it was dark and dismal. Elizabeth and Robbie had come here for lunch two or three times a week, ever since they had opened the office in the building near-by. The first day they had come had been in summer, and Elizabeth, in a sheer black dress — she remembered it still; she would be too thin for it now — and a small white hat and white gloves, had been excited and happy over the great new career opening out for her. She and Robbie had held hands across the table and talked enthusiastically: they were only going to stay in the old building for a year, or two at the most, and then they would have enough money to move uptown; the good clients who would come to the new Robert Shax Agency would be honest reputable writers, with large best-selling manuscripts; editors would go to lunch with them at sleek uptown restaurants, a drink before lunch would not be an extraordinary thing. The first order of stationery saying “ROBERT

SHAX, Literary Agents, Elizabeth Style, Fiction Department," had not been delivered; they planned the letterhead at lunch that day.

Elizabeth thought about ordering another Martini and then she saw Robbie coming impatiently through the people in the aisles. He saw her across the room and waved at her, aware of people watching him, an executive late for a luncheon appointment, even in a dingy restaurant.

When he got to the table, his back to the room, his face was tired and his voice was quiet. "Finally made it," he said. He looked surprised at the empty Martini glass. "I haven't even had breakfast yet," he said.

"Did you have a bad time with the minister?"

"Terrible," he said. "He wants a book of his poems published this year."

"What did you tell him?" Elizabeth tried not to let her voice sound strained. Time enough for that later, she thought, when he feels like answering me.

"I don't know," Robbie said. "How the hell do I know what I told the old fool?" He sat down heavily. "Something about we'd do our best."

That means he's really made a mess of it, Elizabeth thought. If he did well he'd tell me in detail. She was suddenly so tired that she let her shoulders droop and sat stupidly staring off at the people coming in and out of the door. What am I going to say to him, she thought, what words will Robbie understand best?

"What are you looking so glum about?" Robbie asked suddenly. "No one made you go way the hell uptown without breakfast."

"I had a tough morning anyway," Elizabeth said. Robbie looked up, waiting. "I had a new employee to break in."

Robbie still waited, his face a little flushed, squinting at her; he was waiting to see what she was going to say before he apologized, or lost his temper, or tried to pass the whole thing off as a fine joke.

Elizabeth watched him: this is Robbie, she was thinking, I know what he’s going to do and what he’s going to say and what tie he’s going to wear every day in the week, and for eleven years I have known these things and for eleven years I have been wondering how to say things to make him understand; and eleven years ago we sat here and held hands and he said we were going to be successful. “I was thinking of the day we had lunch here when we first started out together,” she said quietly, and Robbie looked mystified. “The day we started out together,” she repeated more distinctly. “Do you remember Jim Harris?” Robbie nodded, his mouth a little open. “We were going to make a lot of money because Jim was going to bring all his friends to us and then you had a fight with Jim and we haven’t seen him since and none of his friends came to us and now we’ve got your friend the minister for a client and a beautiful picture of Jim on your office wall. Signed,” she said. “Signed, with ‘gratitude,’ and if he was making enough money we’d be around trying to borrow from him even now.”

“Elizabeth,” Robbie said. He was confused between trying to look hurt and trying to see if anyone heard what she was saying.

“Even the boy in my corner drugstore.” Elizabeth looked at him for a minute. “Daphne Hill,” she said. “My God.”

“I see,” Robbie said, with a significant smile. “Daphne Hill.” He turned when he saw the waitress coming. “Miss,” he said loudly, and to Elizabeth, “I think you ought to have another drink. Cheer you up a little.” When the waitress looked at him he said “Two Martinis,” and turned back to Elizabeth, putting on the smile again. “I’m going to drink my breakfast,” he said, and then he reached over and touched Elizabeth’s hand. “Listen,” he said, “Liz, if that’s all that’s bothering you. I was a dope, I thought you’d figured I’d done something wrong about the minister. Listen, Daphne’s all right. I just thought we needed someone around who'd brighten the place up a little."

"You could have painted the wall," Elizabeth said tonelessly. When Robbie stared she said, "Nothing," and he went on, leaning forward seriously.

"Look," he said, "if you don't like this Daphne out she goes. There's no question about it, after all. We're in business together." He looked off into space and smiled reminiscently. "I remember those days, all right. We were going to do wonders." He lowered his voice and looked lovingly at Elizabeth. "I think we still can," he said.

Elizabeth laughed in spite of herself. "You'll have to go down the stairs more quietly," she said. "My janitor's wife thought you were the man who leaves skis out in the hall. She nearly broke a leg."

"Don't make fun of me," Robbie said. "Elizabeth, it really hurts me to see you let someone like Daphne Hill upset you."

"Of course it does," Elizabeth said. Robbie suddenly impressed her as funny. If only I could keep on feeling like this, she thought, even while she was laughing at him. "Here comes your breakfast for you to drink," she said.

"Miss," Robbie said to the waitress. "We'd like to order our lunch, please."

He handed the menu ceremoniously to Elizabeth and said to the waitress, "Chicken croquettes and French fried potatoes." Elizabeth said, "The same, please," and handed the menu back. When the waitress had gone Robbie picked up one of the Martinis and handed it to Elizabeth. "You need this, old girl," he said. He picked up the other and looked at her; then he lowered his voice to the same low affectionate tone, and said, "Here's to you, and our future success."

Elizabeth smiled at him sweetly and tasted her drink. She could see Robbie debating whether to toss his off all at once or to sip it slowly as though he didn't need it.

"If you drink it too fast you'll be sick, dear," she said. "Without your breakfast."

He tasted it delicately and then set it down. "Now let's talk seriously about Daphne," he said.

"I thought she was leaving," Elizabeth said.

He looked frightened. "Naturally, if you want it that way," he said stiffly. "Seems sort of rotten to hire a girl and fire her the same day because you're jealous."

"I'm not jealous," Elizabeth said. "I never said I was."

"If I can't have a good-looking girl in the office," Robbie said.

"You can," Elizabeth said. "I'd just like one who could type."

"Daphne can take care of the work all right."

"Robbie," Elizabeth said, and then stopped. Already, she thought, I don't want to laugh at him any more; I wish I could feel all the time like I did a minute ago, not like this. She looked at him carefully, his red face and the thin greying hair, and the heavy shoulders above the table; he was holding his head back and his chin firm because he knew she was looking at him. He thinks I'm awed, she thought, he's a man and he's cowed me. "Let her stay," Elizabeth said.

"After all," Robbie leaned back to let the waitress put his plate in front of him, "after all," he went on when the waitress had gone, "it isn't as though I didn't have the authority to hire someone for my own office."

"I know," Elizabeth said wearily.

"If you want to start a fuss about some small thing," Robbie said. The corners of his mouth were turned down and he refused to meet her eyes. "I can run my own office," he repeated.

"You're scared to death I might leave you some day," Elizabeth said. "Eat your lunch."

Robbie picked up his fork. "Naturally," he said, "I feel that it would be a shame to break up a pleasant partnership just because you were jealous."

"Never mind," Elizabeth said, "I won't go away anywhere."

"I hope not," Robbie said. He ate industriously for a minute. "I tell you what," he said suddenly, putting his fork down, "we'll try her out for a week and then if you don't think she's better than Miss Wilson she'll go."

"But I don't—" Elizabeth began. Then she said. "Fine. That way we can find out exactly how she'll suit us."

"Splendid idea," Robbie said. "Now I feel better." He reached across the table and this time patted her hand. "Good old Liz," he said.

"You know," Elizabeth said, "I feel so funny right now." She was looking at the doorway. "I thought I saw someone I knew."

Robbie turned around and looked at the doorway. "Who?"

"No one you know," Elizabeth said. "A boy from my home town. It wasn't the same person, though."

"Always think you see people you know in New York," Robbie said, turning back to his fork.

Elizabeth was thinking, it must have been talking about old times with Robbie and the two drinks I had, I haven't thought of Frank for years. She laughed out loud, and Robbie stopped eating to say, "What's the matter with you, anyway? People will think something's wrong."

"I was just thinking," Elizabeth said. Suddenly she felt that she must talk to Robbie, treat him as she would anyone else she knew well, like a husband almost. "I haven't thought about this fellow for years," she said. "It just brought a thousand things back to my mind."

"An old boy friend?" Robbie said without interest.

Elizabeth felt the same twinge of horror she might have felt fifteen years ago at the suggestion, "Oh, *no,*" she said. "He took me to a dance once. My mother called up his mother and asked to have him take me."

"Chocolate ice cream with chocolate sauce," Robbie said to the waitress.

"Just coffee," Elizabeth said. "He was a wonderful boy," she said to Robbie. Why can't I stop myself? she was thinking, I haven't thought about this for years.

"Listen," Robbie said, "did you tell Daphne she could go out for lunch?"

"I didn't tell her anything," Elizabeth said.

"We better hurry then," Robbie said. "The poor kid must be starving."

Frank, Elizabeth thought. "Seriously," she said, "what did you and the minister decide?"

"I'll tell you later," Robbie said, "when I get my ideas straight. Right now I'm not so sure what we did decide."

And he'll spring it on me suddenly, Elizabeth thought, so I won't have time to think; he's just promised to publish the minister's poems at his own expense; or he's gone out of town, will I deal with it; or someone's going to sue us. Frank wouldn't have been in a place like this, anyway, if he's eating at all, it's some place where everything is quiet and they call him "sir" and the women are all beautiful. "It doesn't matter anyway," she said.

"Of course it doesn't," Robbie said. He evidently felt it was necessary to add one final clinching touch before they went back to Daphne Hill. "As long as we can fight it together, we'll come through everything fine," he said. "We work well together, Liz." He stood up and turned to get his coat and hat. His suit was wrinkled and he felt uncomfortable in it, from the way he moved his shoulders uneasily.

Elizabeth finished the last of her coffee. “You get fatter every day,” she said.

He looked around at her, his eyes frightened. “You think I ought to start dieting again?” he asked.

They came up in the elevator together, standing in opposite corners, each looking off into space, through the iron grillwork of the elevator, into something private and secret. They had gone up and down in this elevator four or six or eight or ten times a day since they moved into the building, sometimes happily, sometimes coldly angry with one another, sometimes laughing or quarreling furiously with quick violent phrases; the elevator operator probably knew more about them than Elizabeth’s landlady or the young couple who had the apartment across the hall from Robbie, and yet they got into the elevator daily and the elevator operator spoke to them civilly and stood with his back to them, riding up and down, entering briefly into their quarrels, possibly smiling with his back turned.

Today he said, “Weather still bad?” and Robbie said, “Worse than ever,” and the operator said, “There ought to be a law against it,” and let them off at their floor.

“I wonder what he thinks of us, the elevator man,” Elizabeth said, following Robbie down the hall.

“Probably wishes he could get off that elevator for a while and sit down in an office,” Robbie said. He opened the door of the office and said, “Miss Hill?”

Daphne Hill was sitting at the reception desk, reading the mystery Elizabeth had left to go out to lunch. “Hello, Mr. Shax,” she said.

“Did you take that off my desk?” Elizabeth said, surprised for a minute into speaking at once without thinking.

“Wasn’t it all right?” Daphne asked. “I didn’t have anything to do.”

“We’ll find you plenty to do, young lady,” Robbie said heartily, the brisk businessman again. “Sorry to keep you waiting for lunch.”

“I went out and got something to eat,” Daphne said.

“Good,” Robbie said, looking sideways at Elizabeth. “We’ll have to make some arrangement for the future.”

“Hereafter,” Elizabeth said sharply, “don’t go into my office without permission.”

“Sure,” Daphne said, startled. “You want your book back?”

“Keep it,” Elizabeth said. She went into her office and closed the door. She heard Robbie saying, “Miss Style doesn’t like to have her things disturbed, Miss Hill,” and then, “Come into my office, please.” As though there were real partitions, Elizabeth thought. She heard Robbie go quickly into his office and Daphne pound her deliberate way after him, and the door close.

She sighed, and thought, I’ll pretend they’re real partitions; Robbie will. She noticed a note standing against her typewriter where she had left it with the letter to Mr. Burton still half-finished. She picked up the note and read it with heavy concentration to drown out Robbie’s employer voice on the other side of the partition. The note was from Miss Wilson, and said:

“Miss Style, no one told me there was a new girl coming and since I’ve been working here so long I think you should have told me. I guess she can learn the work as well by herself. Please tell Mr. Shax to send me my money at home, the address is in the file as he knows. There was a call from a Mr. Robert Hunt for you, will you call him back at his hotel, the Addison House. Please tell Mr. Shax to send the money, it comes now to two weeks and an extra week for notice. Alice Wilson.”

She must have been mad, Elizabeth thought, not to wait around for her money, she must have been furious, I guess Daphne was the first to tell her and she felt like I did; he'll never send her any money. She could hear Robbie's voice saying, "It's a terrible business, the most heart-breaking I know," He's talking about free-lance writing, she thought, Daphne probably wants to sell her life history.

She went out of the door of her office and around to Robbie's and knocked. If Robbie says, "Who is it?" she thought, I'll say "The elevator man, come up to sit down for a while." Then Robbie said, "Come on in, Liz, don't be silly."

"Robbie," she said, opening the door, "Miss Wilson was here and left a note."

"I forgot to tell you," Daphne said, "and I didn't get a chance yet anyway. She said to tell Mr. Shax to send her money."

"I'm sorry about this," Robbie said. "She should have been told yesterday. It's a damned shame for her to find out like this." Daphne was sitting in the one other chair in his office and he hesitated and then said, "Sit here, Elizabeth."

Elizabeth waited until he started to hoist himself up and then said, "That's all right, Robbie, I'm going back to work."

Robbie read Miss Wilson's letter carefully. "Miss Hill," he said, "make a note to send Miss Wilson her back pay and the extra week she asks for."

"I don't have anything to make a note on," Daphne said. Elizabeth took a pad and pencil off Robbie's desk and handed it to her, and Daphne made a solemn sentence on the first page of the pad.

"Who is this Hunt?" Robbie asked Elizabeth. "Your old boy friend?"

I know I shouldn't have told him, Elizabeth thought. "I think it's an old friend of my father's from home," she said.

"Better call him back," Robbie said, handing her the note.

"I shall," Elizabeth said. "Don't you think you'd better write Miss Wilson and explain what happened?"

Robbie looked dismayed, and then he said, "Miss Hill can do that this afternoon."

Elizabeth, carefully not looking at Daphne, said, "Fine idea. That will give her something to do."

She closed the door quietly when she went out and closed the door of her own office after herself to give the illusion of privacy. She knew that Robbie would listen to her talking on the phone; she had an odd picture of Robbie and Daphne, sitting silently one on either side of Robbie's desk, two heavy serious faces turned slightly to the partition, listening soberly to Elizabeth talking to her father's old friend.

She looked up the hotel number in the book, hearing Robbie say, "Tell her we're all sincerely sorry, but that circumstances beyond my control, and so on. Make it as pleasant as possible. Remember to tell her we'll consider her for the first new job we have here."

Elizabeth dialed the number, waiting for the sudden silence in Robbie's office. She asked the hotel clerk for Mr. Robert Hunt, and when he answered she made her voice low, and said, "Uncle Robert? This is Beth."

He answered enthusiastically, "Beth! It's fine hearing your voice. Mom thought you'd be too busy to call back."

"Is she with you? How nice," Elizabeth said. "How are you both? How is Dad?"

"All fine," he said. "How are you, Beth?"

She kept her voice low. "Just grand, Uncle Robert, getting along so well. How long have you been here? And how long are you staying? And when can I see you?"

He laughed. “Mom is talking at me from this end and you’re talking at me from that end,” he said. “And I can’t hear a word either of you is saying. How are you, anyway?”

“I’m grand,” she said again.

“Beth,” he said, “we’re very anxious to see you. Got a lot of messages from home and all.”

“I’m pretty busy,” she said, “but I’d love to see you. How long are you staying?”

“Tomorrow,” he said. “Just came in for a couple of days.”

She was figuring quickly, even while her voice was saying, “Oh, no,” with heavy dismay. “*Why* didn’t you let me know?” she said.

“Mom wants me to tell you everyone sends their love,” he said.

“I’m just sick,” she said. Guilt drove her into accenting her words violently. “I don’t know *how* I’m going to get to see you. Maybe tomorrow morning somehow?”

“Well,” he said slowly, “Mom sort of had her heart set on going to Long Island tomorrow to see her sister, and they’ll take us right to the train. We thought maybe you’d come along with us tonight.”

“Oh, Lord,” Elizabeth said, “I’ve got a dinner appointment I can’t break. A client,” she said, “you know.”

“Isn’t that a shame,” he said. “We’re going to a show; thought you might come along. Mom,” he called, “what’s that show we’re going to?” He waited for a minute and then said, “She doesn’t remember either. The hotel got tickets for us.”

“I wish I could,” she said, “I just wish I could.” She thought in spite of herself of the extra ticket they had been careful to buy, the two old people alone for dinner pretending they were celebrating in a strange city. They saved tonight for me, she thought. “If it had been any other person in the world, I could have broken it, but this is one of our best clients and I just don't dare."

"Of course not." There was so long a silence that Elizabeth said hastily, "How is Dad, anyway?"

"Fine," he said. "Everyone's fine. I guess he sort of wishes you were home now."

"I imagine he's lonesome," Elizabeth said, careful not to let her voice commit her to anything. She was anxious to end the phone call, dissociate herself from the Hunts and her father and the nagging hints that she should go home. I live in New York now, she told herself while the old man's voice continued with a monotonous series of anecdotes about her father and people she had known long ago; I live in New York by myself and I don't have to remember any of these people; Uncle Robert should be glad I talk to him at all.

"I'm so glad you called," she said suddenly, through his voice. "I've got to get back to work."

"Of course," he said apologetically. "Well, Beth, write to all of us, won't you? Mom is telling me to give you her love."

They hang on to me, she thought; they're holding me back, with their letters and their "Yrs. afftly." and their sending love back and forth. "Good-bye," she said.

"Come back soon for a visit," he went on.

"I will when I can. Good-bye," Elizabeth said. She hung up on his "Good-bye," and then, "Oh, wait, Beth," when something more occurred to him. I couldn't listen any longer without being rude, she thought.

She heard Robbie's voice starting then in the next office, "And I guess you understand about things like answering the phone, and so on."

"I guess so," Daphne said

Elizabeth went back to her letter to Mr. Burton, permanently curled from staying in the typewriter, and she heard Robbie and Daphne Hill talking for a while, about names of clients, and the two-button phone extension at the reception desk, and then she heard both of them go out to the reception desk and try the extension, two children, she thought, playing office. Occasionally she would hear Robbie's heavy laugh, and then, after a minute, Daphne laughing too, slow and surprised. In spite of all her attempts to concentrate on their rates for Mr. Burton she found herself listening, following Robbie and Daphne where they moved around the office. Once, louder than the slight murmur which had been going on between them, she heard Robbie's man-of-the-world voice saying, "Some quiet little restaurant," and then when the voice dropped back to its cautious tone she said to herself, Where they can talk. She waited, not to sound like an intruder, until she heard Daphne settle down solidly at the reception desk and Robbie start back for his own office. Then she said, "Robbie?"

There was a silence and then he came around and opened her office door. "You know I don't like you to yell in the office," he said.

She paused for a minute because she wanted to speak cordially. "We're going to have dinner together tonight?" she asked. They had dinner together four or five times a week, usually in the restaurant where they had had lunch, or in some small place near either Robbie's apartment or Elizabeth's. When she saw the corners of Robbie's mouth turn down and the faint turn of his head toward the outer office she raised her voice slightly. "I got out of seeing these fool people tonight," she said. 'There's a lot I want to talk to you about.'

"As a matter of fact, Liz," Robbie said, talking very quickly and in a low voice, "I'm afraid I'm going to be stuck for dinner." Not realizing that he was repeating what he had heard her say on the phone a few minutes before, he went on, putting on a look of annoyance, “I’ve got a dinner appointment I can’t break, with a client.” When Elizabeth looked surprised, he said, “The minister, I promised him this morning we’d get together again tonight. I haven’t had a chance to tell you.”

“Of course you can’t break it,” Elizabeth said easily. She waited, watching Robbie. He was sitting uneasily on the corner of her desk, playing absently with a pencil, wanting to leave and afraid to go too abruptly. What am I doing, Elizabeth thought suddenly, playing hide-and-seek? “Why don’t you go to a movie or something?” she said.

Robbie laughed mournfully. “I wish I could,” he said.

Elizabeth reached over and took the pencil away from him. “Poor old Robbie,” she said. “You’re all upset. You ought to get off somewhere and relax.”

Robbie frowned anxiously. “Why should I?” he said. “Isn’t this my office?”

Elizabeth made her voice tender. “You ought to get out of here for a few hours, Robbie, I’m serious. You won’t be able to work this afternoon.” She decided to allow herself one small spiteful dig. “Particularly if you have to see that old horror tonight,” she said.

Robbie’s mouth opened and closed, and then he said, “I can’t think when it’s such lousy weather. Rain drives me crazy.”

“I know it does,” Elizabeth said. She stood up. “You get your hat and coat on, and leave your brief case and everything here,” she said, pushing him toward the door, “and then come back after sitting in a movie for a couple of hours and you’ll feel like a million dollars to go out and out-talk the minister.”

“I don’t want to go out again in this weather,” Robbie said.

"Stop and get a shave," Elizabeth said. She opened the door of her office and saw Daphne Hill staring at her. "Get a haircut," she said, touching the back of his head. "Miss Hill and I will get along fine without you. Won't we, Miss Hill?"

"Sure," Daphne said.

Robbie went uneasily into his office and came out a minute later carrying his wet coat and hat. "I don't know what you want me to go out for," he said.

"I don't know what you want to stay here for," Elizabeth said, escorting him to the outer door. "You're not good for anything when you feel like this." She opened the front door and he walked out. "See you later."

"See you later," Robbie said, starting down the hall.

Elizabeth watched him until he had gone into the elevator and then she closed the door behind her and turned to Daphne Hill. "Is that letter to Miss Wilson anywhere near written?" she asked.

"I was just doing it," Daphne said.

"Bring it to me when you finish." Elizabeth went into her office and closed the door and sat down at the desk. Frank, she was thinking, it couldn't have been Frank. He would have said "Hello" or something, I haven't changed that much. If it was Frank, what was he doing around here? It won't do any good, she thought, there's no way of finding him anyway.

She took the telephone book from the corner of her desk and looked for Frank's name; it wasn't there, and she turned further until she came to the H's, running her finger down the page till she found Harris, James. Pulling the phone over she dialed the number and waited. When a man answered she said, "Is this Jim Harris?"

"That's right," he said.

"This is Elizabeth Style."

“Hello,” he said. “How are you?”

“I’ve been waiting for you to get in touch with me,” she said. “It’s been a long time.”

“I know it has,” he said. “Somehow I never seem to get around—”

“I’ll tell you what I called you about,” she said. “Do you remember Frank Davis?”

“I remember him,” he said. “What’s he doing now?”

“That’s what I wanted to ask you,” she said.

“Oh. Well.…”

She waited a minute, and then went on, “One of these days I’m going to take you up on that standing dinner date.”

“I hope you do,” he said. “I’ll call you.”

Oh, no, she thought. “It seems like such a long time since we got together. Listen.” She made her voice sound like this was a sudden idea, one of those unexpectedly brilliant things, “Why don’t we make it tonight?” He started to say something and she went on, “I’ve been dying to see you.”

“You see, my kid sister’s in town,” he said.

“Can’t she come along?” Elizabeth asked.

“Well,” he said, “I guess so.”

“Fine,” Elizabeth said. “You come on down to my place for a drink first, and bring the kid along, and we can have a grand talk about old times.”

“Suppose I call you back?” he asked.

“I’m leaving the office now,” Elizabeth said flatly. “I’ll be running around all afternoon. So let’s make it around seven?”

“All right,” he said.

“I’m so pleased we made it tonight,” Elizabeth said. “I’ll see you later.”

After she had hung up she sat for a minute with her hand on the phone, thinking, good old Harris, he never has a chance if you talk fast; he must get stuck for every dirty job around town. She laughed, pleased, and then stopped abruptly when Daphne knocked on the door; when Elizabeth said, “Come in,” Daphne opened the door cautiously and put her head in.

“I finished the letter, Miss Style,” she said.

“Bring it here,” Elizabeth said, and then added, “please.”

Daphne came in and held the letter out at arm’s length. “It isn’t very good,” she said. “But it’s my first letter by myself.”

Elizabeth glanced at the letter. “It doesn’t matter,” she said. “Sit down, Daphne.”

Daphne sat down gingerly on the edge of the chair. “Sit back,” Elizabeth said. “That’s the only chair I’ve got and I don’t want you breaking it.”

Daphne sat back and opened her eyes wide.

Elizabeth carefully opened her pocketbook and took out a pack of cigarettes and hunted for a match. “Just a minute,” Daphne said eagerly, “I’ve got some.” She hurried out to the outer office and came back with a package of matches. “Keep them,” she said, “I’ve got plenty more.”

Elizabeth lit her cigarette and put the matches down on the edge of the desk. “Now,” she said, and Daphne leaned forward. “Where did you work before you started here?”

“This is my first job,” Daphne said. “I just came to New York.”

“Where did you come from?”

“Buffalo,” Daphne said.

“So you came to New York to make your fortune?” Elizabeth asked. This is where I have dear Daphne, she was thinking, I’ve already made my fortune.

“I don’t know,” Daphne said. “My father brought us down here because his brother needed him in the business. We just moved here a couple of months ago.”

If I had a family to take care of me, Elizabeth thought, I wouldn't have a job with Robert Shax. "What sort of an education have you had?"

"I went to high school in Buffalo," Daphne said. "I was in business school for a while."

"You want to be a writer?"

"No," Daphne said, "I want to be an agent, like Mr. Shax. And you," she added.

"It's a fine business," Elizabeth said. "You can make a lot of money at it."

"That's what Mr. Shax said. He was very nice about it."

Daphne was getting braver. She was eyeing Elizabeth's cigarette and had settled down comfortably in her chair.

Elizabeth was suddenly very tired; there was no sport in Daphne. "Mr. Shax and I were talking about you at lunch," she said deliberately.

Daphne smiled. When she smiled, and when she was sitting down, without the appearance of that big body resting precariously on small feet, Daphne was an attractive girl. In spite of the small brown eyes, with that incredible mop of hair, Daphne was very attractive. I'm so thin, Elizabeth thought, and she said with pleasure, "I think you'd better rewrite that letter to Miss Wilson, Daphne."

"Sure," Daphne said.

"Telling her," Elizabeth went on, "to come back to work as soon as she can."

"Back here?" Daphne asked, with the smallest beginning of alarm.

"Back here," Elizabeth said. She smiled. "I'm afraid Mr. Shax didn't have courage enough to tell you," she said. "Mr. Shax and I are, besides business partners," she said, "very good friends. Frequently Mr. Shax takes advantage of our friendship and leaves the disagreeable tasks for me to do."

“Mr. Shax didn’t tell me anything,” Daphne said.

“I didn’t think he had,” Elizabeth said, “when I saw how you went right ahead as though you were staying here.”

Daphne was frightened. She’s too stupid to cry, Elizabeth thought, but she’s going to have to have everything explained to her in detail. “Naturally,” Elizabeth went on, “I don’t like having to do this. Possibly I can make it easier for you by trying to help you get another job.”

Daphne nodded.

“This may help you,” Elizabeth said, “because Mr. Shax commented on it earlier, and it’s the sort of thing men are particular about. Your appearance.”

Daphne looked down at the ample front of her dress.

“Probably,” Elizabeth said, “you already know this, and I’m very rude to comment on it, but I think you’d make a better impression and if you ever get a job you’d be able to work more comfortably if you wore something to the office instead of a silk dress. It makes you seem, somehow, as though you were just in from Buffalo.”

“You want me to wear a suit or something?” Daphne asked. She spoke slowly and without malice.

“Something quieter, anyway,” Elizabeth said.

Daphne looked Elizabeth up and down. “A suit like yours?” she asked.

“A suit would be fine,” Elizabeth said. “And try to comb your hair down.”

Daphne touched the top of her head tenderly.

“Try to be more orderly, in general,” Elizabeth said. “You have beautiful hair, Daphne, but it would look more suitable to an office if you were to wear it more severely,”

“Like yours?” Daphne asked, looking at the grey in Elizabeth’s hair.

“Any way you please,” Elizabeth said, “just so it doesn’t look like a floor mop.” She turned pointedly back to her desk, and after a minute Daphne rose. “Take this back,” Elizabeth said, holding out the letter to Miss Wilson, “and rewrite it the way I told you to.”

“Yes, Miss Style,” Daphne said.

“You can go home as soon as you’re through with the letter,” Elizabeth said. “Leave it on your desk, along with your name and address, and Mr. Shax will send you your day’s pay.”

“I don’t care whether he does or not,” Daphne said abruptly.

Elizabeth looked up for a minute and regarded Daphne steadily. “Do you think you have any right to criticize Mr. Shax’s decisions?” she asked.

For a few minutes Elizabeth sat at her desk waiting to see what Daphne would do; after the door had closed quietly behind Daphne and she had walked to her desk there had been a heavy silence; she’s sitting at her desk there, Elizabeth thought, thinking it over. Then, finally, there was the small sound of Daphne’s pocketbook, the snap of the catch opening, the movement of a hand searching against keys, papers; she’s taking her compact out, Elizabeth thought, she’s looking to see if what I said about her appearance is true; she’s wondering if Robbie said anything, how he said it, whether I made it worse or smoothed it over for her. I should have told her he said she was a fat pig, or the ugliest thing he had ever seen; she might not even have seen through that. What’s she doing now?

Daphne had said “Damn” very distinctly; Elizabeth sat forward in her chair, not wanting to let any trace of action escape. Then there was the quiet sound of the typewriter; Daphne was typing the letter to Miss Wilson. Elizabeth shook her head slowly and laughed. She lighted a cigarette with one of Daphne’s matches, still on the edge of the desk, and looked blankly at the letter to Mr. Burton, still in the typewriter. Sitting with one arm hooked over the back of the chair and the cigarette in her mouth, she typed slowly, with one finger, “The hell with you, Burton,” and then tore the page out of the typewriter and threw it in the wastebasket. That’s every single bit of work I’ve done today, she told herself, and it doesn’t matter after looking at Daphne’s face when I told her. She looked at her desk, the letters waiting to be answered, the criticisms by a professional editor waiting to be written, the complaints to be satisfied, and thought, I’ll go on home. I can take a bath and clean the place and get some stuff for Jim and the kid sister; I’ll only wait till Daphne leaves.

“Daphne?” she called.

After a hesitation: “Yes, Miss Style?”

“Aren’t you through yet?” Elizabeth said; she could afford to let herself speak gently now. “That letter to Miss Wilson should only take a minute.”

“Just getting ready to leave,” Daphne said.

“Don’t forget to leave your name and address.”

There was a silence from the other room, and Elizabeth said to her closed door, raising her voice again, “Did you hear me?”

“Mr. Shax knows my name and address,” Daphne said. The outer door opened, and Daphne said, “Good-bye.”

“Good-bye,” Elizabeth said.

She got out of the taxi at her corner, and after paying the man, she had a ten-dollar bill and some change in her pocketbook; this, with twenty dollars more in her apartment, was all the money she had until she could ask Robbie for more. Figuring quickly, she decided to take ten dollars of her money at home to get her through the evening; Jim Harris would have to pay for her dinner; ten dollars, then, for taxis and emergencies; she would ask Robbie for more tomorrow. The money in her pocketbook would go for liquor and cocktail things; she stopped in the liquor store on the corner and bought a bottle of rye, a fifth, so that she would have some to offer Robbie the next time he came down. With her bottle under her arm she went into the delicatessen and bought ginger ale; hesitantly she selected a bag of potato chips and then a box of crackers and a liverwurst spread to put on them.

She was unused to entertaining; she and Robbie spent evenings quietly together, seldom seeing any people except an occasional client and, sometimes, an old friend who invited them out. Because they were not married, Robbie was reluctant to take her anywhere where he might be embarrassed by her presence. They ate their meals in small restaurants, did their rare drinking at home or in a corner bar, saw neighborhood movies. When it was necessary for Elizabeth to invite people to visit her Robbie was not there; they had once given a party in Robbie's larger apartment to celebrate some great occasion, probably a client of some sort, and the party had been so miserable and the guest so uncomfortable that they had never given another and had been invited to only one or two.

Consequently Elizabeth, although she spoke so blithely of "coming down for a drink," was almost completely at a loss when people actually came. As she climbed the stairs to her apartment, her packages braced between her arm and her chin, she was worrying over and over the progress of having a drink, the passing of crackers, the taking of coats.

The appearance of her room shocked her; she had forgotten her hurried departure this morning and the way she had left things around; also, the apartment was created and planned for Elizabeth; that is, the hurried departure every morning of a rather unhappy and desperate young woman with little or no ability to make things gracious, the lonely ugly evenings in one chair with one book and one ashtray, the nights spent dreaming of hot grass and heavy sunlight. There was no possible arrangement of these things that would permit of a casual grouping of three or four people, sitting easily around a room holding glasses, talking lightly. In the early evening, with one lamp on and the shadows in the corners, it looked warm and soft, but you had only to sit down in the one armchair, or touch a hand to the grey wood end table that looked polished, to see that the armchair was hard and cheap, the grey paint chipping.

For a minute Elizabeth stood in the doorway holding her packages, trying clearly to visualize her room as it might be smoothed out by an affectionate hand, but the noise of footsteps above coming down the stairs drove her inside with the door shut and, once in, there was no clear vision; she had her feet on the unpolished floor; there was a dirty fingerprint on the inside doorknob. Robbie's, Elizabeth thought.

She opened the glass French doors that screened the kitchenette and put her packages down; the kitchenette was part of one wall, with a tiny stove built in under a cabinet, a sink installed over a refrigerator, and, over the sink, two shelves on which stood her collection of china: two plates, two cups and saucers, four glasses. She also owned a small saucepan, a frying-pan, and a coffeepot. She had bought all her small house furnishings in a five-and-ten a few years before, planning a tiny complete kitchen, where she could make miniature roasts for herself and Robbie, even bake a small pie or cookies, wearing a yellow apron and making funny mistakes at first. Although she had been a fairly competent cook when she first came to New York, capable of frying chops and potatoes, in the many years since she had been near a real stove she had lost all her knowledge except the fudge-making play in which she indulged herself occasionally. Cooking was, like everything else she had known, a decent honest knowledge meant to make her a capable happy woman ("the way to a man's heart," her mother used to say soberly), which, with the rest of her daily life, had sunk to a miniature useful only as a novelty on rare occasions.

She had to take down the four glasses and wash them; they were dusty from standing so long unused on the open shelf. She checked the refrigerator. For a while she had kept butter and eggs in the refrigerator, and bread and coffee in the cabinet, but they had grown mouldy and rancid before she had been able to make more than one breakfast from them; she was so often late and so seldom inclined to take time over her own breakfast.

It was only four-thirty; she had time to straighten things up and bathe and dress. Her first care was for the easy things in the apartment; she dusted the tables and emptied the ashtray, stopping to put her dustcloth down and pull the bedcovers even, smoothing the spread down to a regular roundness. She was tempted to take up the three small scatter rugs and shake them, and then wash the floor, but a glance at the bathroom discouraged her; they would certainly be in and out of the bathroom, and the floor and tub and even the walls badly needed washing. She used her dust cloth soaked in hot water from the tap, getting the floor clean at last; she put out clean towels from her small stock and started her bath water while she went back to finish the big room.

After all her haphazard work the room looked the same; still grey and inhospitable in the rainy afternoon light. She debated for a minute running downstairs for some bright flowers, and then decided that her money wouldn’t last that far; they would only be in the room for a short while anyway, and with something to drink and something to eat any room should look friendly.

When she finished her bath it was nearly six, and dark enough to light the lamp on the end table. She walked barefoot across the room, feeling clean and freshened, conscious of the cologne she had put on, with her hair curling a little from the hot water. With the feeling of cleanness came an excitement; she would be happy tonight, she would be successful, something wonderful would happen to change her whole life. Following out this feeling she chose a dark red silk dress from the closet; it was youthfully styled and without the grey in her hair it made her look nearer twenty than over thirty. She selected a heavy gold chain to wear with it, and thought, I can wear my good black coat, even if it's raining I'll wear it to feel nice.

While she dressed she thought about her home. Considered honestly, there was no way to do anything with this apartment, no yellow drapes or pictures would help. She needed a new apartment, a pleasant open place with big windows and pale furniture, with the sun coming in all day. To get a new apartment she needed more money, she needed a new job, and Jim Harris would have to help her; tonight would be only the first of many exciting dinners together, building into a lovely friendship that would get her a job and a sunny apartment; while she was planning her new life she forgot Jim Harris, his heavy face, his thin voice; he was a stranger, a gallant dark man with knowing eyes who watched her across a room, he was someone who loved her, he was a quiet troubled man who needed sunlight, a warm garden, green lawns.…

A FINE OLD FIRM

MRS. CONCORD AND her older daughter, Helen, were sitting in their living-room, sewing and talking and trying to keep warm. Helen had just put down the stockings she had been mending and walked over to the French doors that opened out on to the garden. “I wish spring would hurry up and get here,” she was saying when the doorbell rang.

“Good Lord,” Mrs. Concord said, “if that’s company! The rug’s all covered with loose threads.” She leaned over in her chair and began to gather up the odds and ends of material around her as Helen went to answer the door. She opened it and stood smiling while the woman outside held out a hand and began to talk rapidly. “You’re Helen? I’m Mrs. Friedman,” she said. “I hope you won’t think I’m just breaking in on you, but I have been so anxious to meet you and your mother.”

“How do you do?” Helen said. “Won’t you come in?” She opened the door wider and Mrs. Friedman stepped in. She was small and dark and wearing a very smart leopard coat. “Is your mother home?” she asked Helen just as Mrs. Concord came out of the living room.

“I’m Mrs. Concord,” Helen’s mother said.

“I’m Mrs. Friedman,” Mrs. Friedman said. “Bob Friedman’s mother.”

“Bob Friedman,” Mrs. Concord repeated.

Mrs. Friedman smiled apologetically. “I thought surely your boy would have mentioned Bobby,” she said.

“Of course he has,” Helen said suddenly. “He’s the one Charlie’s *always* writing about, Mother. It’s so hard to make a connection,” she said to Mrs. Friedman, “because Charlie seems so far away.”

Mrs. Concord was nodding. “Of course,” she said. “Won’t you come in and sit down?”

Mrs. Friedman followed the Concords into the living-room and sat in one of the chairs not filled with sewing. Mrs. Concord waved her hand at the room. “It makes such a mess,” she said, “but every now and then Helen and I just get to work and make things. These are kitchen curtains,” she added, picking up the material she had been working on.

“They’re very nice,” Mrs. Friedman said politely.

“Well, tell us about your son,” Mrs. Concord went on. “I’m amazed that I didn’t recognize the name right away, but somehow I associate Bob Friedman with Charles and the Army, and it seemed strange to have his mother here in town.”

Mrs. Friedman laughed. “That’s just about the way I felt,” she said. “Bobby wrote me that his friend’s mother lived here only a few blocks from us, and said why didn’t I drop in and say Hello.”

“I’m so glad you did,” Mrs. Concord said.

“I guess we know about as much about Bob as you do by now,” Helen said. “Charlie’s always writing about him.”

Mrs. Friedman opened her purse. “I even have a letter from Charlie,” she said. “I thought you’d like to take a look at it.”

“Charles wrote you?” Mrs. Concord asked.

“Just a note. He likes the pipe tobacco I send Bobby,” Mrs. Friedman explained, “and I put a tin of it in for him the last time I sent Bobby a package.” She handed the letter to Mrs. Concord and said to Helen, “I imagine I could tell you all about yourselves, Bobby’s said so much about all of you.”

“Well,” Helen said, “I know that Bob got you a Japanese sword for Christmas. *That* must have looked lovely under the tree. Charlie helped him buy it from the boy that had it — did you hear about that, and how they almost had a fight with the boy?”

“*Bobby* almost had a fight,” Mrs. Friedman said. “Charlie was smart and stayed out of it.”

“No, we heard it that *Charlie* was the one who got in trouble,” Helen said. She and Mrs. Friedman laughed.

“Maybe we shouldn’t compare notes,” Mrs. Friedman said. “They don’t seem to stick together on their stories.” She turned to Mrs. Concord, who had finished the letter and handed it to Helen. “I was just telling your daughter how many complimentary things I’ve heard about you.”

“We’ve heard a lot about you, too,” Mrs. Concord said.

“Charlie showed Bob a picture of you and your two daughters. The younger one’s Nancy, isn’t it?”

“Nancy, yes,” Mrs. Concord said.

“Well, Charlie certainly thinks a lot of his family,” Mrs. Friedman said. “Wasn’t he nice to write me?” she asked Helen.

“That tobacco must be good,” Helen said. She hesitated for a minute and handed the letter back to Mrs. Friedman, who put it in her purse.

“I’d love to meet Charlie sometime,” Mrs. Friedman said. “It seems as though I know him so well.”

“I’m sure he’ll want to meet you when he comes back,” Mrs. Concord said.

“I hope it won’t be long now,” Mrs. Friedman said. All three were silent for a minute, and then Mrs. Friedman went on with animation, “It seems so strange that we’ve been living in the same town and it took our boys so far away to introduce us.”

“This is a very hard town to get acquainted in,” Mrs. Concord said.

“Have you lived here long?” Mrs. Friedman smiled apologetically. “Of course I know of your husband,” she added. “My sister’s children are in your husband’s high school and they speak so highly of him.”

“Really?” Mrs. Concord said. “My husband has lived here all his life. I came here from the West when I was married.”

“Then it hasn’t been hard for you to get settled and make friends,” Mrs. Friedman said.

“No, I never had much trouble,” Mrs. Concord said. “Of course most of our friends are people who went to school with my husband.”

“I’m sorry Bobby never got a chance to study under Mr. Concord,” Mrs. Friedman said. “Well.…” She rose. “I have certainly enjoyed meeting you at last.”

“I’m so glad you came over,” Mrs. Concord said. “It’s like having a letter from Charles.”

“And I know how welcome a letter can be, the way I wait for Bobby’s,” Mrs. Friedman said. She and Mrs. Concord started for the door and Helen got up and followed them. “My husband is very much interested in Charlie, you know. Ever since he found out that Charlie was studying law when he went into the Army.”

“Your husband is a lawyer?” Mrs. Concord asked.

“He’s the Friedman of Grunewald, Friedman & White,” Mrs. Friedman said. “When Charlie is ready to start out for himself, perhaps my husband could find a place for him.”

“That’s awfully kind of you,” Mrs. Concord said. “Charles will be so sorry when I tell him. You see, it’s always been sort of arranged that he’d go in with Charles Satterthwaite, my husband’s oldest friend. Satterthwaite & Harris.”

“I believe Mr. Friedman knows the firm,” Mrs. Friedman said.

“A fine old firm,” Mrs. Concord said. “Mr. Concord’s grandfather used to be a partner.”

“Give Bob our best regards when you write him,” Helen said.

“I will,” Mrs. Friedman said. “I’ll tell him all about meeting you. It’s been very nice,” she said, holding out her hand to Mrs. Concord.

“I’ve enjoyed it,” Mrs. Concord said.

“Tell Charlie I’ll send him some more tobacco,” Mrs. Friedman said to Helen.

“I certainly will,” Helen said.

“Well, good-bye then,” Mrs. Friedman said.

“Good-bye,” Mrs. Concord said.

THE DUMMY

IT WAS A respectable, well-padded restaurant with a good chef and a group of entertainers who called themselves a floor show; the people who came there laughed quietly and dined thoroughly, appreciating the principle that the check was always a little more than the restaurant and the entertainment and the company warranted; it was a respectable, likable restaurant, and two women could go into it alone with perfect decorum and have a faintly exciting dinner. When Mrs. Wilkins and Mrs. Straw came noiselessly down the carpeted staircase into the restaurant none of the waiters looked up more than once, quickly, few of the guests turned, and the head-waiter came quietly and bowed agreeably before he turned to the room and the few vacant tables far in the back.

“Do you *mind* being so far away from everything, Alice?” Mrs. Wilkins, who was hostess, said to Mrs. Straw. “We can wait for a table, if you like. Or go somewhere else?”

“Of course not.” Mrs. Straw was a rather large woman in a heavy flowered hat, and she looked affectionately at the substantial dinners set on near-by tables. “I don’t mind where we sit; this is really lovely.”

“Anywhere will do,” Mrs. Wilkins said to the headwaiter. “Not *too* far back if you can help it.”

The headwaiter listened carefully and nodded, stepping delicately off between the tables to one very far back, near the doorway where the entertainers came in and out, near the table where the lady who owned the restaurant was sitting drinking beer, near the kitchen doors. “Nothing nearer?” Mrs. Wilkins said, frowning at the headwaiter.

The headwaiter shrugged, gesturing at the other vacant tables. One was behind a post, another was set for a large party, a third was somehow behind the small orchestra.

"This will do beautifully, Jen," Mrs. Straw said. "Well sit right down."

Mrs. Wilkins hesitated still, but Mrs. Straw pulled out the chair on one side of the table and sat down with a sigh, setting her gloves and pocketbook on the extra chair beside her, and reaching to unfasten the collar of her coat.

"I can't say I *like* this," Mrs. Wilkins said, sliding into the chair opposite. "I'm not sure we can see anything."

"Of course we can," Mrs. Straw said. "We can see all that's going on, and of course well be able to hear everything. Would you like to sit here instead?" she finished reluctantly.

"Of course not, Alice," Mrs. Wilkins said. She accepted the menu the waiter was offering her and set it down on the table, scanning it rapidly. "The food is quite good here," she said.

"Shrimp casserole," Mrs. Straw said. "Fried chicken." She sighed. "I certainly am hungry."

Mrs. Wilkins ordered quickly, with no debate, and then helped Mrs. Straw choose. When the waiter had gone Mrs. Straw leaned back comfortably and turned in her chair to see all of the restaurant. "This is a lovely place," she said.

"The people seem to be very nice," Mrs. Wilkins said. "The woman who owns it is sitting over there, in back of you. I've always thought she looked very clean and decent."

"She probably makes sure the glasses are washed," Mrs. Straw said. She turned back to the table and picked up her pocketbook, diving deep into it after a pack of cigarettes and a box of wooden safety matches, which she set on the table. “I like to see a place that serves food kept nice and clean,” she said.

“They make a lot of money from this place,” Mrs. Wilkins said. “Tom and 1 used to come here years ago before they enlarged it. It was very nice then, but it attracts a better class of people now.”

Mrs. Straw regarded the crabmeat cocktail now in front of her with deep satisfaction. “Yes, indeed,” she said.

Mrs. Wilkins picked up her fork indifferently, watching Mrs. Straw. “I had a letter from Walter yesterday,” she said.

“What’d he have to say?” Mrs. Straw asked.

“He seems fine,” Mrs. Wilkins said. “Seems like there’s a lot he doesn’t tell us.”

“Walter’s a good boy,” Mrs. Straw said. “You worry too much.”

The orchestra began to play suddenly and violently and the lights darkened to a spotlight on the stage.

“I hate to eat in the dark,” Mrs. Wilkins said.

“We’ll get plenty of light back here from those doors,” Mrs. Straw said. She put down her fork and turned to watch the orchestra.

“They’ve made Walter a proctor,” Mrs. Wilkins said.

“He’ll be first in his class,” Mrs. Straw said. “Look at the dress on that girl.”

Mrs. Wilkins turned covertly, looking at the girl Mrs. Straw had indicated with her head. The girl had come out of the doorway that led to the entertainers’ rooms; she was tall and very dark, with heavy black hair and thick eyebrows, and the dress was electric green satin, cut very low, with a flaming orange flower on one shoulder. “I never did see a dress like that,” Mrs. Wilkins said. “She must be going to dance or something.”

“She’s not a very pretty girl,” Mrs. Straw said. “And look at the fellow with her!”

Mrs. Wilkins turned again, and moved her head back quickly to smile at Mrs. Straw. “He looks like a monkey,” she said.

“So little,” Mrs. Straw said. “I hate those flabby little blond men.”

“They used to have such a nice floor show here,” Mrs. Wilkins said. “Music, and dancers, and sometimes a nice young man who would sing requests from the audience. Once they had an organist, I think.”

“This is our dinner coming along now,” Mrs. Straw said. The music had faded down, and the leader of the orchestra, who acted as master of ceremonies, introduced the first number, a pair of ballroom dancers. When the applause started, a tall young man and a tall young woman came out of the entertainers’ door and made their way through the tables to the dance floor; on their way they both gave a nod of recognition to the girl in electric green and the man with her.

“Aren’t they graceful?” Mrs. Wilkins said when the dance started. “They always look so pretty, that kind of dancers.”

“They have to watch their weight,” Mrs. Straw said critically. “Look at the figure on the girl in green.”

Mrs. Wilkins turned again. “I hope they’re not comedians.”

“They don’t look very funny right now,” Mrs. Straw said. She estimated the butter left on her plate. “Every time I eat a good dinner,” she said, “I think of Walter and the food we used to get in school.”

“Walter writes that the food is quite good,” Mrs. Wilkins said. “He’s gained something like three pounds.”

Mrs. Straw raised her eyes. “For heaven’s sake!”

“What is it?”

“I think he’s a ventriloquist,” Mrs. Straw said. “I do believe he is.”

"They're very popular right now," Mrs. Wilkins said.

"I haven't seen one since I was a kid," Mrs. Straw said. "He's got a little man — what do you call them? — in that box there." She continued to watch, her mouth a little open. "Look at it, Jen."

The girl in green and the man had sat down at a table near the entertainers' door. She was leaning forward, watching the dummy, which was sitting on the man's lap. It was a grotesque wooden copy of the man — where he was blond, the dummy was extravagantly yellow-haired, with sleek wooden curls and sideburns; where the man was small and ugly, the dummy was smaller and uglier, with the same wide mouth, the same staring eyes, the horrible parody of evening clothes, complete to tiny black shoes.

"I wonder how they happen to have a ventriloquist *here,*" Mrs. Wilkins said.

The girl in green was leaning across the table to the dummy, straightening his tie, fastening one shoe, smoothing the shoulders of his coat. As she leaned back again the man spoke to her and she shrugged indifferently.

"I can't take my eyes off that green dress," Mrs. Straw said. She started as the waiter came softly up to her with the menu, waiting uneasily for their dessert orders, his eye on the stage where the orchestra was finishing a between-acts number. By the time Mrs. Straw had decided on apple pie with chocolate ice cream the master of ceremonies was introducing the ventriloquist "…and Marmaduke, a chip off the old block!"

"I hope it's not very long," Mrs. Wilkins said. "We can't hear from here anyway."

The ventriloquist and the dummy were sitting in the spotlight, both grinning widely, talking fast; the man's weak blond face was close to the dummy's staring grin, their black shoulders against one another. Their conversation was rapid; the audience was laughing affectionately, knowing most of the jokes before the dummy finished speaking, silent with interest for a minute and then laughing again before the words were out.

"I think he's terrible," Mrs. Wilkins said to Mrs. Straw during one roar of laughter. "They're always so coarse."

"Look at our friend in the green dress," Mrs. Straw said. The girl was leaning forward, following every word, tense and excited. For a minute the heavy sullenness of her face had vanished; she was laughing with everyone else, her eyes light. "*She* thinks it's funny," Mrs. Straw said.

Mrs. Wilkins drew her shoulders closer together and shivered. She attacked her dish of ice cream primly

"I always wonder," she began after a minute, "why places like this, you know, with really good food, never seem to think about desserts. It's always ice cream or something."

"Nothing better than ice cream," Mrs. Straw said.

"You'd think they'd have pastries, or some nice pudding," Mrs. Wilkins said. "They never seem to give any *thought* to it."

"I've never seen anything like that fig-and-date pudding you make, Jen," Mrs. Straw said.

"Walter always used to say that was the best—" Mrs. Wilkins began, and was cut short by a blare from the orchestra. The ventriloquist and the dummy were bowing, the man bowing deeply from the waist and the dummy bobbing his head courteously; the orchestra began quickly with a dance tune, and the man and the dummy turned and trotted off the stage.

"Thank heavens," Mrs. Wilkins said.

"I haven't seen one of those for years," Mrs. Straw said.

The girl in green had risen, waiting for the man and the dummy to come back to the table. The man sat down heavily, the dummy still on his knee, and the girl sat down again, on the edge of her chair, asking him something urgently.

“What do *you* think?” he said loudly, without looking at her. He waved to a waiter, who hesitated, looking in back of him at the table where the woman who owned the restaurant was sitting alone. After a minute the waiter approached the man, and the girl said, her voice clear over the soft waltz the orchestra was playing, “Don’t drink anything more, Joey, we’ll go somewhere and eat.”

The man spoke to the waiter, ignoring the girl’s hand on his arm. He turned to the dummy, speaking softly, and the dummy’s face and broad grin looked at the girl and then back at the man. The girl sat back, looking out of the corners of her eyes at the owner of the restaurant.

“I’d hate to be married to a man like that,” Mrs. Straw said.

“He’s certainly not a very good comedian,” Mrs. Wilkins said.

The girl was leaning forward again, arguing, and the man was talking to the dummy, making the dummy nod in agreement. When the girl put a hand on his shoulder the man shrugged it away without turning around. The girl’s voice rose again. “Listen, Joey,” she was saying.

“In a minute,” the man said. “I just want to have this one drink.”

“Yeah, leave him alone, can’t you?” the dummy said.

“You don’t need another drink now, Joey,” the girl said. “You can get another drink later.”

The man said, “Look, honey, I’ve got a drink ordered. I can’t leave before it comes.”

“Why don’t you make old deadhead shut up?” the dummy said to the man, “always making a fuss when she sees someone having a good time. Why don’t you tell her to shut up?”

"You shouldn't talk like that," the man said to the dummy. "It's not nice."

"*I* can talk if I want to," the dummy said. "She can't make *me* stop."

"Joey," the girl said, "I want to talk to you. Listen, let's go somewhere and talk."

"Shut up for a minute," the dummy said to the girl. "For God's sake will you shut up for a minute?"

People at nearby tables were beginning to turn, interested in the dummy's loud voice, and laughing already, hearing him talk. "*Please* be quiet," the girl said.

"Yeah, don't make such a fuss," the man said to the dummy. "I'm just going to have this one drink. She doesn't mind."

"He's not going to bring you any drink," the girl said impatiently. "They told him not to. They wouldn't give you a drink here, the way you're acting."

"I'm acting fine," the man said.

"*I'm* the one making the fuss," the dummy said. "It's time someone told you, sweetheart, you're going to get into trouble acting like a wet blanket all the time. A man won't stand for it forever."

"Be quiet," the girl said, looking around her anxiously. "Everyone can hear you."

"Let them hear me," the dummy said. He turned his grinning head around at his audience and raised his voice. "Just because a man wants to have a good time she has to freeze up like an icebag."

"Now, Marmaduke," the man said to the dummy, "you'd better talk nicer to your old mother."

"Why, I wouldn't tell that old bag the right time," the dummy said. "If she doesn't like it here, let her get back on the streets."

Mrs. Wilkins' mouth opened, and shut again; she put her napkin down on the table and stood up. While Mrs. Straw watched blankly she walked over to the other table and slapped the dummy sharply across the face.

By the time she had turned and come back to her own table Mrs. Straw had her coat on and was standing.

"We'll pay on the way out," Mrs. Wilkins said curtly.

She picked up her coat and the two of them walked with dignity to the door. For a moment the man and girl sat looking at the dummy slumped over sideways, its head awry. Then the girl reached over and straightened the wooden head.

SEVEN TYPES OF AMBIGUITY

THE BASEMENT ROOM of the bookstore seemed to be enormous; it stretched in long rows of books off into dimness at either end, with books lined in tall bookcases along the walls, and books standing in piles on the floor. At the foot of the spiral staircase winding down from the neat small store upstairs, Mr. Harris, owner and sales-clerk of the bookstore, had a small desk, cluttered with catalogues, lighted by one dirty overhead lamp. The same lamp served to light the shelves which crowded heavily around Mr. Harris' desk; farther away, along the lines of book tables, there were other dirty overhead lamps, to be lighted by pulling a string and turned off by the customer when he was ready to grope his way back to Mr. Harris' desk, pay for his purchases and have them wrapped. Mr. Harris, who knew the position of any author or any title in all the heavy shelves, had one customer at the moment, a boy of about eighteen, who was standing far down the long room directly under one of the lamps, leafing through a book he had selected from the shelves. It was cold in the big basement room; both Mr. Harris and the boy had their coats on. Occasionally Mr. Harris got up from his desk to put a meagre shovelful of coal on a small iron stove which stood in the curve of the staircase. Except when Mr. Harris got up, or the boy turned to put a book back into the shelves and take out another, the room was quiet, the books standing silent in the dim light.

Then the silence was broken by the sound of the door opening in the little upstairs bookshop where Mr. Harris kept his best-sellers and art books on display. There was the sound of voices, while both Mr. Harris and the boy listened, and then the girl who took care of the upstairs bookshop said, “Right on down the stairs. Mr. Harris will help you.”

Mr. Harris got up and walked around to the foot of the stairs, turning on another of the overhead lamps so that his new customer would be able to see his way down. The boy put his book back in the shelves and stood with his hand on the back of it, still listening.

When Mr. Harris saw that it was a woman coming down the stairs he stood back politely and said, “Watch the bottom step. There’s one more than people think.” The woman stepped carefully down and stood looking around. While she stood there a man came carefully around the turn in the staircase, ducking his head so his hat would clear the low ceiling. “Watch the bottom step,” the woman said in a soft clear voice. The man came down beside her and raised his head to look around as she had.

“Quite a lot of books you have here,” he said.

Mr. Harris smiled his professional smile. “Can I help you?”

The woman looked at the man, and he hesitated a minute and then said, “We want to get some books. Quite a few of them.” He waved his hand inclusively. “Sets of books.”

“Well, if it’s books you want,” Mr. Harris said, and smiled again. “Maybe the lady would like to come over and sit down?” He led the way around to his desk, the woman following him and the man walking uneasily between the tables of books, his hands close to his sides as though he were afraid of breaking something. Mr. Harris gave the lady his desk chair and then sat down on the edge of his desk, shoving aside a pile of catalogues.

“This is a very interesting place,” the lady said, in the same soft voice she had used when she spoke before. She was middle-aged and nicely dressed; all her clothes were fairly new, but quiet and well planned for her age and air of shyness. The man was big and hearty-looking, his face reddened by the cold air and his big hands holding a pair of wool gloves uneasily.

“We’d like to buy some of your books,” the man said. “Some good books.”

“Anything in particular?” Mr. Harris asked.

The man laughed loudly, but with embarrassment. “Tell the truth,” he said, “I sound sort of foolish, now. But I don’t know much about these things, like books.” In the large quiet store his voice seemed to echo, after his wife’s soft voice and Mr. Harris’. “We were sort of hoping you’d be able to tell *us,*” he said. “None of this trash they turn out nowadays.” He cleared his throat. “Something like Dickens,” he said.

“Dickens,” Mr. Harris said.

“I used to read Dickens when I was a kid,” the man said. “Books like that, now, good books.” He looked up as the boy who had been standing off among the books came over to them. “I’d like to read Dickens again,” the big man said.

“Mr. Harris,” the boy asked quietly.

Mr. Harris looked up. “Yes, Mr. Clark?” he said.

The boy came closer to the desk, as though unwilling to interrupt Mr. Harris with his customers. “I’d like to take another look at the Empson,” he said.

Mr. Harris turned to the glass-doored bookcase immediately behind his desk and selected a book. “Here it is,” he said, “you’ll have it read through before you buy it at this rate.” He smiled at the big man and his wife. “Some day he’s going to come in and buy that book,” he said, “and I’m going to go out of business from shock.”

The boy turned away, holding the book, and the big man leaned forward to Mr. Harris. “I figure I’d like two good sets, big, like Dickens,” he said, “and then a couple of smaller sets.”

“And a copy of *Jane Eyre,*” his wife said, in her soft voice. “I used to love that book,” she said to Mr. Harris.

“I can let you have a very nice set of the Brontës,” Mr. Harris said. “Beautiful binding.”

“I want them to look nice,” the man said, “but solid, for reading. I’m going to read through all of Dickens again.”

The boy came back to the desk, holding the book out to Mr. Harris. “It still looks good,” he said

“It’s right here when you want it,” Mr. Harris said, turning back to the bookcase with the book. “It’s pretty scarce, that book.”

“I guess it’ll be here a while longer,” the boy said.

“What’s the name of this book?” the big man asked curiously.

“*Seven Types of Ambiguity,*” the boy said. “It’s quite a good book.”

“There’s a fine name for a book,” the big man said to Mr. Harris. “Pretty smart young fellow, reading books with names like that.”

“It’s a good book,” the boy repeated.

“I’m trying to buy some books myself,” the big man said to the boy. “I want to catch up on a few I’ve missed. Dickens, I’ve always liked his books.”

“Meredith is good,” the boy said. “You ever try reading Meredith?”

“Meredith,” the big man said. “Let’s see a few of your books,” he said to Mr. Harris. “I’d sort of like to pick out a few I want.”

“Can I take the gentleman down there?” the boy said to Mr. Harris. “I’ve got to go back anyway to get my hat.”

“I’ll go with the young man and look at the books, Mother,” the big man said to his wife. “You stay here and keep warm.”

"Fine," Mr. Harris said. "He knows where the books are as well as I do," he said to the big man.

The boy started off down the aisle between the book tables, and the big man followed, still walking carefully, trying not to touch anything. They went down past the lamp still burning where the boy had left his hat and gloves, and the boy turned on another lamp further down. "Mr. Harris keeps most of his sets around here," the boy said. "Let's see what we can find." He squatted down in front of the bookcases, touching the backs of the rows of books lightly with his fingers. "How do you feel about the prices?" he asked.

"I'm willing to pay a reasonable amount for the books I have in mind," the big man said. He touched the book in front of him experimentally, with one finger. "A hundred and fifty, two hundred dollars altogether."

The boy looked up at him and laughed. "That ought to get you some nice books," he said.

"Never saw so many books in my life," the big man said. "I never thought I'd see the day when I'd just walk into a bookstore and buy up all the books I always wanted to read."

"It's a good feeling."

"I never got a chance to read much," the man said. "Went right into the machine-shop where my father worked when I was much younger than you, and worked ever since. Now all of a sudden I find I have a little more money than I used to, and Mother and I decided we'd like to get ourselves a few things we always wanted."

"Your wife was interested in the Brontës," the boy said. "Here's a very good set."

The man leaned down to look at the books the boy pointed out. "I don't know much about these things," he said. "They look nice, all alike. What's the next set?"

"Carlyle," the boy said. "You can skip him. He's not quite what you're looking for. Meredith is good. And Thackeray. I think you'd want Thackeray; he's a great writer."

The man took one of the books the boy handed him and opened it carefully, using only two fingers from each of his big hands. "This looks fine," he said.

"I'll write them down," the boy said. He took a pencil and a pocket memorandum from his coat pocket. "Brontës," he said, "Dickens, Meredith, Thackeray." He ran his hand along each of the sets as he read them off.

The big man narrowed his eyes. "I ought to take one more," he said. "These won't quite fill up the bookcase I got for them."

"Jane Austen," the boy said. "Your wife would be pleased with that."

"You read all these books?" the man asked.

"Most of them," the boy said.

The man was quiet for a minute and then he went on, "I never got much of a chance to read anything, going to work so early. I've got a lot to catch up on."

"You're going to have a fine time," the boy said.

"That book you had a while back," the man said. "What was that book?"

"It's aesthetics," the boy said. "About literature. It's very scarce. I've been trying to buy it for quite a while and haven't had the money."

"You go to college?" the man asked.

"Yes."

"Here's one I ought to read again," the man said. "Mark Twain. I read a couple of his books when I was a kid. But I guess I have enough to start on." He stood up.

The boy rose too, smiling. "You're going to have to do a lot of reading."

“I like to read,” the man said. “I really like to read.”

He started back down the aisles, going straight for Mr. Harris’ desk. The boy turned off the lamps and followed, stopping to get his hat and gloves. When the big man reached Mr. Harris’ desk he said to his wife, “That’s sure a smart kid. He knows those books right and left.”

“Did you pick out what you want?” his wife asked.

“The kid has a fine list for me.” He turned to Mr. Harris and went on, “It’s quite an experience seeing a kid like that liking books the way he does. When I was his age I was working for four or five years.”

The boy came up with the slip of paper in his hand. “These ought to hold him for a while,” he said to Mr. Harris.

Mr. Harris glanced at the list and nodded. “That Thackeray’s a nice set of books,” he said.

The boy had put his hat on and was standing at the foot of the stairs. “Hope you enjoy them,” he said. “I’ll be back for another look at that Empson, Mr. Harris.”

“I’ll try to keep it around for you,” Mr. Harris said. “I can’t promise to hold it, you know.”

“I’ll just count on it’s being here,” the boy said.

“Thanks, son,” the big man called out as the boy started up the stairs. “Appreciate your helping me.”

“That’s all right,” the boy said.

“He’s sure a smart kid,” the man said to Mr. Harris. “He’s got a great chance, with an education like that.”

“He’s a nice young fellow,” Mr. Harris said, “and he sure wants that book.”

“You think he’ll ever buy it?” the big man asked.

"I doubt it," Mr. Harris said. "If you'll just write down your name and address, I'll add these prices."

Mr. Harris began to note down the prices of the books, copying from the boy's neat list. After the big man had written his name and address, he stood for a minute drumming his fingers on the desk, and then he said, "Can I have another look at that book?"

"The Empson?" Mr. Harris said, looking up.

"The one the boy was so interested in." Mr. Harris reached around to the bookcase in back of him and took out the book. The big man held it delicately, as he had held the others, and he frowned as he turned the pages. Then he put the book down on Mr. Harris' desk.

"If he isn't going to buy it, will it be all right if I put this in with the rest?" he asked.

Mr. Harris looked up from his figures for a minute, and then he made the entry on his list. He added quickly, wrote down the total, and then pushed the paper across the desk to the big man. While the man checked over the figures Mr. Harris turned to the woman and said, "Your husband has bought a lot of very pleasant reading."

"I'm glad to hear it," she said. "We've been looking forward to it for a long time."

The big man counted out the money carefully, handing the bills to Mr. Harris. Mr. Harris put the money in the top drawer of his desk and said, "We can have these delivered to you by the end of the week, if that will be all right."

"Fine," the big man said. "Ready, Mother?"

The woman rose, and the big man stood back to let her go ahead of him. Mr. Harris followed, stopping near the stairs to say to the woman, "Watch the bottom step."

They started up the stairs and Mr. Harris stood watching them until they got to the turn. Then he switched off the dirty overhead lamp and went back to his desk.

COME DANCE WITH ME IN IRELAND

YOUNG MRS. ARCHER was sitting on the bed with Kathy Valentine and Mrs. Corn, playing with the baby and gossiping, when the doorbell rang. Mrs. Archer, saying, "Oh, dear!," went to push the buzzer that released the outside door of the apartment building. "We *had* to live on the ground floor," she called to Kathy and Mrs. Corn. "Everybody rings our bell for everything."

When the inner doorbell rang she opened the door of the apartment and saw an old man standing in the outer hall. He was wearing a long, shabby black overcoat and had a square white beard. He held out a handful of shoelaces.

"Oh," Mrs. Archer said. "Oh, I'm terribly sorry, but—"

"Madam," the old man said, "if you would be so kind. A nickel apiece."

Mrs. Archer shook her head and backed away. "I'm afraid not," she said.

"Thank you anyway, Madam," he said, "for speaking courteously. The first person on this block who has been decently polite to a poor old man."

Mrs. Archer turned the doorknob back and forth nervously. "I'm awfully sorry," she said. Then, as he turned to go, she said, "Wait a minute," and hurried into the bedroom. "Old man selling shoelaces," she whispered. She pulled open the top dresser drawer, took out her pocketbook, and fumbled in the change purse. "Quarter," she said. "Think it's all right?"

"Sure," Kathy said. "Probably more than he's gotten all day." She was Mrs. Archer's age, and unmarried. Mrs. Corn was a stout woman in her middle fifties. They both lived in the building and spent a good deal of time at Mrs. Archer's, on account of the baby.

Mrs. Archer returned to the front door. “Here,” she said, holding out the quarter. “I think it’s a shame everyone was so rude.”

The old man started to offer her some shoelaces, but his hand shook and the shoelaces dropped to the floor. He leaned heavily against the wall. Mrs. Archer watched, horrified. “Good Lord,” she said, and put out her hand. As her fingers touched the dirty old overcoat she hesitated and then, tightening her lips, she put her arm firmly through his and tried to help him through the doorway. “Girls,” she called, “come help me, quick!”

Kathy came running out of the bedroom, saying, “Did you call, Jean?” and then stopped dead, staring.

“What’ll I do?” Mrs. Archer said, standing with her arm through the old man’s. His eyes were closed and he seemed barely able, with her help, to stand on his feet. “For heaven’s sake, grab him on the other side.”

“Get him to a chair or something,” Kathy said. The hall was too narrow for all three of them to go down side by side, so Kathy took the old man’s other arm and half-led Mrs. Archer and him into the living-room. “Not in the good chair,” Mrs. Archer exclaimed. “In the old leather one.” They dropped the old man into the leather chair and stood back. “What on earth do we do now?” Mrs. Archer said.

“Do you have any whiskey?” Kathy asked.

Mrs. Archer shook her head. “A little wine,” she said doubtfully.

Mrs. Corn came into the living-room, holding the baby. “Gracious!” she said. “He’s drunk!”

“Nonsense,” Kathy said. “I wouldn’t have let Jean bring him in if he were.”

“Watch out for the baby, Blanche,” Mrs. Archer said.

“Naturally,” Mrs. Corn said. “We’re going back into the bedroom, honey,” she said to the baby, “and then we’re going to get into our lovely crib and go beddy-bye."

The old man stirred and opened his eyes. He tried to get up.

"Now you stay right where you are," Kathy ordered, "and Mrs. Archer here is going to bring you a little bit of wine. You'd like that, wouldn't you?"

The old man raised his eyes to Kathy. "Thank you," he said.

Mrs. Archer went into the kitchen. After a moment's thought she took the glass from over the sink, rinsed it out, and poured some sherry into it. She took the glass of sherry back into the living-room and handed it to Kathy.

"Shall I hold it for you or can you drink by yourself?" Kathy asked the old man.

"You are much too kind," he said, and reached for the glass. Kathy steadied it for him as he sipped from it, and then he pushed it away.

"That's enough, thank you," he said. "Enough to revive me." He tried to rise. "Thank you," he said to Mrs. Archer, "and thank *you,*" to Kathy. "I had better be going along."

"Not until you're quite firm on your feet," Kathy said. "Can't afford to take chances, you know."

The old man smiled. "*I* can afford to take chances," he said.

Mrs. Corn came back into the living-room. "Baby's in his crib," she said, "and just about asleep already. Does *he* feel better now? I'll bet he was just drunk or hungry or something."

"Of course he was," Kathy said, fired by the idea. "He was hungry. That's what was wrong all the time, Jean. How silly we were. Poor old gentleman!" she said to the old man. "Mrs. Archer is certainly not going to let you leave here without a full meal inside of you."

Mrs. Archer looked doubtful. "I have some eggs," she said.

“Fine!” Kathy said. “Just the thing. They’re easily digested,” she said to the old man, “and especially good if you haven’t eaten for” — she hesitated — “for a while.”

“Black coffee,” Mrs. Corn said, “if you ask me. Look at his hands shake.”

“Nervous exhaustion,” Kathy said firmly. “A nice hot cup of bouillon is all he needs to be good as ever, and he has to drink it very slowly until his stomach gets used to food again. The stomach,” she told Mrs. Archer and Mrs. Corn, “shrinks when it remains empty for any great period of time.”

“I would rather not trouble you,” the old man said to Mrs. Archer.

“Nonsense,” Kathy said. “We’ve got to see that you get a good hot meal to go on with.” She took Mrs. Archer’s arm and began to walk her out to the kitchen. “Just some eggs,” she said. “Fry four or five. I’ll get you half a dozen later. I don’t suppose you have any bacon. I’ll tell you, fry up a few potatoes too. He won’t care if they’re half-raw. These people eat things like heaps of fried potatoes and eggs and—”

“There’s some canned figs left over from lunch,” Mrs. Archer said. “I was wondering what to do with them.”

“I’ve got to run back and keep an eye on him,” Kathy said. “He might faint again or something. You just fry up those eggs and potatoes. I’ll send Blanche out if she’ll come.”

Mrs. Archer measured out enough coffee for two cups and set the pot on the stove. Then she took out her frying pan. “Kathy,” she said, “I’m just a little worried. If he really is drunk, I mean, and if Jim should hear about it, with the baby here and everything.…”

“Why, Jean!” Kathy said. “You should live in the country for a while, I guess. Women always give out meals to starving men. And you don’t need to *tell* Jim. Blanche and I certainly won’t say anything.”

“Well,” said Mrs. Archer, “you’re sure he isn’t drunk?”

“I know a starving man when I see one,” Kathy said. “When an old man like that can’t stand up and his hands shake and he looks so funny, that means he’s starving to death. Literally starving.”

“Oh, my!” said Mrs. Archer. She hurried to the cupboard under the sink and took out two potatoes. “Two enough, do you think? I guess we’re really doing a good deed.”

Kathy giggled. “Just a bunch of Girl Scouts,” she said. She started out of the kitchen, and then she stopped and turned around. “You have any pie? They always eat pie.”

“It was for dinner, though,” Mrs. Archer said.

“Oh, give it to him,” Kathy said. “We can run out and get some more after he goes.”

While the potatoes were frying, Mrs. Archer put a plate, a cup and saucer, and a knife and fork and spoon on the dinette table. Then, as an afterthought, she picked up the dishes and, taking a paper bag out of a cupboard, tore it in half and spread it smoothly on the table and put the dishes back. She got a glass and filled it with water from the bottle in the refrigerator, cut three slices of bread and put them on a plate, and then cut a small square of butter and put it on the plate with the bread. Then she got a paper napkin from the box in the cupboard and put it beside the plate, took it up after a minute to fold it into a triangular shape, and put it back. Finally she put the pepper and salt shakers on the table and got out a box of eggs. She went to the door and called, “Kathy! Ask him how does he want his eggs fried?”

There was a murmur of conversation in the living-room and Kathy called back, “Sunny side up!”

Mrs. Archer took out four eggs and then another and broke them one by one into the frying-pan. When they were done she called out, “All right, girls! Bring him in!”

Mrs. Corn came into the kitchen, inspected the plate of potatoes and eggs, and looked at Mrs. Archer without speaking. Then Kathy came, leading the old man by the arm. She escorted him to the table and sat him down in a chair. “There,” she said. “Now, Mrs. Archer’s fixed you a lovely hot meal.”

The old man looked at Mrs. Archer. “I’m very grateful,” he said.

“Isn’t that nice!” Kathy said. She nodded approvingly at Mrs. Archer. The old man regarded the plate of eggs and potatoes. “Now pitch right in,” Kathy said. “Sit down, girls. I’ll get a chair from the bedroom.”

The old man picked up the salt and shook it gently over the eggs. “This looks delicious,” he said finally.

“You just go right ahead and eat,” Kathy said, reappearing with a chair. “We want to see you get filled up. Pour him some coffee, Jean.”

Mrs. Archer went to the stove and took up the coffeepot.

“Please don’t bother,” he said.

“That’s all right,” Mrs. Archer said, filling the old man’s cup. She sat down at the table. The old man picked up the fork and then put it down again to take up the paper napkin and spread it carefully over his knees.

“What’s your name?” Kathy asked.

“O’Flaherty, Madam. John O’Flaherty.”

“Well, John,” Kathy said, “I am Miss Valentine and this lady is Mrs. Archer and the other one is Mrs. Corn.”

“How do you do?” the old man said.

“I gather you’re from the old country,” Kathy said.

“I beg your pardon?”

“Irish, aren’t you?” Kathy said.

“I am, Madam.” The old man plunged the fork into one of the eggs and watched the yoke run out onto the plate. “I knew Yeats,” he said suddenly.

“Really?” Kathy said, leaning forward. “Let me see — he was the writer, wasn’t he?”

“‘Come out of charity, come dance with me in Ireland,’” the old man said. He rose and, holding on to the chair back, bowed solemnly to Mrs. Archer, “Thank you again, Madam, for your generosity.” He turned and started for the front door. The three women got up and followed him.

“But you didn’t finish,” Mrs. Corn said.

“The stomach,” the old man said, “as this lady has pointed out, shrinks. Yes, indeed,” he went on reminiscently, “I knew Yeats.”

At the front door he turned and said to Mrs. Archer, “Your kindness should not go unrewarded.” He gestured to the shoelaces lying on the floor. “These,” he said, “are for you. For your kindness. Divide them with the other ladies.”

“But I wouldn’t dream—” Mrs. Archer began.

“I insist,” the old man said, opening the door. “A small return, but all that I have to offer. Pick them up yourself,” he added abruptly. Then he turned and thumbed his nose at Mrs. Corn. “I hate old women,” he said.

“Well!” said Mrs. Corn faintly.

“I may have imbibed somewhat freely,” the old man said to Mrs. Archer, “but I never served bad sherry to my guests We are of two different worlds, Madam.”

“Didn’t I tell you?” Mrs. Corn was saying. “Haven’t I kept telling you all along?”

Mrs. Archer, her eyes on Kathy, made a tentative motion of pushing the old man through the door, but he forestalled her.

“‘Come dance with me in Ireland,’” he said. Supporting himself against the wall, he reached the outer door and opened it. “And time runs on,” he said.

PART IV

We are never liable to be so betray'd and abused, till, by our vile *Dispositions* and *Tendencies,* we have forfeited the *tutelary* Care, and *Oversight* of the better Spirits; who, tho' generally they are our Guard and Defence against the Malice and Violence of evil *Angels,* yet it may well enough be thought, that some Time they may take their Leave of such as are swallowed up by *Malice, Envy,* and Desire of *Revenge,* Qualities most contrary to their *Life* and *Nature;* and leave them exposed to the *Invasion* and *Solicitations* of those *wicked Spirits,* to whom such hateful *Attributes* make them very suitable.

Joseph Glanvil: Sadducismus Triumphatus

OF COURSE

MRS. TYLOR, IN the middle of a busy morning, was far too polite to go out on the front porch and stare, but she saw no reason for avoiding the windows; when her vacuuming or her dishwashing, or even the upstairs bedmaking, took her near a window on the south side of the house she would lift the curtain slightly, or edge to one side and stir the shade. All she could see, actually, was the moving van in front of the house, and various small activities going on between the movers; the furniture, what she could see of it, looked fine.

Mrs. Tylor finished the beds and came downstairs to start lunch, and in the short space of time it took her to get from the front bedroom window to the kitchen window a taxi had stopped in front of the house next door and a small boy was dancing up and down on the sidewalk. Mrs. Taylor estimated him; about four, probably, unless he was small for his age; about right for her youngest girl. She turned her attention to the woman who was getting out of the taxi, and was further reassured. A nice-looking tan suit, a little worn and perhaps a *little* too light in color for moving day, but nicely cut, and Mrs. Tylor nodded appreciatively over the carrots she was scraping. *Nice* people, obviously.

Carol, Mrs. Tylor's youngest, was leaning on the fence in front of the Tylor house, watching the little boy next door. When the little boy stopped dancing up and down Carol said, "Hi." The little boy looked up, took a step backward, and said, "Hi." His mother looked at Carol, at the Tylor house, and down at her son. Then she said, "Hello there" to Carol. Mrs. Tylor smiled in the kitchen. Then, on a sudden impulse she dried her hands on a paper towel, took off her apron, and went to the front door. “Carol,” she called lightly, “Carol, dear.” Carol turned around, still leaning on the fence. “What?” she said uncooperatively.

“Oh, hello,” Mrs. Tylor said to the lady still standing on the sidewalk next to the little boy. “I heard Carol talking to someone.…”

“The children were making friends,” the lady said shyly.

Mrs. Tylor came down the steps to stand near Carol at the fence. “Are you our new neighbor?”

“If we ever get moved in,” the lady said. She laughed. “Moving day,” she said expressively.

“I know. Our name’s Tylor,” Mrs. Tylor said. “This is Carol.”

“*Our* name is Harris,” the lady said. “This is James Junior.”

“Say hello to James,” Mrs. Tylor said.

“And *you* say hello to Carol,” Mrs. Harris said.

Carol shut her mouth obstinately and the little boy edged behind his mother. Both ladies laughed. “Children!” one of them said, and the other said, “Isn’t it the way!”

Then Mrs. Tylor said, gesturing at the moving van and the two men moving in and out with chairs and tables and beds and lamps, “Heavens, isn’t it terrible?”

Mrs. Harris sighed. “I think I’ll just go crazy.”

“Is there anything we can do to help?” Mrs. Tylor asked. She smiled down at James. “Perhaps James would like to spend the afternoon with us?”

“That *would* be a relief,” Mrs. Harris agreed. She twisted around to look at James behind her. “Would you like to play with Carol this afternoon, honey?” James shook his head mutely and Mrs. Tylor said to him brightly, “Carol’s two older sisters might, just *might* take her to the movies, James. You’d like *that,* wouldn’t you?”

“I’m afraid not,” Mrs. Harris said flatly. “James does not go to movies.”

“Oh, well, of course,” Mrs. Tylor said, “lots of mothers *don’t,* of course, but when a child has two older.…”

“It isn’t that,” Mrs. Harris said. “We do not go to movies, any of us.”

Mrs. Tylor quickly registered the “any” as meaning there was probably a Mr. Harris somewhere around, and then her mind snapped back and she said blankly, “Don’t go to movies?”

“Mr. Harris,” Mrs. Harris said carefully, “feels that movies are intellectually retarding. We do not go to movies.”

“Naturally,” Mrs. Tylor said. “Well, I’m sure Carol wouldn’t mind staying home this afternoon. She’d love to play with James. Mr. Harris,” she added cautiously, “wouldn’t object to a sandbox?”

“I want to go to the movies,” Carol said.

Mrs. Tylor spoke quickly. “Why don’t you and James come over and rest at our house for a while? You’ve probably been running around all morning.”

Mrs. Harris hesitated, watching the movers. “Thank you,” she said finally. With James following along behind her, she came through the Tylors’ gate, and Mrs. Tylor said, “If we sit in the garden out back we can still keep an eye on your movers.” She gave Carol a small push. “Show James the sandbox, dear,” she said firmly.

Carol took James sullenly by the hand and led him over to the sandbox. “See?” she said, and went back to kick the fence pickets deliberately. Mrs. Tylor sat Mrs. Harris in one of the garden chairs and went over and found a shovel for James to dig with.

“It certainly feels good to sit down,” Mrs. Harris said. She sighed. “Sometimes I feel that moving is the most terrible thing I have to do.”

"You were lucky to get that house," Mrs. Tylor said, and Mrs. Harris nodded. "We'll be glad to get nice neighbors," Mrs. Tylor went on. "There's something so nice about congenial people right next door. I'll be running over to borrow cups of sugar," she finished roguishly.

"I certainly hope you will," Mrs. Harris said. "We had such disagreeable people next door to us in our old house. Small things, you know, and they do irritate you so." Mrs. Tylor sighed sympathetically. "The radio, for instance," Mrs. Harris continued, "all day long, and so *loud."*

Mrs. Tylor caught her breath for a minute. "You must be sure and tell us if ours is ever too loud."

"Mr. Harris cannot bear the radio," Mrs. Harris said. "We do not own one, of course."

"Of course," Mrs. Tylor said. "No radio."

Mrs. Harris looked at her and laughed uncomfortably. "You'll be thinking my husband is crazy."

"Of course not," Mrs. Tylor said. "After all, lots of people don't like radios; my oldest nephew, now, he's just the *other* way—"

"Well," Mrs. Harris said, "newspapers, too."

Mrs. Tylor recognized finally the faint nervous feeling that was tagging her; it was the way she felt when she was irrevocably connected with something dangerously out of control: her car, for instance, on an icy street, or the time on Virginia's roller skates.…Mrs. Harris was staring absent-mindedly at the movers going in and out, and she was saying, "It isn't as though we hadn't ever *seen* a newspaper, not like the movies at all; Mr. Harris just feels that the newspapers are a mass degradation of taste. You really never *need* to read a newspaper, you know," she said, looking around anxiously at Mrs. Tylor.

"I never read anything but the—"

"And we took *The New Republic* for a *number* of years," Mrs. Harris said. "When we were first married, of course. Before James was born."

"What is your husband's business?" Mrs. Tylor asked timidly.

Mrs. Harris lifted her head proudly. "He's a scholar," she said. "He writes monographs."

Mrs. Tylor opened her mouth to speak, but Mrs. Harris leaned over and put her hand out and said, "It's *terribly* hard for people to understand the desire for a really peaceful life."

"What," Mrs. Tylor said, "what does your husband do for relaxation?"

"He reads plays," Mrs. Harris said. She looked doubtfully over at James. "Pre-Elizabethan, of course."

"Of course," Mrs. Tylor said, and looked nervously at James, who was shoveling sand into a pail.

"People are really very unkind," Mrs. Harris said. "Those people I was telling you about, next door. It wasn't only the radio, you see. Three times they *deliberately* left their *New York Times* on our doorstep. Once James nearly got it."

"Good Lord," Mrs. Tylor said. She stood up. "Carol," she called emphatically, "don't go away. It's nearly time for lunch, dear."

"Well," Mrs. Harris said. "I must go and see if the movers have done anything right."

Feeling as though she had been rude, Mrs. Tylor said, "Where is Mr. Harris now?"

"At his mother's," Mrs. Harris said. "He always stays there when we move."

"Of course," Mrs. Tylor said, feeling as though she had been saying nothing else all morning.

"They don't turn the radio on while he's there," Mrs. Harris explained.

“Of course,” Mrs. Tylor said.

Mrs. Harris held out her hand and Mrs. Tylor took it. “I do so hope we’ll be friends,” Mrs. Harris said. “As you said, it means such a lot to have really thoughtful neighbors. And we’ve been so unlucky.”

“Of course,” Mrs. Tylor said, and then came back to herself abruptly. “Perhaps one evening soon we can get together for a game of bridge?” She saw Mrs. Harris’s face and said, “No. Well, anyway, we must all get together some evening soon.” They both laughed.

“It does sound silly, doesn’t it,” Mrs. Harris said. “Thanks so much for all your kindness this morning.”

“Anything we can do,” Mrs. Tylor said. “If you want to send James over this afternoon.”

“Perhaps I shall,” Mrs. Harris said. “If you really don’t mind.”

“Of course,” Mrs. Tylor said. “Carol, dear.”

With her arm around Carol she walked out to the front of the house and stood watching Mrs. Harris and James go into their house. They both stopped in the doorway and waved, and Mrs. Tylor and Carol waved back.

“Can’t I go to the movies,” Carol said, “*please,* Mother?”

“I’ll go with you, dear,” Mrs. Tylor said.

PILLAR OF SALT

FOR SOME REASON a tune was running through her head when she and her husband got on the train in New Hampshire for their trip to New York; they had not been to New York for nearly a year, but the tune was from farther back than that. It was from the days when she was fifteen or sixteen, and had never seen New York except in movies, when the city was made up, to her, of penthouses filled with Noel Coward people; when the height and speed and luxury and gaiety that made up a city like New York were confused inextricably with the dullness of being fifteen, and beauty unreachable and far in the movies.

“What *is* that tune?” she said to her husband, and hummed it. “It’s from some old movie, I think.”

“I know it,” he said, and hummed it himself. “Can’t remember the words.”

He sat back comfortably. He had hung up their coats, put the suitcases on the rack, and had taken his magazine out. “I’ll think of it sooner or later,” he said.

She looked out the window first, tasting it almost secretly, savoring the extreme pleasure of being on a moving train with nothing to do for six hours but read and nap and go into the dining-car, going farther and farther every minute from the children, from the kitchen floor, with even the hills being incredibly left behind, changing into fields and trees too far away from home to be daily. “I love trains,” she said, and her husband nodded sympathetically into his magazine.

Two weeks ahead, two unbelievable weeks, with all arrangements made, no further planning to do, except perhaps what theatres or what restaurants. A friend with an apartment went on a convenient vacation, there was enough money in the bank to make a trip to New York compatible with new snow suits for the children; there was the smoothness of unopposed arrangements, once the initial obstacles had been overcome, as though when they had really made up their minds, nothing dared stop them. The baby's sore throat cleared up. The plumber came, finished his work in two days, and left. The dresses had been altered in time; the hardware store could be left safely, once they had found the excuse of looking over new city products. New York had not burned down, had not been quarantined, their friend had gone away according to schedule, and Brad had the keys to the apartment in his pocket. Everyone knew where to reach everyone else; there was a list of plays not to miss and a list of items to look out for in the stores — diapers, dress materials, fancy canned goods, tarnish-proof silverware boxes. And, finally, the train was there, performing its function, pacing through the afternoon, carrying them legally and with determination to New York.

Margaret looked curiously at her husband, inactive in the middle of the afternoon on a train, at the other fortunate people traveling, at the sunny country outside, looked again to make sure, and then opened her book. The tune was still in her head, she hummed it and heard her husband take it up softly as he turned a page in his magazine.

In the dining-car she ate roast beef, as she would have done in a restaurant at home, reluctant to change over too quickly to the new, tantalizing food of a vacation. She had ice cream for dessert but became uneasy over her coffee because they were due in New York in an hour and she still had to put on her coat and hat, relishing every gesture, and Brad must take the suitcases down and put away the magazines. They stood at the end of the car for the interminable underground run, picking up their suitcases and putting them down again, moving restlessly inch by inch.

The station was a momentary shelter, moving visitors gradually into a world of people and sound and light to prepare them for the blasting reality of the street outside. She saw it for a minute from the sidewalk before she was in a taxi moving into the middle of it, and then they were bewilderingly caught and carried on uptown and whirled out on to another sidewalk and Brad paid the taxi driver and put his head back to look up at the apartment house. "This is it, all right," he said, as though he had doubted the driver's ability to find a number so simply given. Upstairs in the elevator, and the key fit the door. They had never seen their friend's apartment before, but it was reasonably familiar — a friend moving from New Hampshire to New York carries private pictures of a home not erasable in a few years, and the apartment had enough of home in it to settle Brad immediately in the right chair and comfort her with instinctive trust of the linen and blankets.

"This is home for two weeks," Brad said, and stretched. After the first few minutes they both went to the windows automatically; New York was below, as arranged, and the houses across the street were apartment houses filled with unknown people.

"It's wonderful," she said. There were cars down there, and people, and the noise was there. "I'm so happy," she said, and kissed her husband.

They went sight-seeing the first day; they had breakfast in an Automat and went to the top of the Empire State building. "Got it all fixed up now," Brad said, at the top. "Wonder just where that plane hit."

They tried to peer down on all four sides, but were embarrassed about asking. "After all," she said reasonably, giggling in a corner, "if something of mine got broken I wouldn’t want people poking around asking to see the pieces.”

“If you owned the Empire State building you wouldn’t care,” Brad said.

They traveled only in taxis the first few days, and one taxi had a door held on with a piece of string; they pointed to it and laughed silently at each other, and on about the third day, the taxi they were riding in got a flat tire on Broadway and they had to get out and find another.

“We’ve only got eleven days left,” she said one day, and then, seemingly minutes later, “we’ve already been here six days.”

They had got in touch with the friends they had expected to get in touch with, they were going to a Long Island summer home for a week end. “It looks pretty dreadful right now,” their hostess said cheerfully over the phone, “and we’re leaving in a week ourselves, but I’d never *forgive* you if you didn’t see it *once* while you were here.” The weather had been fair but cool, with a definite autumn awareness, and the clothes in the store windows were dark and already hinting at furs and velvets. She wore her coat every day, and suits most of the time. The light dresses she had brought were hanging in the closet in the apartment, and she was thinking now of getting a sweater in one of the big stores, something impractical for New Hampshire, but probably good for Long Island.

“I have to do some shopping, at least one day,” she said to Brad, and he groaned.

“Don’t ask me to carry packages,” he said.

“You aren’t up to a good day’s shopping,” she told him, “not after all this walking around you’ve been doing. Why don’t you go to a movie or something?”

“I want to do some shopping myself,” he said mysteriously. Perhaps he was talking about her Christmas present; she had thought vaguely of getting such things done in New York; the children would be pleased with novelties from the city, toys not seen in their home stores. At any rate she said, “You’ll probably be able to get to your wholesalers at last.”

They were on their way to visit another friend, who had found a place to live by a miracle and warned them consequently not to quarrel with the appearance of the building, or the stairs, or the neighborhood. All three were bad, and the stairs were three flights, narrow and dark, but there was a place to live at the top. Their friend had not been in New York long, but he lived by himself in two rooms, and had easily caught the mania for slim tables and low bookcases which made his rooms look too large for the furniture in some places, too cramped and uncomfortable in others.

“What a lovely place,” she said when she came in, and then was sorry when her host said, “Some day this damn situation will let up and I’ll be able to settle down in a really decent place.”

There were other people there; they sat and talked companionably about the same subjects then current in New Hampshire, but they drank more than they would have at home and it left them strangely unaffected; their voices were louder and their words more extravagant; their gestures, on the other hand, were smaller, and they moved a finger where in New Hampshire they would have waved an arm. Margaret said frequently, “We’re just staying here for a couple of weeks, on a vacation,” and she said, “It’s wonderful, so *exciting,*” and she said, “We were *terribly* lucky; this friend went out of town just at the right.…”

Finally the room was very full and noisy, and she went into a corner near a window to catch her breath. The window had been opened and shut all evening, depending on whether the person standing next to it had both hands free; and now it was shut, with the clear sky outside. Someone came and stood next to her, and she said, “Listen to the noise outside. It’s as bad as it is inside.”

He said, “In a neighborhood like this someone’s always getting killed.”

She frowned. “It sounds different than before. I mean, there’s a different sound to it.”

“Alcoholics,” he said. “Drunks in the streets. Fighting going on across the way.” He wandered away, carrying his drink.

She opened the window and leaned out, and there were people hanging out of the windows across the way shouting, and people standing in the street looking up and shouting, and from across the way she heard clearly, “Lady, lady.” They must mean me, she thought, they’re all looking this way. She leaned out farther and the voices shouted incoherently but somehow making an audible whole, “Lady, your house is on fire, lady, lady.”

She closed the window firmly and turned around to the other people in the room, raising her voice a little. “Listen,” she said, “they’re saying the house is on fire.” She was desperately afraid of their laughing at her, of looking like a fool while Brad across the room looked at her blushing. She said again, “The *house* is on *fire,*” and added, “They say,” for fear of sounding too vehement. The people nearest to her turned and someone said, “She says the house is on fire.”

She wanted to get to Brad and couldn’t see him; her host was not in sight either, and the people all around were strangers. They don’t listen to me, she thought, I might as well not be here, and she went to the outside door and opened it. There was no smoke, no flame, but she was telling herself, I might as well not be here, so she abandoned Brad in panic and ran without her hat and coat down the stairs, carrying a glass in one hand and a package of matches in the other. The stairs were insanely long, but they were clear and safe, and she opened the street door and ran out. A man caught her arm and said, “Everyone out of the house?” and she said, “No, Brad’s still there.” The fire engines swept around the corner, with people leaning out of the windows watching them, and the man holding her arm said, “It’s down here,” and left her. The fire was two houses away; they could see flames behind the top windows, and smoke against the night sky, but in ten minutes it was finished and the fire engines pulled away with an air of martyrdom for hauling out all their equipment to put out a ten-minute fire.

She went back upstairs slowly and with embarrassment, and found Brad and took him home.

“I was so frightened,” she said to him when they were safely in bed, “I lost my head completely.”

“You should have tried to find someone,” he said.

“They wouldn’t listen,” she insisted. “I kept telling them and they wouldn’t listen and then I thought I must have been mistaken. I had some idea of going down to see what was going on.”

“Lucky it was no worse,” Brad said sleepily.

“I felt trapped,” she said. “High up in that old building with a fire; it’s like a nightmare. And in a strange city.”

“Well, it’s all over now,” Brad said.

The same faint feeling of insecurity tagged her the next day; she went shopping alone and Brad went off to see hardware, after all. She got on a bus to go downtown and the bus was too full to move when it came time for her to get out. Wedged standing in the aisle she said, “Out, please,” and, “Excuse me,” and by the time she was loose and near the door the bus had started again and she got off a stop beyond. “No one *listens* to me,” she said to herself. “Maybe it’s because I’m too polite.” In the stores the prices were all too high and the sweaters looked disarmingly like New Hampshire ones. The toys for the children filled her with dismay; they were so obviously for

New York children: hideous little parodies of adult life, cash registers, tiny pushcarts with imitation fruit, telephones that really worked (as if there weren't enough phones in New York that really worked), miniature milk bottles in a carrying case. "We get our milk from cows," Margaret told the salesgirl. "My children wouldn't know what these were." She was exaggerating, and felt guilty for a minute, but no one was around to catch her.

She had a picture of small children in the city dressed like their parents, following along with a miniature mechanical civilization, toy cash registers in larger and larger sizes that eased them into the real thing, millions of clattering jerking small imitations that prepared them nicely for taking over the large useless toys their parents lived by. She bought a pair of skis for her son, which she knew would be inadequate for the New Hampshire snow, and a wagon for her daughter inferior to the one Brad could make at home in an hour. Ignoring the toy mailboxes, the small phonographs with special small records, the kiddie cosmetics, she left the store and started home.

She was frankly afraid by now to take a bus; she stood on the corner and waited for a taxi. Glancing down at her feet, she saw a dime on the sidewalk and tried to pick it up, but there were too many people for her to bend down, and she was afraid to shove to make room for fear of being stared at. She put her foot on the dime and then saw a quarter near it, and a nickel. Someone dropped a pocketbook, she thought, and put her other foot on the quarter, stepping quickly to make it look natural; then she saw another dime and another nickel, and a third dime in the gutter. People were passing her, back and forth, all the time, rushing, pushing against her, not looking at her, and she was afraid to get down and start gathering up the money. Other people saw it and went past, and she realized that no one was going to pick it up. They were all embarrassed, or in too much of a hurry, or too crowded.

A taxi stopped to let someone off, and she hailed it. She lifted her feet off the dime and the quarter, and left them there when she got into the taxi. This taxi went slowly and bumped as it went; she had begun to notice that the gradual decay was not peculiar to the taxis. The buses were cracking open in unimportant seams, the leather seats broken and stained. The buildings were going, too — in one of the nicest stores there had been a great gaping hole in the tiled foyer, and you walked around it. Corners of the buildings seemed to be crumbling away into fine dust that drifted downward, the granite was eroding unnoticed. Every window she saw on her way uptown seemed to be broken; perhaps every street corner was peppered with small change. The people were moving faster than ever before; a girl in a red hat appeared at the upper side of the taxi window and was gone beyond the lower side before you could see the hat; store windows were so terribly bright because you only caught them for a fraction of a second. The people seemed hurled on in a frantic action that made every hour forty-five minutes long, every day nine hours, every year fourteen days. Food was so elusively fast, eaten in such a hurry, that you were always hungry, always speeding to a new meal with new people. Everything was imperceptibly quicker every minute. She stepped into the taxi on one side and stepped out the other side at her home; she pressed the fifth-floor button on the elevator and was coming down again, bathed and dressed and ready for dinner with Brad. They went out for dinner and were coming in again, hungry and hurrying to bed in order to get to breakfast with lunch beyond. They had been in New York nine days; tomorrow was Saturday and they were going to Long Island, coming home Sunday, and then Wednesday they were going home, really home. By the time she had thought of it they were on the train to Long Island; the train was broken, the seats torn and the floor dirty; one of the doors wouldn't open and the windows wouldn't shut Passing through the outskirts of the city, she thought, It's as though everything were traveling so fast that the solid stuff couldn't stand it and were going to pieces under the strain, cornices blowing off and windows caving in. She knew she was afraid to say it truly, afraid to face the knowledge that it was a voluntary neck-breaking speed, a deliberate whirling faster and faster to end in destruction.

On Long Island, their hostess led them into a new piece of New York, a house filled with New York furniture as though on rubber bands, pulled this far, stretched taut, and ready to snap back to the city, to an apartment, as soon as the door was opened and the lease, fully paid, had expired. "We've had this place every year for simply ages," their hostess said. "Otherwise we couldn't have gotten it *possibly* this year."

"It's an awfully nice place," Brad said. "I'm surprised you don't live here all year round."

"Got to get back to the city *some* time," their hostess said, and laughed.

"Not much like New Hampshire," Brad said. He was beginning to be a little homesick, Margaret thought; he wants to yell, just once. Since the fire scare she was apprehensive about large groups of people gathering together; when friends began to drop in after dinner she waited for a while, telling herself they were on the ground floor, she could run right outside, all the windows were open; then she excused herself and went to bed. When Brad came to bed much later she woke up and he said irritably, "We've been playing anagrams. Such crazy people." She said sleepily, "Did you win?" and fell asleep before he told her.

The next morning she and Brad went for a walk while their host and hostess read the Sunday papers. "If you turn to the right outside the door," their hostess said encouragingly, "and walk about three blocks down, you'll come to our beach."

“What do they want with our beach?” their host said. “It’s too damn cold to do anything down there.”

“They can look at the *water,*” their hostess said.

They walked down to the beach; at this time of year it was bare and windswept, yet still nodding hideously under traces of its summer plumage, as though it thought itself warmly inviting. There were occupied houses on the way there, for instance, and a lonely lunchstand was open, bravely advertising hot dogs and root beer. The man in the lunch-stand watched them go by, his face cold and unsympathetic. They walked far past him, out of sight of houses, on to a stretch of grey pebbled sand that lay between the grey water on one side and the grey pebbled sand dunes on the other.

“Imagine going swimming here,” she said with a shiver. The beach pleased her; it was oddly familiar and reassuring and at the same time that she realized this, the little tune came back to her, bringing a double recollection. The beach was the one where she had lived in imagination, writing for herself dreary love-broken stories where the heroine walked beside the wild waves; the little tune was the symbol of the golden world she escaped into to avoid the everyday dreariness that drove her into writing depressing stories about the beach. She laughed out loud and Brad said, “What on earth’s so funny about his Godforsaken landscape?”

“I was just thinking how far away from the city it seems,” she said falsely.

The sky and the water and the sand were grey enough to make it feel like late afternoon instead of midmorning; she was tired and wanted to go back, but Brad said suddenly, “Look at that,” and she turned and saw a girl running down over the dunes, carrying her hat, and her hair flying behind her.

"Only way to get warm on a day like this," Brad remarked, but Margaret said, "She looks frightened."

The girl saw them and came toward them, slowing down as she approached them. She was eager to reach them but when she came within speaking distance the familiar embarrassment, the not wanting to look like a fool, made her hesitate and look from one to the other of them uncomfortably.

"Do you know where I can find a policeman?" she asked finally.

Brad looked up and down the bare rocky beach and said solemnly, "There don't seem to be any around. Is there something we can do?"

"I don't think so," the girl said. "I really need a policeman."

They go to the police for everything, Margaret thought, these people, these New York people, it's as though they had selected a section of the population to act as problem-solvers, and so no matter what they want they look for a policeman.

"Be glad to help you if we can," Brad said.

The girl hesitated again. "Well, if you *must* know," she said crossly, "there's a leg up there."

They waited politely for the girl to explain, but she only said, "Come *on,* then," and waved to them to follow her. She led them over the dunes to a spot near a small inlet, where the dunes gave way abruptly to an intruding head of water. A leg was lying on the sand near the water, and the girl gestured at it and said, "There," as though. it were her own property and they had insisted on having a share.

They walked over to it and Brad bent down gingerly. "It's a leg all right," he said. It looked like part of a wax dummy, a death-white wax leg neatly cut off at top-thigh and again just above the ankle, bent comfortably at the knee and resting on the sand. “It’s real,” Brad said, his voice slightly different. “You’re right about that policeman.”

They walked together to the lunchstand and the man listened unenthusiastically while Brad called the police. When the police came they all walked out again to where the leg was lying and Brad gave the police their names and addresses, and then said, “Is it all right to go on home?”

“What the hell you want to hang around for?” the policeman inquired with heavy humor. “You waiting for the rest of him?”

They went back to their host and hostess, talking about the leg, and their host apologized, as though he had been guilty of a breach of taste in allowing his guests to come on a human leg; their hostess said with interest, “There was an arm washed up in Bensonhurst, I’ve been reading about it.”

“One of these killings,” the host said.

Upstairs Margaret said abruptly, “I suppose it starts to happen first in the suburbs,” and when Brad said, “What starts to happen?” she said hysterically, “People starting to come apart.”

In order to reassure their host and hostess about their minding the leg, they stayed until the last afternoon train to New York. Back in their apartment again it seemed to Margaret that the marble in the house lobby had begun to age a little; even in two days there were new perceptible cracks. The elevator seemed a little rusty, and there was a fine film of dust over everything in the apartment. They went to bed feeling uncomfortable, and the next morning Margaret said immediately, “I’m going to stay in today.”

“You’re not upset about yesterday, are you?”

“Not a bit,” Margaret said. “I just want to stay in and rest.”

After some discussion Brad decided to go off again by himself; he still had people it was important to see and places he must go in the few days they had left. After breakfast in the Automat Margaret came back alone to the apartment, carrying the mystery story she had bought on the way. She hung up her coat and hat and sat down by the window with the noise and the people far below, looking out at the sky where it was grey beyond the houses across the street.

I'm not going to worry about it, she said to herself, no sense thinking all the time about things like that, spoil your vacation and Brad's too. No sense worrying, people get ideas like that and then worry about them.

The nasty little tune was running through her head again, with its burden of suavity and expensive perfume. The houses across the street were silent and perhaps unoccupied at this time of day; she let her eyes move with the rhythm of the tune, from window to window along one floor. By gliding quickly across two windows, she could make one line of the tune fit one floor of windows, and then a quick breath and a drop down to the next floor; it had the same number of windows and the tune had the same number of beats, and then the next floor and the next. She stopped suddenly when it seemed to her that the windowsill she had just passed had soundlessly crumpled and fallen into fine sand; when she looked back it was there as before but then it seemed to be the windowsill above and to the right, and finally a corner of the roof.

No sense worrying, she told herself, forcing her eyes down to the street, stop thinking about things all the time. Looking down at the street for long made her dizzy and she stood up and went into the small bedroom of the apartment. She had made the bed before going out to breakfast, like any good housewife, but now she deliberately took it apart, stripping the blankets and sheets off one by one, and then she made it again, taking a long time over the corners and smoothing out every wrinkle. "*That'*s done," she said when she was through, and went back to the window. When she looked across the street the tune started again, window to window, sills dissolving and falling downward. She leaned forward and looked down at her own window, something she had never thought of before, down to the sill. It was partly eaten away; when she touched the stone a few crumbs rolled off and fell.

It was eleven o'clock; Brad was looking at blowtorches by now and would not be back before one, if even then. She thought of writing a letter home, but the impulse left her before she found paper and pen. Then it occurred to her that she might take a nap, a thing she had never done in the morning in her life, and she went in and lay down on the bed. Lying down, she felt the building shaking.

No sense worrying, she told herself again, as though it were a charm against witches, and got up and found her coat and hat and put them on. I'll just get some cigarettes and some letter paper, she thought, just run down to the corner. Panic caught her going down in the elevator; it went too fast, and when she stepped out in the lobby it was only the people standing around who kept her from running. As it was, she went quickly out of the building and into the street. For a minute she hesitated, wanting to go back. The cars were going past so rapidly, the people hurrying as always, but the panic of the elevator drove her on finally. She went to the corner, and, following the people flying along ahead, ran out into the street, to hear a horn almost overhead and a shout from behind her, and the noise of brakes. She ran blindly on and reached the other side where she stopped and looked around. The truck was going on its appointed way around the corner, the people going past on either side of her, parting to go around her where she stood.

No one even noticed me, she thought with reassurance, everyone who saw me has gone by long ago. She went into the drugstore ahead of her and asked the man for cigarettes; the apartment now seemed safer to her than the street — she could walk up the stairs. Coming out of the store and walking to the corner, she kept as close to the buildings as possible, refusing to give way to the rightful traffic coming out of the doorways. On the corner she looked carefully at the light; it was green, but it looked as though it were going to change. Always safer to wait, she thought, don't want to walk into another truck.

People pushed past her and some were caught in the middle of the street when the light changed. One woman, more cowardly than the rest, turned and ran back to the curb, but the others stood in the middle of the street, leaning forward and then backward according to the traffic moving past them on both sides. One got to the farther curb in a brief break in the line of cars, the others were a fraction of a second too late and waited. Then the light changed again and as the cars slowed down Margaret put a foot on the street to go, but a taxi swinging wildly around her corner frightened her back and she stood on the curb again. By the time the taxi had gone the light was due to change again and she thought, I can wait once more, no sense getting caught out in the middle. A man beside her tapped his foot impatiently for the light to change back; two girls came past her and walked out into the street a few steps to wait, moving back a little when cars came too close, talking busily all the time. I ought to stay right with them, Margaret thought, but then they moved back against her and the light changed and the man next to her charged into the street and the two girls in front waited a minute and then moved slowly on, still talking, and Margaret started to follow and then decided to wait. A crowd of people formed around her suddenly; they had come off a bus and were crossing here, and she had a sudden feeling of being jammed in the center and forced out into the street when all of them moved as one with the light changing, and she elbowed her way desperately out of the crowd and went off to lean against a building and wait. It seemed to her that people passing were beginning to look at her. What do they think of me, she wondered, and stood up straight as though she were waiting for someone. She looked at her watch and frowned, and then thought, What a fool I must look like, no one here ever saw me before, they all go by too fast. She went back to the curb again but the green light was just changing to red and she thought, I'll go back to the drugstore and have a coke, no sense going back to that apartment.

The man looked at her unsurprised in the drugstore and she sat and ordered a coke but suddenly as she was drinking it the panic caught her again and she thought of the people who had been with her when she first started to cross the street, blocks away by now, having tried and made perhaps a dozen lights while she had hesitated at the first; people by now a mile or so downtown, because they had been going steadily while she had been trying to gather her courage. She paid the man quickly, restrained an impulse to say that there was nothing wrong with the coke, she just had to get back, that was all, and she hurried down to the corner again.

The minute the light changes, she told herself firmly; there's no sense. The light changed before she was ready and in the minute before she collected herself traffic turning the corner overwhelmed her and she shrank back against the curb. She looked longingly at the cigar store on the opposite corner, with her apartment house beyond; she wondered, How do people ever manage to get there, and knew that by wondering, by admitting a doubt, she was lost. The light changed and she looked at it with hatred, a dumb thing, turning back and forth, back and forth, with no purpose and no meaning. Looking to either side of her slyly, to see if anyone were watching, she stepped quietly backward, one step, two, until she was well away from the curb. Back in the drugstore again she waited for some sign of recognition from the clerk and saw none; he regarded her with the same apathy as he had the first time. He gestured without interest at the telephone; he doesn't care, she thought, it doesn't matter to him who I call.

She had no time to feel like a fool, because they answered the phone immediately and agreeably and found him right away. When he answered the phone, his voice sounding surprised and matter-of-fact, she could only say miserably, "I'm in the drugstore on the corner. Come and get me."

"What's the matter?" He was not anxious to come.

"Please come and get me," she said into the black mouthpiece that might or might not tell him, "please come and get me, Brad. *Please.*"

MEN WITH THEIR BIG SHOES

IT WAS YOUNG Mrs. Hart's first summer living in the country, and her first year being married and the mistress of a house; she was going to have her first baby soon, and it was the first time she had ever had anyone, or thought of having anyone, who could remotely be described as a maid. Young Mrs. Hart spent almost hours every day, while she was resting as the doctor told her to, in peacefully congratulating herself. When she was sitting in the rocking chair on the front porch she could look down the quiet street with the trees and gardens and kind people who smiled at her as they passed; or she could turn her head and look through the wide windows in her own house, into the pretty living-room with the chintz curtains and matching slip-covers and maple furniture; she could raise her eyes a little and look at the ruffled white curtains on the bedroom windows. It was a real house: the milkman left milk there every morning, the brightly painted pots in a row along the porch railing held real plants which grew and needed regular watering; you could cook on the real stove in the kitchen, and Mrs. Anderson was always complaining about the shoe marks on the clean floors, just like a real maid.

"It's the men who make dirt on the floor," Mrs. Anderson would say, regarding the print of a heel. "A woman, you watch them, she always puts her feet down quiet. Men with their big shoes." And she would flick carelessly at the mark with the dustcloth.

Although Mrs. Hart was unreasonably afraid of Mrs. Anderson, she had heard and read so much about how all house-wives these days were intimidated by their domestic help that she was never surprised at first by her own timid uneasiness; Mrs. Anderson's belligerent authority, moreover, seemed to Follow naturally from a knowledge of canning and burnt-sugar gravy and setting yeast rolls out to rise. When Mrs. Anderson, all elbows and red face, her hair pulled disagreeably tight, had presented herself first at the back door with an offer to help, Mrs. Hart had accepted blindly, caught between unwashed windows in a litter of unpacking and dust; Mrs. Anderson had started correctly with the kitchen, and made Mrs. Hart a hot cup of tea first thing; "You can't afford to get too tired," she said, eyeing Mrs. Hart's waist, "you got to be careful right along."

By the time Mrs. Hart discovered that Mrs. Anderson never got anything quite clean, never completely managed to get anything back where it belonged, it was incredible to think of doing anything about it. Mrs. Anderson's thumbprints were on all the windows and Mrs. Hart's morning cup of tea was a regular institution; Mrs. Hart put the water on to boil directly after breakfast and Mrs. Anderson made them each a cup of tea when she came at nine. "You need a hot cup of tea to start your day off right," she said amiably every morning, "it settles your stomach for the day."

Mrs. Hart never allowed herself to think further about Mrs. Anderson than to feel comfortably proud of having all the housework done for her ("a regular *treasure,*" she wrote to her girl friends in New York, "and she fusses over me like I was actually *her* baby!"); it was not until Mrs. Anderson had been coming dutifully every morning for over a month that Mrs. Hart recognized with sickening conviction that the faint small uneasiness was justified.

It was a warm sunny morning, the first after a week of rain, and Mrs. Hart put on an especially pretty house dress — washed and ironed by Mrs. Anderson — and made her husband a soft-boiled egg for his breakfast, and went down the front walk with him to wave good-bye till he got to the corner and the bus which took him to his job at the bank in the neighboring town. Coming back up the walk to her house, Mrs. Hart admired the sunlight on the green shutters, and spoke affectionately to her next-door neighbor, who was out already sweeping her porch. Pretty soon I'll have my baby out in the garden in his play pen, Mrs. Hart thought, and left the front door open behind her for the sun to come in and soak into the floor. When she came into the kitchen, Mrs. Anderson was sitting at the table and the tea was poured.

"Good morning," Mrs. Hart said. "Isn't it a beautiful day?"

"Morning," Mrs. Anderson said. She waved at the tea. "I knew you was just out front so I got everything all ready. Can't start the day off without your cup of tea."

"I was beginning to think the sun would never come out again," Mrs. Hart said. She sat down and pulled her cup toward her. "It's so lovely to be dry and warm again."

"It settles your stomach, tea does," Mrs. Anderson said. "I already put the sugar in. You'll be having trouble with your stomach right along now."

"You know," Mrs. Hart said happily, "last summer about this time I was still working in New York and I didn't think Bill and I were *ever* going to get married. And *now* look at me," she added, and laughed.

"You never know what's going to happen to you," Mrs. Anderson said. "When things look worst, you'll either die or get better. I used to have a neighbor was always saying that." She sighed and rose, taking her cup with her to the sink. "Of course some of us never get much good coming along," she said.

"And then everything happened in about two weeks," Mrs. Hart said. "Bill got this job up here and the girls at the office gave us a waffle iron."

"It's up on the shelf," Mrs. Anderson said. She reached out for Mrs. Hart's cup. "You sit still," she said. "You'll never have another chance to take it easy like this."

"I can't remember to sit still all the time," Mrs. Hart said. "Everything's too exciting."

"It's for your own good," Mrs. Anderson said. "I'm only thinking of you."

"You've been very nice already," Mrs. Hart said dutifully, "coming to help every morning like this. And taking such good care of me."

"I don't want thanks," Mrs. Anderson said. "You just come through all right, that's all I want to see."

"But I really don't know what to do without you," Mrs. Hart said. That ought to be enough for today, she thought suddenly, and laughed aloud at the idea of a portion of gratitude doled out every morning to Mrs. Anderson, like a bonus on her hourly wage. It's true, though, she thought; I have to say it every day, sooner or later.

"You laughing about something?" Mrs. Anderson said, half-turning with her hard red wrists braced against the sink. "I say something funny?"

"I was just thinking," Mrs. Hart said quickly, "thinking about the girls I used to be in the office with. They'd be so jealous if they could see me now."

"Never know when they're well off," Mrs. Anderson said.

Mrs. Hart reached out and touched the yellow curtain at the window beside her, thinking of the one-room apartments in New York and the dark office. "I wish *I* could be cheerful these days," Mrs. Anderson went on.

Mrs. Hart dropped her hand quickly from the curtain and turned to smile sympathetically at Mrs. Anderson. "I know," she murmured.

“You never know how bad it can be,” Mrs. Anderson said. She jerked her head toward the back door. “He was at it again. All night long.” By now Mrs. Hart knew how to tell whether *“he”* meant Mr. Anderson or Mr. Hart; a gesture of Mrs. Anderson’s head toward the back door and the path she took home every day meant Mr. Anderson; the same gesture toward the front door where every night Mrs. Hart met her husband meant Mr. Hart. “Not a minute’s sleep for *me,*” Mrs. Anderson was saying.

“Isn’t that a shame,” Mrs. Hart said. She stood up quickly and started for the back door. “Dish towels on the line,” she explained.

“I’ll do it, later,” Mrs. Anderson said. “Cursing and yelling,” she went on, “I thought I was going crazy. ‘Why don’t you go on and get out?’ he says to me. Went over and opened the door wide as it would go and yelled so’s all the neighbors could hear him. ‘Why don’t you get out?’ he says.”

“Terrible,” Mrs. Hart said, her hand on the back door knob.

“Thirty-seven years,” Mrs. Anderson said. She shook her head. “And he wants me to get out.” She watched Mrs. Hart light a cigarette and said, “You shouldn’t smoke. You’ll likely be sorry if you go on smoking like that. That’s why I never had any children,” she went on. “What would I do, him acting like that with children around listening?”

Mrs. Hart walked across to the stove and looked into the teapot. “Believe I’ll have another cup,” she said. “Will you have another, Mrs. Anderson?”

“Gives me heartburn,” Mrs. Anderson said. She put the freshly washed cup back on the table. “I just washed this,” she said, “but it’s your cup. And your house. I guess you can do what you want to.”

Mrs. Hart laughed and brought the teapot over to the table. Mrs. Anderson watched her pour the tea and then took the teapot away. “I’ll just wash this,” she aid, “before you decide to drink any more.” She dropped her voice. “Too much liquid spoils the kidneys.”

"I always drink a lot of tea and coffee," Mrs. Hart said.

Mrs. Anderson looked at the dried dishes standing on the drain of the sink, and then picked up three glasses in each great hand. "You sure had a lot of dirty glasses around this morning."

"I was just too tired last night to clean up," Mrs. Hart said. Besides, she thought, cleaning up is what I pay *her* for; and she added, making her voice light, "So I just left everything for you."

"It's my job to clean up after people," Mrs. Anderson said. "Someone always has to do the dirty work for the rest. You have a lot of company?"

"Some people my husband knows in town," Mrs. Hart said. "About six altogether."

"He shouldn't bring his friends home with you like *that,*" Mrs. Anderson said.

Mrs. Hart thought of the pleasant chatter about the New York theatre and the local roadhouse where they all might go dancing soon, and the pretty compliments on her house, and showing the baby things to the two other young wives, and sighed. She had lost track of what Mrs. Anderson was saying.

" — Right in front of his own wife," Mrs. Anderson finished, and moved her head significantly toward the front door. "*He* do much drinking?"

"No, not much," Mrs. Hart said.

Mrs. Anderson nodded. "I know what you mean," she said.

"You watch them taking one drink after another and you can't think of any way to tell them to stop. And then something makes them mad and first thing you know they're telling you to go on and get out." She nodded again. "There's nothing any woman can do but make sure when she does have to get out she sure has some place to go."

Mrs. Hart said carefully, “Now, Mrs. Anderson, I don’t really think that all husbands—”

“You only been married a year,” Mrs. Anderson said dismally, “and no one that’s older around to tell you.”

Mrs. Hart lit a second cigarette from the end of the first. “I’m really not at all worried about my husband’s drinking,” she said formally.

Mrs. Anderson stopped, holding a pile of clean plates. “Other women?” she asked. “Is *that* what it is?”

“What on *earth* makes you say that?” Mrs. Hart demanded. “Bill would no more *look*—”

“You need someone to be looking after you, times like this,” Mrs. Anderson said. “Don’t think I don’t know; you just want to tell someone about it all. I guess all men treat their wives the same, only some of them are drinkers and some of them throw their money away on gambling and some of them chase every young girl they see.” She laughed her abrupt laugh. “And some not so young, if you ask the wives,” she said. “If most women knew how their husbands were going to turn out, there’d be less marrying going on.”

“I think a successful marriage is the woman’s responsibility,” Mrs. Hart said.

“Mrs. Martin now, down at the grocery, she was telling me, the other day, some of the things *her* husband used to do before he died,” Mrs. Anderson said. “You’d never suspect what some men do.” She looked thoughtfully at the back door. “Some’s worse than others, though. She thinks you’re real sweet, Mrs. Martin does.”

“That’s nice of her,” Mrs. Hart said.

“I didn’t say nothing about *him,*” Mrs. Anderson said, her head moving toward the front door. “I don’t mention any names, not where anybody’d think I know the people."

Mrs. Hart thought of Mrs. Martin, keen-eyed and shrill, watching other people's groceries ("Two loaves of whole wheat today, Mrs. Hart? Company tonight, maybe?") "I think she's such a nice person," Mrs. Hart said, wanting to add, You tell her I said so.

"I'm not saying she isn't," Mrs. Anderson said grimly. "You just don't want to let her figure out anything's wrong."

"I'm sure—" Mrs. Hart began.

"I *told* her," Mrs. Anderson said, "I said I was sure Mr. Hart never did any running around's far as I knew. Nor drinking like some. I said I felt like you might be my own daughter sometimes and no man was going to mistreat you while I was around."

"I wish," Mrs. Hart began again, a quick fear touching her; her kind neighbors watching her beneath their friendliness, looking out quietly from behind curtains, watching Bill, perhaps? "I don't think people ought to talk about other people," she said desperately, "I mean, I don't think it's fair to say things when you can't *know* for sure."

Mrs. Anderson laughed again suddenly and went over to open the mop closet. "You don't want to let anything scare you," she said, "not right now. Will I do the living-room this morning? I could get the little rugs out to air in the sun. It's just that *he*—" the back door " — got me all upset. You know."

"I'm sorry," Mrs. Hart said. "Isn't that a shame."

"Mrs. Martin said why didn't I come live with you folks," Mrs. Anderson said, searching violently in the mop closet, her voice sounding muffled and dusty. "Mrs. Martin was saying a young woman like you, just starting out, always needs a friend around."

Mrs. Hart looked down at her fingers twisting the handle of the cup; she had only drunk half her tea. It's too late now for me to walk into another room, she thought; I can always say Bill would never allow it. "I met Mrs. Martin in town a few days ago," she said. "She was wearing an awfully good-looking blue coat." She smoothed her house dress with her hand, and added irritably, "I wish I could get into a decent dress again."

" 'Why don't you get out?' he says to me." Mrs. Anderson backed out of the mop closet with a dustpan in one hand and a cleaning cloth in the other. "Drunk and cursing so's all the neighbors could hear. 'Why don't you get out?' I thought sure you'd hear him even up here."

"I'm sure he couldn't mean it," Mrs. Hart said, trying to make her voice sound final.

"You wouldn't stand for it," Mrs. Anderson said. She put the dustpan and cloth down and came over and sat down at the table opposite Mrs. Hart. "Mrs. Martin was thinking if you wanted me to I could come right into your spare room. Do all the cooking."

"You could," Mrs. Hart said amiably, "except that I'm going to put the baby in there."

"We'd put the baby in your room," Mrs. Anderson said. She laughed and gave Mrs. Hart's hand a push. "Don't worry," she said, "I'd keep out of your way. Well, and if you wanted to put the baby in with me then I could get up at night to feed it for you. Guess I could take care of a baby all right."

Mrs. Hart smiled cheerfully back at Mrs. Anderson. "I'd love to, of course," she said. "Some day. Right now of *course* Bill would never let me do it."

"Of course not," Mrs. Anderson said. "The men never do, do they? I told Mrs. Martin down at the grocery, she's the nicest little thing in the world, I said, but her husband wouldn’t let the scrubwoman come live with them.”

“Why, Mrs. Anderson,” Mrs. Hart said, looking horrified, “saying things like that about yourself!”

“And another woman, one who’s older and knows a little more,” Mrs. Anderson said. “She might see a little more, too, maybe.”

Mrs. Hart, her fingers tight on the teacup, caught a quick picture of Mrs. Martin, leaning comfortably across the counter (“I see you’ve got a new star boarder, Mrs. Hart. Mrs. Anderson’ll see that you’re taken good care of!”). And her neighbors, their frozen faces regarding her as she walked down to meet Bill at the bus; the girls in New York, reading her letters together and envying her (“Such a perfect *jewel* — she’s going to live with us and do *all* the work!”). Looking up at Mrs. Anderson’s knowing smile across the table, Mrs. Hart realized with a sudden unalterable conviction that she was lost.

THE TOOTH

THE BUS WAS waiting, panting heavily at the curb in front of the small bus station, its great blue-and-silver bulk glittering in the moonlight. There were only a few people interested in the bus, and at that time of night no one passing on the sidewalk: the one movie theatre in town had finished its show and closed its doors an hour before, and all the movie patrons had been to the drugstore for ice cream and gone on home; now the drugstore was closed and dark, another silent doorway in the long midnight street. The only town lights were the street lights, the lights in the all-night lunchstand across the street, and the one remaining counter lamp in the bus station where the girl sat in the ticket office with her hat and coat on, only waiting for the New York bus to leave before she went home to bed.

Standing on the sidewalk next to the open door of the bus, Clara Spencer held her husband's arm nervously. "I feel so funny," she said.

"Are you all right?" he asked. "Do you think I ought to go with you?"

"No, of course not," she said. "I'll be all right." It was hard for her to talk because of her swollen jaw; she kept a handkerchief pressed to her face and held hard to her husband. "Are you sure *you*'ll be all right?" she asked. "I'll be back tomorrow night at the latest. Or else I'll call."

"Everything will be fine," he said heartily. "By tomorrow noon it'll all be gone. Tell the dentist if there's anything wrong I can come right down."

"I feel so funny" she said. "Light-headed, and sort of dizzy."

"That's because of the dope," he said. "All that codeine, and the whisky, and nothing to eat all day."

She giggled nervously. “I couldn’t comb my hair, my hand shook so. I’m glad it’s dark.”

“Try to sleep in the bus,” he said. “Did you take a sleeping pill?”

“Yes,” she said. They were waiting for the bus driver to finish his cup of coffee in the lunchstand; they could see him through the glass window, sitting at the counter, taking his time. “I feel so *funny,*” she said.

“You know, Clara,” he made his voice very weighty, as though if he spoke more seriously his words would carry more conviction and be therefore more comforting, “you know, I’m glad you’re going down to New York to have Zimmerman take care of this. I’d never forgive myself if it turned out to be something serious and I let you go to this butcher up here.”

“It’s just a *toothache,*” Clara said uneasily, “nothing very serious about a *toothache.*”

“You can’t tell,” he said. “It might be abscessed or something; I’m sure he’ll have to pull it.”

“Don’t even talk like that,” she said, and shivered.

“Well, it looks pretty bad,” he said soberly, as before. “Your face so swollen, and all. Don’t you worry.”

“I’m not worrying,” she said. “I just feel as if I were all tooth. Nothing else.”

The bus driver got up from the stool and walked over to pay his check. Clara moved toward the bus, and her husband said, “Take your time, you’ve got plenty of time.”

“I just feel funny,” Clara said.

“Listen,” her husband said, “that tooth’s been bothering you off and on for years; at least six or seven times since I’ve known you you’ve had trouble with that tooth. It’s about time something was done. You had a toothache on our honeymoon,” he finished accusingly.

"Did I?" Clara said. "You know," she went on, and laughed, "I was in such a hurry I didn't dress properly. I have on old stockings and I just dumped everything into my good pocketbook."

"Are you sure you have enough money?" he said.

"Almost twenty-five dollars," Clara said. "I'll be home tomorrow."

"Wire if you need more," he said. The bus driver appeared in the doorway of the lunchroom. "Don't worry," he said.

"Listen," Clara said suddenly, "are you *sure* you'll be all right? Mrs. Lang will be over in the morning in time to make breakfast, and Johnny doesn't need to go to school if things are too mixed up."

"I know," he said.

"Mrs. Lang," she said, checking on her fingers. "I called Mrs. Lang, I left the grocery order on the kitchen table, you can have the cold tongue for lunch and in case I don't get back Mrs. Lang will give you dinner. The cleaner ought to come about four o'clock, I won't be back so give him your brown suit and it doesn't matter if you forget but be sure to empty the pockets."

"Wire if you need more money," he said. "Or call. I'll stay home tomorrow so you can call at home."

"Mrs. Lang will take care of the baby," she said.

"Or you can wire," he said.

The bus driver came across the street and stood by the entrance to the bus.

"Okay?" the bus driver said.

"Good-bye," Clara said to her husband.

"You'll feel all right tomorrow," her husband said. "It's only a toothache."

“I’m fine,” Clara said. “Don’t you worry.” She got on the bus and then stopped, with the bus driver waiting behind her. “Milkman,” she said to her husband. “Leave a note telling him we want eggs.”

“I will,” her husband said. “Good-bye.”

“Good-bye,” Clara said. She moved on into the bus and behind her the driver swung into his seat. The bus was nearly empty and she went far back and sat down at the window outside which her husband waited. “Good-bye,” she said to him through the glass, “take care of yourself.”

“Good-bye,” he said, waving violently.

The bus stirred, groaned, and pulled itself forward. Clara turned her head to wave good-bye once more and then lay back against the heavy soft seat. Good Lord, she thought, what a thing to do!

Outside, the familiar street slipped past, strange and dark and seen, unexpectedly, from the unique station of a person leaving town, going away on a bus. It isn’t as though it’s the first time I’ve ever been to New York, Clara thought indignantly, it’s the whisky and the codeine and the sleeping pill and the toothache. She checked hastily to see if her codeine tablets were in her pocketbook; they had been standing, along with the aspirin and a glass of water, on the dining-room sideboard, but somewhere in the lunatic flight from her home she must have picked them up, because they were in her pocketbook now, along with the twenty-odd dollars and her compact and comb and lipstick. She could tell from the feel of the lipstick that she had brought the old, nearly finished one, not the new one that was a darker shade and had cost two-fifty. There was a run in her stocking and a hole in the toe that she never noticed at home wearing her old comfortable shoes, but which was now suddenly and disagreeably apparent inside her best walking shoes.

Well, she thought, I can buy new stockings in New York tomorrow, after the tooth is fixed, after everything's all right. She put her tongue cautiously on the tooth and was rewarded with a split-second crash of pain.

The bus stopped at a red light and the driver got out of his seat and came back toward her. "Forgot to get your ticket before," he said.

"I guess I was a little rushed at the last minute," she said. She found the ticket in her coat pocket and gave it to him. "When do we get to New York?" she asked.

"Five-fifteen," he said. "Plenty of time for breakfast. Oneway ticket?"

"I'm coming back by train," she said, without seeing why she had to tell him, except that it was late at night and people isolated together in some strange prison like a bus had to be more friendly and communicative than at other times.

"Me, I'm coming back by bus," he said, and they both laughed, she painfully because of her swollen face. When he went back to his seat far away at the front of the bus she lay back peacefully against the seat. She could feel the sleeping pill pulling at her; the throb of the toothache was distant now, and mingled with the movement of the bus, a steady beat like her heartbeat which she could hear louder and louder, going on through the night. She put her head back and her feet up, discreetly covered with her skirt, and fell asleep without saying good-bye to the town.

She opened her eyes once and they were moving almost silently through the darkness. Her tooth was pulsing steadily and she turned her cheek against the cool back of the seat in weary resignation. There was a thin line of lights along the ceiling of the bus and no other light. Far ahead of her in the bus she could see the other people sitting; the driver, so far away as to be only a tiny figure at the end of a telescope, was straight at the wheel, seemingly awake. She fell back into her fantastic sleep.

She woke up later because the bus had stopped, the end of that silent motion through the darkness so positive a shock that it woke her stunned, and it was a minute before the ache began again. People were moving along the aisle of the bus and the driver, turning around, said, "Fifteen minutes," She got up and followed everyone else out, all but her eyes still asleep, her feet moving without awareness. They were stopped beside an all-night restaurant, lonely and lighted on the vacant road. Inside, it was warm and busy and full of people. She saw a seat at the end of the counter and sat down, not aware that she had fallen asleep again when someone sat down next to her and touched her arm. When she looked around foggily he said, "Traveling far?"

"Yes," she said.

He was wearing a blue suit and he looked tall; she could not focus her eyes to see any more.

"You want coffee?" he asked.

She nodded and he pointed to the counter in front of her where a cup of coffee sat steaming.

"Drink it quickly," he said.

She sipped at it delicately; she may have put her face down and tasted it without lifting the cup. The strange man was talking.

"Even farther than Samarkand," he was saying, "and the waves ringing on the shore like bells."

"Okay, folks," the bus driver said, and she gulped quickly at the coffee, drank enough to get her back into the bus.

When she sat down in her seat again the strange man sat down beside her. It was so dark in the bus that the lights from the restaurant were unbearably glaring and she closed her eyes. When her eyes were shut, before she fell asleep, she was closed in alone with the toothache.

"The flutes play all night," the strange man said, "and the stars are as big as the moon and the moon is as big as a lake"

As the bus started up again they slipped back into the darkness and only the thin thread of lights along the ceiling of the bus held them together, brought the back of the bus where she sat along with the front of the bus where the driver sat and the people sitting there so far away from her. The lights tied them together and the strange man next to her was saying, "Nothing to do all day but lie under the trees."

Inside the bus, traveling on, she was nothing; she was passing the trees and the occasional sleeping houses, and she was in the bus but she was between here and there, joined tenuously to the bus driver by a thread of lights, being carried along without effort of her own.

"My name is Jim," the strange man said.

She was so deeply asleep that she stirred uneasily without knowledge, her forehead against the window, the darkness moving along beside her.

Then again that numbing shock, and, driven awake, she said, frightened, "What's happened?"

"It's all right," the strange man — Jim — said immediately. "Come along."

She followed him out of the bus, into the same restaurant, seemingly, but when she started to sit down at the same seat at the end of the counter he took her hand and led her to a table. "Go and wash your face," he said. "Come back here afterward"

She went into the ladies' room and there was a girl standing there powdering her nose. Without turning around the girl said, "Cost's a nickel. Leave the door fixed so's the next one won't have to pay."

The door was wedged so it would not close, with half a match folder in the lock. She left it the same way and went back to the table where Jim was sitting.

“What do you want?” she said, and he pointed to another cup of coffee and a sandwich. “Go ahead,” he said.

While she was eating her sandwich she heard his voice, musical and soft, “And while we were sailing past the island we heard a voice calling us.…”

Back in the bus Jim said, “Put your head on my shoulder now, and go to sleep.”

“I’m all right,” she said.

“No,” Jim said. “Before, your head was rattling against the window.”

Once more she slept, and once more the bus stopped and she woke frightened, and Jim brought her again to a restaurant and more coffee. Her tooth came alive then, and with one hand pressing her cheek she searched through the pockets of her coat and then through her pocketbook until she found the little bottle of codeine pills and she took two while Jim watched her.

She was finishing her coffee when she heard the sound of the bus motor and she started up suddenly, hurrying, and with Jim holding her arm she fled back into the dark shelter of her seat. The bus was moving forward when she realized that she had left her bottle of codeine pills sitting on the table in the restaurant and now she was at the mercy of her tooth. For a minute she stared back at the lights of the restaurant through the bus window and then she put her head on Jim’s shoulder and he was saying as she fell asleep, “The sand is so white it looks like snow, but it’s hot, even at night it’s hot under your feet.”

Then they stopped for the last time, and Jim brought her out of the bus and they stood for a minute in New York together. A woman passing them in the station said to the man following her with suitcases, “We’re just on time, it’s five-fifteen.”

"I'm going to the dentist," she said to Jim.

"I know," he said. "I'll watch out for you."

He went away, although she did not see him go. She thought to watch for his blue suit going through the door, but there was nothing.

I ought to have thanked him, she thought stupidly, and went slowly into the station restaurant, where she ordered coffee again. The counter man looked at her with the worn sympathy of one who has spent a long night watching people get off and on buses. "Sleepy?" he asked.

"Yes," she said.

She discovered after a while that the bus station joined Pennsylvania Terminal and she was able to get into the main waiting-room and find a seat on one of the benches by the time she fell asleep again.

Then someone shook her rudely by the shoulder and said, "What train you taking, lady, it's nearly seven." She sat up and saw her pocketbook on her lap, her feet neatly crossed, a clock glaring into her face. She said, "Thank you," and got up and walked blindly past the benches and got on to the escalator. Someone got on immediately behind her and touched her arm; she turned and it was Jim. "The grass is so green and so soft," he said, smiling, "and the water of the river is so cool."

She stared at him tiredly. When the escalator reached the top she stepped off and started to walk to the street she saw ahead. Jim came along beside her and his voice went on, "The sky is bluer than anything you've ever seen, and the songs. . . ."

She stepped quickly away from him and thought that people were looking at her as they passed. She stood on the corner waiting for the light to change and Jim came swiftly up to her and then away. "Look," he said as he passed, and he held out a handful of pearls.

Across the street there was a restaurant, just opening. She went in and sat down at a table, and a waitress was standing beside her frowning. “You was asleep,” the waitress said accusingly.

“I’m very sorry,” she said. It was morning. “Poached eggs and coffee, please.”

It was a quarter to eight when she left the restaurant, and she thought, if I take a bus, and go straight downtown now, I can sit in the drugstore across the street from the dentist’s office and have more coffee until about eight-thirty and then go into the dentist’s when it opens and he can take me first.

The buses were beginning to fill up; she got into the first bus that came along and could not find a seat. She wanted to go to Twenty-third Street, and got a seat just as they were passing Twenty-sixth Street; when she woke she was so far downtown that it took her nearly half-an-hour to find a bus and get back to Twenty-third.

At the corner of Twenty-third Street, while she was waiting for the light to change, she was caught up in a crowd of people, and when they crossed the street and separated to go different directions someone fell into step beside her. For a minute she walked on without looking up, staring resentfully at the sidewalk, her tooth burning her, and then she looked up, but there was no blue suit among the people pressing by on either side.

When she turned into the office building where her dentist was, it was still very early morning. The doorman in the office building was freshly shaven and his hair was combed; he held the door open briskly, as at five o’clock he would be sluggish, his hair faintly out of place. She went in through the door with a feeling of achievement; she had come successfully from one place to another, and this was the end of her journey and her objective.

The clean white nurse sat at the desk in the office; her eyes took in the swollen cheek, the tired shoulders, and she said, “You poor thing, you look worn out.”

“I have a toothache,” The nurse half-smiled, as though she were still waiting for the day when someone would come in and say, “My feet hurt,” She stood up into the professional sunlight. “Come right in,” she said. “We won’t make you wait.”

There was sunlight on the headrest of the dentist’s chair, on the round white table, on the drill bending its smooth chromium head. The dentist smiled with the same tolerance as the nurse; perhaps all human ailments were contained in the teeth, and he could fix them if people would only come to him in time. The nurse said smoothly, “I’ll get her file, doctor. We thought we’d better bring her right in.”

She felt, while they were taking an X-ray, that there was nothing in her head to stop the malicious eye of the camera, as though the camera would look through her and photograph the nails in the wall next to her, or the dentist’s cuff buttons, or the small thin bones of the dentist’s instruments; the dentist said, “Extraction,” regretfully to the nurse, and the nurse said, “Yes, doctor, I’ll call them right away.”

Her tooth, which had brought her here unerringly, seemed now the only part of her to have any identity. It seemed to have had its picture taken without her; it was the important creature which must be recorded and examined and gratified; she was only its unwilling vehicle, and only as such was she of interest to the dentist and the nurse, only as the bearer of her tooth was she worth their immediate and practised attention. The dentist handed her a slip of paper with the picture of a full set of teeth drawn on it; her living tooth was checked with a black mark, and across the top of the paper was written “Lower molar; extraction.”

“Take this slip,” the dentist said, “and go right up to the address on this card; it’s a surgeon dentist. They’ll take care of you there.”

“What will they do?” she said. Not the question she wanted to ask, not: What about me? or, How far down do the roots go?

“They’ll take that tooth out,” the dentist said testily, turning away. “Should have been done years ago.”

I’ve stayed too long, she thought, he’s tired of my tooth. She got up out of the dentist chair and said, “Thank you. Good-bye.”

“Good-bye,” the dentist said. At the last minute he smiled at her, showing her his full white teeth, all in perfect control.

“Are you all right? Does it bother you too much?” the nurse asked.

“I’m all right.”

“I can give you some codeine tablets,” the nurse said. “We’d rather you didn’t take anything right now, of course, but I think I could let you have them if the tooth is really bad.”

“No,” she said, remembering her little bottle of codeine pills on the table of a restaurant between here and there. “No, it doesn’t bother me too much.”

“Well,” the nurse said, “good luck.”

She went down the stairs and out past the doorman; in the fifteen minutes she had been upstairs he had lost a little of his pristine morningness, and his bow was just a fraction smaller than before.

“Taxi?” he asked, and, remembering the bus down to Twenty-third Street, she said, “Yes.”

Just as the doorman came back from the curb, bowing to the taxi he seemed to believe he had invented, she thought a hand waved to her from the crowd across the street.

She read the address on the card the dentist had given her and repeated it carefully to the taxi driver. With the card and the little slip of paper with “Lower molar” written on it and her tooth identified so clearly, she sat without moving, her hands still around the papers, her eyes almost closed. She thought she must have been asleep again when the taxi stopped suddenly, and the driver, reaching around to open the door, said, “Here we are, lady.” He looked at her curiously.

“I’m going to have a tooth pulled,” she said.

“Jesus,” the taxi driver said. She paid him and he said, “Good luck,” as he slammed the door.

This was a strange building, the entrance flanked by medical signs carved in stone; the doorman here was faintly professional,as though he were competent to prescribe if she did not care to go any farther. She went past him, going straight ahead until an elevator opened its door to her. In the elevator she showed the elevator man the card and he said, “Seventh floor.”

She had to back up in the elevator for a nurse to wheel in an old lady in a wheel chair. The old lady was calm and restful, sitting there in the elevator with a rug over her knees; she said, “Nice day” to the elevator operator and he said, “Good to see the sun,” and then the old lady lay back in her chair and the nurse straightened the rug around her knees and said, “Now we’re not going to worry,” and the old lady said irritably, “Who’s worrying?”

They got out at the fourth floor. The elevator went on up and then the operator said, “Seven,” and the elevator stopped and the door opened.

“Straight down the hall and to your left,” the operator said.

There were closed doors on either side of the hall. Some of them said “DDS,” some of them said “Clinic,” some of them said “X-Ray.” One of them, looking wholesome and friendly and somehow most comprehensible, said “Ladies.” Then she turned to the left and found a door with the name on the card and she opened it and went in. There was a nurse sitting behind a glass window, almost as in a bank, and potted palms in tubs in the corners of the waiting room, and new magazines and comfortable chairs. The nurse behind the glass window said, “Yes?” as though you had overdrawn your account with the dentist and were two teeth in arrears.

She handed her slip of paper through the glass window and the nurse looked at it and said, “Lower molar, yes. They called about you. Will you come right in, please? Through the door to your left.”

Into the vault? she almost said, and then silently opened the door and went in. Another nurse was waiting, and she smiled and turned, expecting to be followed, with no visible doubt about her right to lead.

There was another X-ray, and the nurse told another nurse: “Lower molar,” and the other nurse said, “Come this way, please.”

There were labyrinths and passages, seeming to lead into the heart of the office building, and she was put, finally, in a cubicle where there was a couch with a pillow and a washbasin and a chair.

“Wait here,” the nurse said. “Relax if you can.”

“I’ll probably go to sleep,” she said.

“Fine,” the nurse said. “You won’t have to wait long.”

She waited probably, for over an hour, although she spent the time half-sleeping, waking only when someone passed the door; occasionally the nurse looked in and smiled, once she said, “Won’t have to wait much longer.” Then, suddenly, the nurse was back, no longer smiling, no longer the good hostess, but efficient and hurried. “Come along,” she said, and moved purposefully out of the little room into the hallways again.

Then, quickly, more quickly than she was able to see, she was sitting in the chair and there was a towel around her head and a towel under her chin and the nurse was leaning a hand on her shoulder.

“Will it hurt?” she asked.

“No,” the nurse said, smiling. “You know it won’t hurt, don’t you?”

“Yes,” she said.

The dentist came in and smiled down on her from over her head. “Well,” he said.

“Will it hurt?” she said.

“Now,” he said cheerfully, “we couldn’t stay in business if we hurt people.” All the time he talked he was busying himself with metal hidden under a towel, and great machinery being wheeled in almost silently behind her. “We couldn’t stay in business at all,” he said. “All you’ve got to worry about is telling us all your secrets while you’re asleep. Want to watch out for that, you know. Lower molar?” he said to the nurse.

“Lower molar, doctor,” she said.

Then they put the metal-tasting rubber mask over her face and the dentist said, “You know,” two or three times absent-mindedly while she could still see him over the mask. The nurse said “Relax your hands, dear,” and after a long time she felt her fingers relaxing.

First of all things get so far away, she thought, remember this. And remember the metallic sound and taste of all of it. And the outrage.

And then the whirling music, the ringing confusedly loud music that went on and on, around and around, and she was running as fast as she could down a long horribly clear hallway with doors on both sides and at the end of the hallway was Jim, holding out his hands and laughing, and calling something she could never hear because of the loud music, and she was running and then she said, “I’m not afraid,” and someone from the door next to her took her arm and pulled her through and the world widened alarmingly until it would never stop and then it stopped with the head of the dentist looking down at her and the window dropped into place in front of her and the nurse was holding her arm.

"Why did you pull me back?" she said, and her mouth was full of blood. "I wanted to go on."

"I didn't pull you," the nurse said, but the dentist said, "She's not out of it yet."

She began to cry without moving and felt the tears rolling down her face and the nurse wiped them off with a towel. There was no blood anywhere around except in her mouth; everything was as clean as before. The dentist was gone, suddenly, and the nurse put out her arm and helped her out of the chair. "Did I talk?" she asked suddenly, anxiously. "Did I say anything?"

"You said, 'I'm not afraid,'" the nurse said soothingly. "Just as you were coming out of it."

"No," she said, stopping to pull at the arm around her. "Did I *say* anything? Did I say where he is?"

"You didn't say *anything,*" the nurse said. "The doctor was only teasing you."

"Where's my tooth?" she asked suddenly, and the nurse laughed and said, "All gone. Never bother you again."

She was back in the cubicle, and she lay down on the couch and cried, and the nurse brought her whisky in a paper cup and set it on the edge of the wash-basin.

"God has given me blood to drink," she said to the nurse, and the nurse said, "Don't rinse your mouth or it won't clot."

After a long time the nurse came back and said to her from the doorway, smiling, "I see you're awake again."

"Why?" she said.

"You've been asleep," the nurse said. "I didn't want to wake you."

She sat up; she was dizzy and it seemed that she had been in the cubicle all her life.

“Do you want to come along now?” the nurse said, all kindness again. She held out the same arm, strong enough to guide any wavering footstep; this time they went back through the long corridor to where the nurse sat behind the bank window.

“All through?” this nurse said brightly. “Sit down a minute, then.” She indicated a chair next to the glass window, and turned away to write busily. “Do not rinse your mouth for two hours,” she said, without turning around. “Take a laxative tonight, take two aspirin if there is any pain. If there is much pain or excessive bleeding, notify this office at once. All right?” she said, and smiled brightly again.

There was a new little slip of paper; this one said, “Extraction,” and underneath, “Do not rinse mouth. Take mild laxative. Two aspirin for pain. If pain is excessive or any hemorrhage occurs, notify office.”

“Good-bye,” the nurse said pleasantly.

“Good-bye,” she said.

With the little slip of paper in her hand, she went out through the glass door and, still almost asleep, turned the corner and started down the hall. When she opened her eyes a little and saw that it was a long hall with doorways on either side, she stopped and then saw the door marked “Ladies” and went in. Inside there was a vast room with windows and wicker chairs and glaring white tiles and glittering silver faucets; there were four or five women around the wash-basins, combing their hair, putting on lipstick. She went directly to the nearest of the three wash-basins, took a paper towel, dropped her pocketbook and the little slip of paper on the floor next to her, and fumbled with the faucets, soaking the towel until it was dripping. Then she slapped it against her face violently. Her eyes cleared and she felt fresher, so she soaked the paper again and rubbed her face with it. She felt out blindly for another paper towel, and the woman next to her handed her one, with a laugh she could hear, although she could not see for the water in her eyes. She heard one of the women say, “Where we going for lunch?” and another one say, “Just downstairs, prob’ly. Old fool says I gotta be back in half-an-hour.”

Then she realized that at the wash-basin she was in the way of the women in a hurry so she dried her face quickly. It was when she stepped a little aside to let someone else get to the basin and stood up and glanced into the mirror that she realized with a slight stinging shock that she had no idea which face was hers!

She looked into the mirror as though into a group of strangers, all staring at her or around her; no one was familiar in the group, no one smiled at her or looked at her with recognition; you’d think my own face would know me, she thought, with a queer numbness in her throat. There was a creamy chinless face with bright blond hair, and a sharp-looking face under a red veiled hat, and a colorless anxious face with brown hair pulled straight back, and a square rosy face under a square haircut, and two or three more faces pushing close to the mirror, moving, regarding themselves. Perhaps it’s not a mirror, she thought, maybe it’s a window and I’m looking straight through at women washing on the other side. But there were women combing their hair and consulting the mirror; the group was on her side, and she thought, I hope I’m not the blonde, and lifted her hand and put it on her cheek.

She was the pale anxious one with the hair pulled back and when she realized it she was indignant and moved hurriedly back through the crowd of women, thinking, It isn’t fair, why don’t I have any color in my face? There were some pretty faces there, why didn’t I take one of those? I didn’t have time, she told herself sullenly, they didn't give me time to think, I could have had one of the nice faces, even the blonde would be better.

She backed up and sat down in one of the wicker chairs. It's mean, she was thinking. She put her hand up and felt her hair; it was loosened after her sleep but that was definitely the way she wore it, pulled straight back all around and fastened at the back of her neck with a wide tight barrette. Like a schoolgirl, she thought, only — remembering the pale face in the mirror — only I'm older than that. She unfastened the barrette with difficulty and brought it around where she could look at it. Her hair fell softly around her face; it was warm and reached to her shoulders. The barrette was silver; engraved on it was the name, "Clara."

"Clara," she said aloud. "*Clara*?" Two of the women leaving the room smiled back at her over their shoulders; almost all the women were leaving now, correctly combed and lip-sticked, hurrying out talking together. In the space of a second, like birds leaving a tree, they all were gone and she sat alone in the room. She dropped the barrette into the ashstand next to her chair; the ashstand was deep and metal, and the barrette made a satisfactory clang falling down. Her hair down on her shoulders, she opened her pocketbook, and began to take things out, setting them on her lap as she did so. Handkerchief, plain, white, uninitialled. Compact, square and brown tortoise-shell plastic, with a powder compartment and a rouge compartment; the rouge compartment had obviously never been used, although the powder cake was half-gone. That's why I'm so pale, she thought, and set the compact down. Lipstick, a rose shade, almost finished. A comb, an opened package of cigarettes and a package of matches, a change purse, and a wallet. The change purse was red imitation leather with a zipper across the top; she opened it and dumped the money out into her hand. Nickels, dimes, pennies, a quarter. Ninety-seven cents. Can't go far on that, she thought, and opened the brown leather wallet; there was money in it but she looked first for papers and found nothing. The only thing in the wallet was money. She counted it; thereé were nineteen dollars. I can go a little farther on *that,* she thought.

There was nothing else in the pocketbook. No keys — shouldn't I have keys? she wondered — no papers, no address book, no identification. The pocketbook itself was imitation leather, light grey, and she looked down and discovered that she was wearing a dark grey flannel suit and a salmon pink blouse with a ruffle around the neck. Her shoes were black and stout with moderate heels and they had laces, one of which was untied. She was wearing beige stockings and there was a ragged tear in the right knee and a great ragged run going down her leg and ending in a hole in the toe which she could feel inside her shoe. She was wearing a pin on the lapel of her suit which, when she turned it around to look at it, was a blue plastic letter C. She took the pin off and dropped it into the ashstand, and it made a sort of clatter at the bottom, with a metallic clang when it landed on the barrette. Her hands were small, with stubby fingers and no nail polish; she wore a thin gold wedding ring on her left hand and no other jewelry.

Sitting alone in the ladies' room in the wicker chair, she thought, The least I can do is get rid of these stockings. Since no one was around she took off her shoes and stripped away the stockings with a feeling of relief when her toe was released from the hole. Hide them, she thought: the paper towel waste-basket. When she stood up she got a better sight of herself in the mirror; it was worse than she had thought: the grey suit bagged in the seat, her legs were bony, and her shoulders sagged. I look fifty, she thought; and then, consulting the face, but I can't be more than thirty. Her hair hung down untidily around the pale face and with sudden anger she fumbled in the pocketbook and found the lipstick; she drew an emphatic rosy mouth on the pale face, realizing as she did so that she was not very expert at it, and with the red mouth the face looking at her seemed somehow better to her, so she opened the compact and put on pink cheeks with the rouge. The cheeks were uneven and patent, and the red mouth glaring, but at least the face was no longer pale and anxious.

She put the stockings into the wastebasket and went barelegged out into the hall again, and purposefully to the elevator. The elevator operator said, “Down?” when he saw her and she stepped in and the elevator carried her silently downstairs. She went back past the grave professional doorman and out into the street where people were passing, and she stood in front of the building and waited. After a few minutes Jim came out of a crowd of people passing and came over to her and took her hand.

Somewhere between here and there was her bottle of codeine pills, upstairs on the floor of the ladies’ room she had left a little slip of paper headed “Extraction”; seven floors below, oblivious of the people who stepped sharply along the sidewalk, not noticing their occasional curious glances, her hand in Jim’s and her hair down on her shoulders, she ran barefoot through hot sand.

GOT A LETTER FROM JIMMY

SOMETIMES, SHE THOUGHT, stacking the dishes in the kitchen, sometimes I wonder if men are quite sane, any of them. Maybe they're all just crazy and every other woman knows it but me, and my mother never told me and my roommate just didn't mention it and all the other wives think I know.…

"Got a letter from Jimmy today," he said, when he was unfolding his napkin.

So you got it at last, she thought, so he finally broke down and wrote you, maybe now it will be all right, everything settled and friendly again.…"What did he have to say?" she asked casually.

"Don't know," he said, "didn't open it."

My God, she thought, seeing it clearly all the way through right then. She waited.

"Going to send it back to him tomorrow unopened."

I could have figured that one out by myself, she thought. I couldn't have kept that letter closed for five minutes. I would have figured out something nasty like tearing it up and sending it back in little pieces, or getting someone to write a sharp answer for me, but I couldn't have kept it around for five minutes.

"Had lunch with Tom today," he said, as though the subject were closed, just exactly as though the subject were closed, she thought, just exactly as though he never expected to think about it again. Maybe he doesn't, she thought, my God.

“I think you ought to open Jimmy’s letter,” she said. Maybe it will all be just as easy as that, she thought, maybe he’ll say all right and go open it, maybe hell go home and live with his mother for a while.

“Why?” he said.

Start easy, she thought. You’ll kill yourself if you don’t. “Oh, I guess because I’m curious and I’ll just die if I don’t see what’s in it,” she said.

“Open it,” he said.

Just watch me make a move for it, she thought. “Seriously,” she said, “it’s so silly to hold a grudge against a letter. Against Jimmy, all right. But not to read a letter out of spite is silly.” Oh God, she thought, I said silly. I said silly twice. That finishes it. If he hears me say he’s silly I’m through, I can talk all night.

“Why should I read it?” he said, “I wouldn’t be interested in anything he had to say.”

“I would.”

“Open it,” he said.

Oh God, she thought, oh God oh God, I’ll steal it out of his brief case, I’ll scramble it up with his eggs tomorrow, but I won’t take a dare like that, he’d break my arm.

“Okay,” she said, “so I’m not interested.” Make him think you’re through, let him get nicely settled in his chair, let him get to the lemon pie, get him off on some other subject.

“Had lunch with Tom today,” he said.

Stacking the dishes in the kitchen, she thought, Maybe he means it, maybe he could kill himself first, maybe he really wasn’t curious and even if he were he’d drive himself into a hysterical state trying to read through the envelope, locked in the bathroom. Or maybe he just got it and said, Oh, from Jimmy, and threw it in his brief case and forgot it. I’ll murder him if he did, she thought, I’ll bury him in the cellar.

Later, when he was drinking his coffee, she said, “Going to show it to John?” John will die too, she thought, John will edge around it just like I’m doing.

“Show what to John?” he said.

“Jimmy’s letter.”

“Oh,” he said. “Sure.”

A tremendous triumph captured her. So he really wants to show it to John, she thought, so he just wants to see for himself that he’s still mad, he wants John to say, Really, are you still mad at Jimmy? And he wants to be able to say yes. Out of her great triumph she thought, He really has been thinking about it all this time, too; and she said, before she could stop herself:

“Thought you were going to send it back unopened?”

He looked up. “I forgot,” he said. “Guess I will.”

I had to open my mouth, she thought. He forgot. The trouble is, she thought, he really did forget. It slipped his mind completely, he never gave it a second thought, if it was a snake it would have bit him. Under the cellar steps, she thought, with his head bashed in and his goddam letter under his folded hands, and it’s worth it, she thought, oh it’s worth it.

THE LOTTERY (VERSION 1)

THE MORNING OF June 27th was clear and sunny, with the fresh warmth of a full-summer day; the flowers were blossoming profusely and the grass was richly green. The people of the village began to gather in the square, between the post office and the bank, around ten o’clock; in some towns there were so many people that the lottery took two days and had to be started on June 26th, but in this village, where there were only about three hundred people, the whole lottery took less than two hours, so it could begin at ten o’clock in the morning and still be through in time to allow the villagers to get home for noon dinner.

The children assembled first, of course. School was recently over for the summer, and the feeling of liberty sat uneasily on most of them; they tended to gather together quietly for a while before they broke into boisterous play, and their talk was still of the classroom and the teacher, of books and reprimands. Bobby Martin had already stuffed his pockets full of stones, and the other boys soon followed his example, selecting the smoothest and roundest stones; Bobby and Harry Jones and Dickie Delacroix — the villagers pronounced this name “Dellacroy” — eventually made a great pile of stones in one corner of the square and guarded it against the raids of the other boys. The girls stood aside, talking among themselves, looking over their shoulders at the boys, and the very small children rolled in the dust or clung to the hands of their older brothers or sisters.

Soon the men began to gather, surveying their own children, speaking of planting and rain, tractors and taxes. They stood together, away from the pile of stones in the corner, and their jokes were quiet and they smiled rather than laughed. The women, wearing faded house dresses and sweaters, came shortly after their menfolk. They greeted one another and exchanged bits of gossip as they went to join their husbands. Soon the women, standing by their husbands, began to call to their children, and the children came reluctantly, having to be called four or five times. Bobby Martin ducked under his mother's grasping hand and ran, laughing, back to the pile of stones. His father spoke up sharply, and Bobby came quickly and took his place between his father and his oldest brother.

The lottery was conducted — as were the square dances, the teen-age club, the Halloween program — by Mr. Summers, who had time and energy to devote to civic activities. He was a round-faced, jovial man and he ran the coal business, and people were sorry for him, because he had no children and his wife was a scold. When he arrived in the square, carrying the black wooden box, there was a murmur of conversation among the villagers, and he waved and called, "Little late today, folks." The postmaster, Mr. Graves, followed him, carrying a three-legged stool, and the stool was put in the center of the square and Mr. Summers set the black box down on it. The villagers kept their distance, leaving a space between themselves and the stool, and when Mr. Summers said, "Some of you fellows want to give me a hand?" there was a hesitation before two men, Mr. Martin and his oldest son, Baxter, came forward to hold the box steady on the stool while Mr. Summers stirred up the papers inside it.

The original paraphernalia for the lottery had been lost long ago, and the black box now resting on the stool had been put into use even before Old Man Warner, the oldest man in town, was born. Mr. Summers spoke frequently to the villagers about making a new box, but no one liked to upset even as much tradition as was represented by the black box. There was a story that the present box had been made with some pieces of the box that had preceded it, the one that had been constructed when the first people settled down to make a village here. Every year, after the lottery, Mr. Summers began talking again about a new box, but every year the subject was allowed to fade off without anything's being done. The black box grew shabbier each year; by now it was no longer completely black but splintered badly along one side to show the original wood color, and in some places faded or stained.

Mr. Martin and his oldest son, Baxter, held the black box securely on the stool until Mr. Summers had stirred the papers thoroughly with his hand. Because so much of the ritual had been forgotten or discarded, Mr. Summers had been successful in having slips of paper substituted for the chips of wood that had been used for generations. Chips of wood, Mr. Summers had argued, had been all very well when the village was tiny, but now that the population was more than three hundred and likely to keep on growing, it was necessary to use something that would fit more easily into the black box. The night before the lottery, Mr. Summers and Mr. Graves made up the slips of paper and put them in the box, and it was then taken to the safe of Mr. Summers' coal company and locked up until Mr. Summers was ready to take it to the square next morning. The rest of the year, the box was put away, sometimes one place, sometimes another; it had spent one year in Mr. Graves's barn and another year underfoot in the post office, and sometimes it was set on a shelf in the Martin grocery and left there.

There was a great deal of fussing to be done before Mr. Summers declared the lottery open. There were the lists to make up — of heads of families, heads of households in each family, members of each household in each family. There was the proper swearing-in of Mr. Summers by the postmaster, as the official of the lottery; at one time, some people remembered, there had been a recital of some sort, performed by the official of the lottery, a perfunctory, tuneless chant that had been rattled off duly each year; some people believed that the official of the lottery used to stand just so when he said or sang it, others believed that he was supposed to walk among the people, but years and years ago this part of the ritual had been allowed to lapse. There had been, also, a ritual salute, which the official of the lottery had had to use in addressing each person who came up to draw from the box, but this also had changed with time, until now it was felt necessary only for the official to speak to each person approaching. Mr. Summers was very good at all this; in his clean white shirt and blue jeans, with one hand resting carelessly on the black box, he seemed very proper and important as he talked interminably to Mr. Graves and the Martins.

Just as Mr. Summers finally left off talking and turned to the assembled villagers, Mrs. Hutchinson came hurriedly along the path to the square, her sweater thrown over her shoulders, and slid into place in the back of the crowd. “Clean forgot what day it was,” she said to Mrs. Delacroix, who stood next to her, and they both laughed softly. “Thought my old man was out back stacking wood,” Mrs. Hutchinson went on, “and then I looked out the window and the kids was gone, and then I remembered it was the twenty-seventh and came a-running.” She dried her hands on her apron, and Mrs. Delacroix said, “You’re in time, though. They’re still talking away up there.”

Mrs. Hutchinson craned her neck to see through the crowd and found her husband and children standing near the front. She tapped Mrs. Delacroix on the arm as a farewell and began to make her way through the crowd. The people separated good-humoredly to let her through; two or three people said, in voices just loud enough to be heard across the crowd, “Here comes your Missus Hutchinson,” and “Bill, she made it after all.” Mrs. Hutchinson reached her husband, and Mr. Summers, who had been waiting, said cheerfully, “Thought we were going to have to get on without you, Tessie.” Mrs. Hutchinson said, grinning, “Wouldn’t have me leave m’dishes in the sink, now, would you, Joe?,” and soft laughter ran through the crowd as the people stirred back into position after Mrs. Hutchinson’s arrival.

“Well, now,” Mr. Summers said soberly, “guess we better get started, get this over with, so’s we can go back to work. Anybody ain’t here?”

“Dunbar,” several people said. “Dunbar, Dunbar.”

Mr. Summers consulted his list. “Clyde Dunbar,” he said. “That’s right. He’s broke his leg, hasn’t he? Who’s drawing for him?”

“Me, I guess,” a woman said, and Mr. Summers turned to look at her. “Wife draws for her husband,” Mr. Summers said. “Don’t you have a grown boy to do it for you, Janey?” Although Mr. Summers and everyone else in the village knew the answer perfectly well, it was the business of the official of the lottery to ask such questions formally. Mr. Summers waited with an expression of polite interest while Mrs. Dunbar answered.

“Horace’s not but sixteen yet,” Mrs. Dunbar said regretfully. “Guess I gotta fill in for the old man this year.”

“Right,” Mr. Summers said. He made a note on the list he was holding. Then he asked, “Watson boy drawing this year?”

A tall boy in the crowd raised his hand. “Here,” he said. “I’m drawing for m’mother and me.” He blinked his eyes nervously and ducked his head as several voices in the crowd said things like “Good fellow, Jack,” and “Glad to see your mother’s got a man to do it.”

“Well,” Mr. Summers said, “guess that’s everyone. Old Man Warner make it?”

“Here,” a voice said, and Mr. Summers nodded.

A sudden hush fell on the crowd as Mr. Summers cleared his throat and looked at the list. “All ready?” he called. “Now, I’ll read the names —

heads of families first — and the men come up and take a paper out of the box. Keep the paper folded in your hand without looking at it until everyone has had a turn. Everything clear?"

The people had done it so many times that they only half listened to the directions; most of them were quiet, wetting their lips, not looking around. Then Mr. Summers raised one hand high and said, "Adams." A man disengaged himself from the crowd and came forward. "Hi, Steve," Mr. Summers said, and Mr. Adams said, "Hi, Joe." They grinned at one another humorlessly and nervously. Then Mr. Adams reached into the black box and took out a folded paper. He held it firmly by one corner as he turned and went hastily back to his place in the crowd, where he stood a little apart from his family, not looking down at his hand.

"Allen," Mr. Summers said. "Anderson.…Bentham."

"Seems like there's no time at all between lotteries any more," Mrs. Delacroix said to Mrs. Graves in the back row. "Seems like we got through with the last one only last week."

"Time sure goes fast," Mrs. Graves said.

"Clark.…Delacroix."

"There goes my old man," Mrs. Delacroix said. She held her breath while her husband went forward.

"Dunbar," Mr. Summers said, and Mrs. Dunbar went steadily to the box while one of the women said, "Go on, Janey," and another said, "There she goes."

"We're next," Mrs. Graves said. She watched while Mr. Graves came around from the side of the box, greeted Mr. Summers gravely, and selected a slip of paper from the box. By now, all through the crowd there were men holding the small folded papers in their large hands, turning them over and over nervously. Mrs. Dunbar and her two sons stood together, Mrs. Dunbar holding the slip of paper.

"Harburt.…Hutchinson."

"Get up there, Bill," Mrs. Hutchinson said, and the people near her laughed.

"Jones."

"They do say," Mr. Adams said to Old Man Warner, who stood next to him, "that over in the north village they're talking of giving up the lottery."

Old Man Warner snorted. "Pack of crazy fools," he said. "Listening to the young folks, nothing's good enough for *them.* Next thing you know, they'll be wanting to go back to living in caves, nobody work any more, live *that* way for a while. Used to be a saying about 'Lottery in June, corn be heavy soon.' First thing you know, we'd all be eating stewed chickweed and acorns. There's *always* been a lottery," he added petulantly. "Bad enough to see young Joe Summers up there joking with everybody."

"Some places have already quit lotteries," Mrs. Adams said.

"Nothing but trouble in *that,*" Old Man Warner said stoutly. "Pack of young fools."

"Martin." And Bobby Martin watched his father go forward. "Overdyke.…Percy."

"I wish they'd hurry," Mrs. Dunbar said to her older son. "I wish they'd hurry."

"They're almost through," her son said.

"You get ready to run tell Dad," Mrs. Dunbar said.

Mr. Summers called his own name and then stepped forward precisely and selected a slip from the box. Then he called, "Warner."

"Seventy-seventh year I been in the lottery," Old Man Warner said as he went through the crowd. "Seventy-seventh time."

"Watson." The tall boy came awkwardly through the crowd. Someone said, "Don't be nervous, Jack," and Mr. Summers said, "Take your time, son."

"Zanini."

After that, there was a long pause, a breathless pause, until Mr. Summers, holding his slip of paper in the air, said, "All right, fellows." For a minute, no one moved, and then all the slips of paper were opened. Suddenly, all the women began to speak at once, saying, "Who is it?," "Who's got it?," "Is it the Dunbars?," "Is it the Watsons?" Then the voices began to say, "It's Hutchinson. It's Bill," "Bill Hutchinson's got it."

"Go tell your father," Mrs. Dunbar said to her older son.

People began to look around to see the Hutchinsons. Bill Hutchinson was standing quiet, staring down at the paper in his hand. Suddenly, Tessie Hutchinson shouted to Mr. Summers, "You didn't give him time enough to take any paper he wanted. I saw you. It wasn't fair!"

"Be a good sport, Tessie," Mrs. Delacroix called, and Mrs. Graves said, "All of us took the same chance."

"Shut up, Tessie," Bill Hutchinson said.

"Well, everyone," Mr. Summers said, "that was done pretty fast, and now we've got to be hurrying a little more to get done in time." He consulted his next list. "Bill," he said, "you draw for the Hutchinson family. You got any other households in the Hutchinsons?"

"There's Don and Eva," Mrs. Hutchinson yelled. "Make *them* take their chance!"

"Daughters draw with their husbands' families, Tessie," Mr. Summers said gently. "You know that as well as anyone else."

"It wasn't *fair,*" Tessie said.

“I guess not, Joe,” Bill Hutchinson said regretfully. “My daughter draws with her husband’s family, that’s only fair. And I’ve got no other family except the kids.”

“Then, as far as drawing for families is concerned, it’s you,” Mr. Summers said in explanation, “and as far as drawing for households is concerned, that’s you, too. Right?”

“Right,” Bill Hutchinson said.

“How many kids, Bill?” Mr. Summers asked formally.

“Three,” Bill Hutchinson said. “There’s Bill, Jr. and Nancy, and little Dave. And Tessie and me.”

“All right, then,” Mr. Summers said. “Harry, you got their tickets back?”

Mr. Graves nodded and held up the slips of paper. “Put them in the box, then,” Mr. Summers directed. “Take Bill’s and put it in.”

“I think we ought to start over,” Mrs. Hutchinson said, as quietly as she could. “I tell you it wasn’t *fair.* You didn’t give him time enough to choose. *Every*body saw that.”

Mr. Graves had selected the five slips and put them in the box, and he dropped all the papers but those onto the ground, where the breeze caught them and lifted them off.

“Listen, everybody,” Mrs. Hutchinson was saying to the people around her.

“Ready, Bill?” Mr. Summers asked, and Bill Hutchinson, with one quick glance around at his wife and children, nodded.

“Remember,” Mr. Summers said, “take the slips and keep them folded until each person has taken one. Harry, you help little Dave.” Mr. Graves took the hand of the little boy, who came willingly with him up to the box. “Take a paper out of the box, Davy,” Mr. Summers said. Davy put his hand into the box and laughed. “Take just *one* paper,” Mr. Summers said. “Harry, you hold it for him." Mr. Graves took the child's hand and removed the folded paper from the tight fist and held it while little Dave stood next to him and looked up at him wonderingly.

"Nancy next," Mr. Summers said. Nancy was twelve, and her school friends breathed heavily as she went forward, switching her skirt, and took a slip daintily from the box. "Bill, Jr." Mr. Summers said, and Billy, his face red and his feet over-large, nearly knocked the box over as he got a paper out. "Tessie," Mr. Summers said. She hesitated for a minute, looking around defiantly, and then set her lips and went up to the box. She snatched a paper out and held it behind her.

"Bill," Mr. Summers said, and Bill Hutchinson reached into the box and felt around, bringing his hand out at last with the slip of paper in it.

The crowd was quiet. A girl whispered, "I hope it's not Nancy," and the sound of the whisper reached the edges of the crowd.

"It's not the way it used to be," Old Man Warner said clearly. "People ain't the way they used to be."

"All right," Mr. Summers said. "Open the papers. Harry, you open little Dave's."

Mr. Graves opened the slip of paper and there was a general sigh through the crowd as he held it up and everyone could see that it was blank. Nancy and Bill, Jr. opened theirs at the same time, and both beamed and laughed, turning around to the crowd and holding their slips of paper above their heads.

"Tessie," Mr. Summers said. There was a pause, and then Mr. Summers looked at Bill Hutchinson, and Bill unfolded his paper and showed it. It was blank.

"It's Tessie," Mr. Summers said, and his voice was hushed. "Show us her paper, Bill."

Bill Hutchinson went over to his wife and forced the slip of paper out of her hand. It had a black spot on it, the black spot Mr. Summers had made the night before with the heavy pencil in the coal-company office. Bill Hutchinson held it up, and there was a stir in the crowd.

“All right, folks,” Mr. Summers said. “Let’s finish quickly.”

Although the villagers had forgotten the ritual and lost the original black box, they still remembered to use stones. The pile of stones the boys had made earlier was ready; there were stones on the ground with the blowing scraps of paper that had come out of the box. Mrs. Delacroix selected a stone so large she had to pick it up with both hands and turned to Mrs. Dunbar. “Come on,” she said. “Hurry up.’

Mrs. Dunbar had small stones in both hands, and she said, gasping for breath, “I can’t run at all. You’ll have to go ahead and I’ll catch up with you.”

The children had stones already, and someone gave little Davy Hutchinson a few pebbles.

Tessie Hutchinson was in the center of a cleared space by now, and she held her hands out desperately as the villagers moved in on her. “It isn’t fair,” she said. A stone hit her on the side of the head.

Old Man Warner was saying, “Come on, come on, everyone.” Steve Adams was in the front of the crowd of villagers, with Mrs. Graves beside him.

“It isn’t fair, it isn’t right,” Mrs. Hutchinson screamed, and then they were upon her.

PART V

Epilogue

… She set her foot upon the ship,
No mariners could she behold,
But the sails were o the taffetie,
And the masts o the beaten gold.
She had not sailed a league, a league,
A league but barely three,
When dismal grew his countenance,
And drumlie grew his ee.
They had not sailed a league, a league,
A league but barely three,
Until she espied his cloven foot,
And she wept right bitterlie.
‘O hold your tongue of your weeping,’ says he,
‘Of your weeping now let me be,
I will shew you how the lilies grow
On the banks of Italy.’
‘O what hills are yon, yon pleasant hills,
That the sun shines sweetly on?’
‘O yon are the hills of heaven,’ he said,
‘Where you will never win.’
‘O whaten a mountain is yon,’ she said,
‘All so dreary wi frost and snow?’
‘O yon is the mountain of hell,’ he cried,
‘Where you and I will go.’
He strack the tap-mast wi his hand,

The fore-mast wi his knee,
And he brake that gallant ship in twain,
And sank her in the sea.
from James Harris, The Daemon Lover
(Child Ballad No. 243)

Stories from ‘Come Along with Me’ (1968)

The posthumous story collection *Come Along with Me* (1968), edited by Jackson’s husband, includes the story ‘Janice’, a very brief tale about a college student casually recalling her attempted suicide. Jackson wrote it as a sophomore at Syracuse University and Hyman selected it for sentimental reasons, since it had led to the couple meeting and marrying.

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JANICE

FIRST, TO ME on the phone, in a half-amused melancholy: “Guess I’m not going back to school...”

“Why not, Jan?”

“Oh, my *mother*. She says we can’t afford it.” How can I reproduce the uncaring inflections of Janice’s voice, saying conversationally that what she wanted she could not have? “So I guess I’m not going back.”

“I’m so sorry, Jan.”

But then, struck by another thought: “Y’know *what*?”

“What?”

“Darn near killed myself this afternoon.”

“Jan! How?”

Almost whimsical, indifferent: “Locked myself in the garage and turned on the car motor.”

“But why?”

“I dunno. ‘Cause I couldn’t go back, I suppose.”

“What happened?”

“Oh, the fellow that was cutting our lawn heard the motor and came and got me. I was pretty near out.”

“But that’s terrible, Jan. What ever possessed—”

“Oh, well. Say—” changing again, “ — going to Sally’s tonight?”...

And, later, that night at Sally’s where Janice was not the center of the group, but sat talking to me and to Bob: “Nearly killed myself this afternoon, Bob.”

“What!”

Lightly: “Nearly killed myself. Locked myself in the garage with the car motor running.”

“But why, Jan?”

“I guess because they wouldn’t let me go back to school.”

“Oh, I’m sorry about that, Jan. But what about this afternoon? What did you do?”

“Man cutting the grass got me out.”

Sally coming over: “What’s this, Jan?”

“Oh, I’m not going back to school.”

Myself, cutting in: “How did it feel to be dying, Jan?”

Laughing “Gee, funny. All black.” Then, to Sally’s incredulous stare: “Nearly killed myself this afternoon, Sally...”

TOOTIE IN PEONAGE

I REALLY GOT the first good look at Tootie Maple, since it fell on to my shoulders to interview her for my friend Julie. Julie had found herself settled in New Hampshire for the summer with her two-year-old son, a husband who only came up from his defense job in Boston for week ends, and a rambling old farmhouse that was lonely enough to make some sort of company a welcome necessity. She had carefully told them in the First National store in town: “I want a girl who can take care of Tommy, who can cook and clean a little, and who isn’t scared of the dark. A *nice* girl,” she had added hopefully. “The nicer the better.”

Tootie was the first and only applicant. She arrived at Julie’s house one morning, with a suitcase in her hand, and rang the doorbell emphatically. “You Miz Taylor?” she demanded when I opened the door. I shook my head helplessly. Tootie stood not quite five feet tall in her summer sandals, but she had arranged to add another three inches to her height by a complicated coiffure of curls and hair ribbons which made her look like a badly sketched perfume ad. She was wearing a house dress somehow too small for her, held together loosely with pins at the sides, and her arms dangled down to her knees, with bright red fingernails glittering as she waved her suitcase at me. “I come to stay here,” she said. “Like Miz Taylor wanted.”

As I stood back for her to come in — there was nothing I could think of to say, with that coiffure catching me somewhere about the chin — I saw that her toenails, too, were bright red. “Tommy will love her,” I thought, “just simply love her.” “Sit down,” I said, and she put down her suitcase and sat down, crossing her legs the way they do in the movies.

"Let's have a cigarette?" she said. I gave her one.

"Mrs. Taylor isn't here right now," I began, "but she ought to be back any minute. Meanwhile suppose you just tell me about yourself and I can probably let you know whether you'll be satisfactory or not."

She looked at me suspiciously. "Miz Taylor say it's all right for you to talk to anyone that comes?" I nodded. "Well," she said, "I got a boy friend. That be all right with Miz Taylor?"

"I should think so, if you didn't want to take too many evenings off. But suppose you tell me your name, first."

"Tootie Maple," she said. "His name's Bud. He works nights, though, so we go for rides in the afternoons. He has a car, a Chevvy, and it'll do fifty if he pushes her up."

"I see. Have you ever had any experience with children? Mrs. Taylor has a two-year-old baby boy you'll have to—"

"That ain't a baby. That's a kid. I took care of m'whole damn family. Guess I can handle this one. He much of a brat?"

I thought of peaceful little Tommy. "Not much," I said.

"Sure," Tootie told me, waving a set of those fingernails, "I can handle him fine. Pot?" she demanded.

"I beg your pardon?"

"I say, does he go on a pot, or—"

"You'll have to ask Mrs. Taylor about all that," I said firmly. "Let me see — can you cook?"

"Never tried," Tootie said.

By the time Julie came home I had discovered that Tootie could not wash clothes ("Never tried"), could not wash dishes ("At least, not a *lot* of dishes all at once"), was not afraid to stay alone with the baby at night ("Me scared? Of the *dark*? Jeez!"), and never bathed during the summertime. All this I told Julie in a sort of hurried whisper in the hall. I will never know how much of it she understood, because the next thing I heard, Tootie was hired, to come to work the following Monday morning.

"It's just got to be *some*body," Julie said weakly after Tootie had left, storing her suitcase suspiciously in Julie's guest room. "Maybe she's sort of wonderful with children."

"She looked a little bit... backwoods New Hampshire, don't you think?" I asked, carefully regarding my cigarette.

"Sort of... like an ape," Julie said tentatively. "And I got a look at her mate — this Bud. Gargantua."

"Gargantua?"

"And M'Tootie," Julie said. "M'Tootie."

By the following Monday night it had stopped being quite so funny. For some reason, probably because I had seen her first, Julie came to regard M'Tootie as my project, and even after a while became a little bitter toward me. "It's not that I think you could have *warned* me," she kept saying, "But *some*body ought've made me think it *over*."

M'Tootie had arrived Monday morning with Bud, an impressive creature of about sixteen, who stopped the Chevvy that would do fifty in front of Julie's house and disgorged M'Tootie with what looked to Julie, watching from the window, like a sort of desperate relief. M'Tootie shambled in the back door, dropped her jacket on a chair, and said to Julie: "Well, whaddye want me for? Could I have one of them cigarettes?"

Julie gave her a cigarette and told her to wash the dishes, came out into the kitchen an hour later, and found M'Tootie reading a page from *True Confessions* which had been used to pave a closet shelf.

"Aren't the dishes done yet?" Julie asked.

“Just getting to them,” M’Tootie said. She flipped the page over. “It don’t finish here anyway,” she said.

Tommy, as I had suspected, fell madly in love with M’Tootie immediately. He loved her red nail polish, the ribbons in her coiffure, and the shrill version of “I Found a Million Dollar Baby in a Five and Ten Cent Store” with which she used to quiet him when he was nervous. Because of Tommy, Julie was hesitant about attacking the red nail polish, and her first timid attempts at improving M’Tootie were so disastrous that she was forced to reconcile herself to M’Tootie in an anthropoid state. “What happens?” Julie wailed to me, “Where do I get? I give her a bowl of hot water and say, ‘While I’m giving Tommy his bath, Tootie, suppose you wash yourself and then we’ll all go out together, all dressed up—’ nice, you know, like a casual suggestion, and I come upstairs after giving Tommy his bath and the water’s sitting there stone-cold and that damn ape is lying on the bed reading *Jo’s Boys* and when I come in she says ‘All ready? Just wait’ll I finish this chapter and we’ll go,’ and there I am, and so then I figure that if I give her some nice clothes she might want to be clean and look nice and I say ‘Think how much Bud will admire you if you look pretty,’ and she looks at the clothes I have for her and says ‘Them? Say, I got a whole closet-full of them. Look,’ and she shows me the closet and she has ten dresses nicer than any I own, and she took the ones I gave her and gave them to Bud for his sister to wear. And all the time if she isn’t reading *Jo’s Boys* it’s *Heidi*, and she keeps asking me to help her with the long words; while I’m doing the dishes and taking care of Tommy she’s reading *Heidi*.”

Julie made one attempt on the coiffure, which not only failed miserably, but brought Bud around to have a talk with Julie when Tootie was upstairs reading.

"You gotta treat her nice, Miz Taylor," Bud said earnestly. "She's an independent sort of a kid, like, and you gotta be sure you're nice to her. All this fooling around trying to get her to change her ways won't work; she told me about how you come making her wear other clothes and bothering her hair and all this talk about washing dishes and stuff..."

Julie was dangerously near a stroke, but she said: "Don't you think Tootie ought to do the work she was hired for, Bud?"

"Sure," Bud said, nodding his head profoundly, "that ain't right, she shouldn't do her work. But I tell you, Miz Taylor, Tootie's had a hard time. Her father threw her out of the house when she was eighteen—"

"When she was *eighteen!*" Julie said. We had estimated Tootie's age as approximately fourteen.

"Yeah," Bud said, "and she's been living with us ever since, because I'm sort of her boy friend, and she ought to be treated right. So you just be careful of her, Miz Taylor, and she'll turn out fine, I promise you."

"I'd hate to send her back to live with your family, Bud," Julie said, "and I guess I'll have to give her one more chance, except that—"

"You're not going to give her any more chances," Bud said finally. "Tootie *likes* it here, and I guess she won't want to move back with us. She doesn't like my mother, and so I guess she'll sort of figure on staying here, so I guess you'll have to sort of make it up with her."

"I see," Julie said feverishly. "She won't want to leave."

"No'm," Bud said, "she honest to God won't."

As a test Julie put the matter of leaving up to Tootie, as tactfully as possible, and Tootie smiled prettily and shrugged. "The way I see it, Miz Taylor," she said, "you people have been mighty nice to me, and I better stick around."

“But, Tootie,” Julie explained, “I may have to get someone else to do your work.”

“That’s all right,” Tootie said, “if you can afford it.”

“Your family—” Julie began.

“They don’t really mind,” Tootie reassured her. “My father says you people are German spies, but I don’t much care. Way I see it, it’s your business.”

“I thought you didn’t see your father?” Julie asked. German spies or not, she was thinking, maybe we could give M’Tootie back.

“I see him some,” Tootie said. “Bud drives me out there. He thinks you’re German spies, too, Bud does, but, like I say, I don’t mind.”

“Why?” Julie asked. “Why does he think we’re German spies?”

“Oh,” Tootie waved her hand vaguely. Then she said brightly: “Maybe because you stay up so late, with the lights on, you know, and then you have so much money, and no husband.”

“You’ve met Mr. Taylor,” Julie said between her teeth, “he comes up from Boston week ends. You’ve met him.”

Tootie grinned generously. “Yeah,” she said. “Sure.”

Before Julie had worked up her courage to call in assistance and put Tootie out, Tootie solved the situation in her own peculiar fashion. After she had been with Julie for some three or four weeks, she came down to breakfast one morning just as Julie was finishing the dishes, and indicated by sitting down at the table and lighting a cigarette that she wanted to talk. Julie, who by that time was exerting every ounce of will power she possessed to ignore Tootie and go on about her own business until the happy day when she and Tootie could part company, refused to turn around until Tootie spoke.

“Hey,” Tootie said, banging the ash tray on the table to get attention, “hey, Miz Taylor?”

“Yes?”

“Look.” Tootie seemed unusually embarrassed. “Tell me this stuff about babies.”

Julie half turned. “What about babies?”

“Well...” Tootie shuffled her feet. “I mean, about babies, and, like, what you do to get them.”

Julie told me later that the only thought in her mind was, “This is what they always told me happened with hired girls, this is what they always told me — but not Tootie; how could it happen to Tootie?” accompanied by a deep unchanging joy which she made no attempt to analyze. She endeavored to answer Tootie in the simplest language possible, “carefully avoiding,” she told me, “any moral question, and leaning heavily on the bees and the flowers.”

Tootie was delighted. “I guess that’s it,” she said. “I guess I’m gonna.”

Julie clung to the edge of the sink. “Is it Bud?” she asked.

Tootie giggled. “According to the way you tell it,” she answered, “I guess it is.”

Julie was rehearsing statements which began “Well, I guess I can’t let you stay on here, Tootie, after all this...” when Tootie went on:

“Told m’father,” she said. “I’m going home, Miz Taylor. You can get along.”

“What about Bud?”

“Him and me ain’t going together no more,” Tootie said. “He’s got hisself a new car, a Ford, and he’s got a girl.”

“Better let your father talk to him,” Julie said. “After all, if he got you into this...”

“M’father don’t want no Bud around, him and his cars.” Tootie sniffed. “It’s the first,” she added.

“The first what?”

“First I ever had,” Tootie said.

When Tootie had packed all her clothes and the carton of cigarettes Julie gave her, and the bottle of red nail polish, and was standing on the porch waiting for her father to come and get her, Julie had the first feeling of real sympathy she had ever felt for Tootie.

“I hope everything’s all right, Tootie,” she said graciously. “You must let us know if there is anything we can—”

“Sure,” Tootie said. “Y’know what?” she asked.

“Well?”

“I’m going to name it Heidi,” Tootie said, “after the nice time I had staying with you folks.”

A CAULIFLOWER IN HER HAIR

MR. AND MRS. Garland and their daughter Virginia lived in a pleasant house in a pretty town and every night at seven they ate the agreeable dinner cooked by Agnes, the maid who cooked well and dusted adequately and made beds abominably. Mr. and Mrs. Garland belonged to two country clubs and Mr. Garland had a mustache; Mrs. Garland had given up evening gowns in favor of dinner dresses and had two fur coats, a leopard and an inferior mink. Virginia was in first year high school and went out with the captain of the basketball team. Every Saturday night Mr. Garland shook hands with this young man and they chatted jovially about the war until Virginia came down the stairs wearing her mother's perfume. Virginia was fifteen years old, Mr. Garland was thirty-nine, and Mrs. Garland was forty-one.

One evening at dinner — it would have been about twenty minutes past seven — Virginia remarked: "Mother, Millie said she'd be around tonight. Can I skip helping Agnes with the dishes?"

"What is Millie?" Mr. Garland inquired, regarding the cauliflower Agnes was offering, "a cow?"

Virginia giggled. "She looks a little bit like one," she said. "Only she isn't. She's Millie, from school. She's coming over and we're going to do algebra."

"Millie can wait while you help Agnes," Mrs. Garland said. She looked at Virginia to make Virginia realize that Agnes must be kept in good humor. "It doesn't take ten minutes, and Millie can wait."

“I’ll entertain Millie,” Mr. Garland said helpfully, “Millie and I will do all your algebra. Used to be quite a hand at algebra,” he told Mrs. Garland solemnly.

“You’re still quite a hand at talk,” Mrs. Garland said. “Take some cauliflower before it gets too cold. Agnes has to have some too, you know.”

“Millie hasn’t been in school long,” Virginia said. “She didn’t come until the second semester and I’m helping her catch up.”

“Very kind of you,” Mr. Garland said.

The doorbell rang, and Virginia dropped her napkin. “When she says early she means early,” she said.

“That would be Millie?” Mr. Garland inquired.

Virginia answered the door and Mr. and Mrs. Garland could hear her voice for a minute in the hall. Then she came back into the dining room, leading Millie. Millie was pretty and stupid-looking, and she had heavy black eyelashes and wore a great deal of lipstick.

“This is my mother and father,” Virginia said, sliding into her chair, “this is Millie. Pull up a chair, Millie.”

Mrs. Garland frowned slightly. “Have you had your dinner, Millie?”

“Yes,” Millie said. She looked at Virginia and giggled. “I ought to wait in the living room,” she said, “but Ginny said to come right on in.”

“Of course,” Mr. Garland said, “have some cauliflower?”

Millie giggled again, staring at Mr. Garland.

“If you don’t care to eat it,” Mr. Garland said, “you could wear it in your hair.”

“My father never takes anything seriously,” Virginia said to Millie. “He’s like that all the time, don’t mind him.”

“Maybe you’ll have some dessert with us, Millie?” Mrs. Garland said.

“No, thank you,” Millie said.

“If you eat anything,” Mr. Garland scowled ferociously at Millie, “you’ll have to wash dishes. Anyone eats in this house, right after dinner they have to go out in the kitchen and wash dishes.”

“Charles!” Mrs. Garland said. “You’ll frighten the child.”

“Millie isn’t scared of anything, Mother,” Virginia said, “Millie and I can do anything.”

“I’ll bet Millie can do anything,” Mr. Garland said. Mrs. Garland looked up.

“Virginia,” she said finally, “since you and Millie have to do algebra I’ll explain to Agnes and she won’t mind if you don’t help her.”

“Hallelujah,” Virginia said. “Come on, Millie. Be excused, Mother?”

Mrs. Garland nodded and Virginia slid off her chair and ran out of the dining room, waving Millie to follow her.

Mr. and Mrs. Garland were quiet for a little while after Virginia and Millie had left the room, until finally Mrs. Garland remarked: “She doesn’t seem like an awfully *nice* girl, does she, this Millie?”

“I don’t know,” Mr. Garland said, putting down his coffee cup, “she looked all right to me.”

Mr. and Mrs. Garland were sitting quietly in the living room some time later, Mrs. Garland doing needlepoint — she was making a footstool — and Mr. Garland reading the *Saturday Evening Post*, when Virginia and Millie, heralded by a clatter of feet from upstairs, burst into the room.

“Mother,” Virginia cried as she came, “Mother, we finished our homework and can we go down and get a soda, Mother?”

Mrs. Garland thought. “I suppose so,” she said slowly, “only hurry back.”

“Wait,” Mr. Garland said reaching into his pocket, “bring back some ice cream and we’ll all have some. Mother and I would like some ice cream.”

“I don’t think...” Mrs. Garland said.

Virginia rushed over and grabbed the money from her father’s hand. “Back in two seconds,” she said, and she and Millie ran out again.

“They do rush around so, don’t they,” Mrs. Garland said, turning back to her needlework.

“They’re young,” Mr. Garland said, “let them have their fun.”

“I don’t think we should encourage Millie as a friend for Virginia,” Mrs. Garland said, “she doesn’t seem to be quite a *nice* girl.”

“She seems all right to me,” Mr. Garland said.

Millie and Virginia put the ice cream in dishes and brought it in to Mr. and Mrs. Garland. Mr. Garland received his with disgust. “Why should Millie,” he inquired, “get away with so much and only leave this little bit for me?”

Millie giggled. “I don’t have one bit more than you do, Mr. Garland.”

“I dished it out myself,” Virginia said.

“You certainly do, Millie,” Mr. Garland went on, “I got robbed.” He went over to Millie to compare dishes and sat down next to her on the couch. “Now I’m going to sit right down here,” he said, “and watch every bit you eat, and count how much you have, and then you’ll be sorry you didn’t let me have more.”

Millie giggled again. “Stop, Mr. Garland,” she said, “I’m choking.”

“Charles,” Mrs. Garland said, “you’re spoiling the girl’s good time.”

“No, Mrs. Garland,” Millie said, “I think Mr. Garland’s awfully funny.”

“Now I’m funny,” Mr. Garland said. “First you rob me of my ice cream and then you think I’m funny. Just a silly old man, I guess.”

“You’re not an old man,” Millie said.

“He’s old enough not to act like a clown,” Mrs. Garland said sharply.

“I don’t think you’re old at all,” Millie protested, “really, I think you’re young.”

Mr. Garland eyed Millie. “How young would you say?” he demanded.

Millie giggled.

“My father’s always like that,” Virginia said to Millie. “He’s always fooling people.”

“Wouldn’t go out with a guy my age, would you, Millie?” Mr. Garland said.

Millie looked up at him. “I couldn’t say,” she said.

“Now don’t tease me,” Mr. Garland said.

Mrs. Garland rose, put down her sewing, and went to the door. In the doorway she stopped for a minute. “Virginia,” she said, without turning around, “I want to speak to you for a minute, please.”

Virginia got up and followed her mother out of the room. “Be right with you, Millie,” she said.

When Virginia was gone Millie turned around to Mr. Garland. “Is Mrs. Garland mad about something I said or something?” she asked.

“Don’t pay any attention to her,” Mr. Garland said. He touched the flower in Millie’s hair. “Pretty flower,” he said.

“My boy friend gave it to me,” Millie said.

“Got a boy friend?” Mr. Garland said. “Does he take you out and show you a good time?”

Millie giggled. “He sure does,” she said.

“Where does he take you?” Mr. Garland asked. “Ever take you to this place downtown, this club they call The Blue Lantern?”

“I’ve been there,” Millie said.

Mr. Garland got up and walked across the room to get a cigarette and, as an afterthought, offered one to Millie.

“*She* coming back?” Millie asked, her hand out.

“Mrs. Garland? Not for a minute or two, probably.” Millie took the cigarette and Mr. Garland lit it for her.

“She doesn’t like me,” Millie said, leaning back.

“I shouldn’t think so,” Mr. Garland said.

“But Virginia’s a swell kid,” Millie said. Mr. Garland laughed, and Millie looked up at him. “What did I *say*?” she asked.

Virginia came into the doorway and stopped for a minute. “Millie,” she said, and Millie juggled Mr. Garland’s hand insistently to make him take her cigarette. “Millie,” Virginia said, “Mother wants to know if we will run down and get her a couple of things at the store. Want to go?”

Millie hesitated, and Mrs. Garland came into the doorway behind Virginia. “Charles,” she said, “I told Virginia that if she and Millie went down to the store for me like good children you’d give them each a dime.”

“We’ll get a soda,” Virginia said.

“After all that ice cream?” Mrs. Garland asked tolerantly. “You’d like to have a dime, wouldn’t you, Millie?”

Millie hesitated. “Come *on*, Millie,” Virginia said impatiently. “Daddy, give us a dime.”

Mr. Garland looked at his wife, and reached into his pocket and took out a quarter. “Here,” he said.

Virginia came over and took the quarter and then grabbed Millie’s arm and started her toward the door.

Mrs. Garland sat down and picked up her sewing again. “Charles,” she said, “don’t you think the children are having too much ice cream?”

I KNOW WHO I LOVE

CATHARINE VINCENT BEGAN her life in a two-room apartment in New York; she was born in a minister's home in Buffalo; the shift from one to the other might be called her tragedy. When the devil prompted William Vincent to marry he did not prompt William further to inquire if his wife were to bear sons or daughters, or if the daughter were to be Catharine (named after William's mother, finally), thin and frightened, born with a scream and blue eyes.

When Catharine was twenty-three years old she found out that her father would have preferred a son, if he had to have any child at all. At that time she was still thin and noticeably frightened, with blue eyes and a faint talent for painting. She had eventually gone to New York alone; by the time she was self-supporting she had nearly forgotten her father, and her mother was dying.

William Vincent was a short heavy man, who affected a large mustache, which he thought made him look more the master of his house. He had become a minister shortly before his marriage because he had a vague feeling that in that way he was somehow certain of being right, and virtuous, and easily sure of his authority. He was not afraid of his wife, who was the only daughter of a grocer with no money, but he was afraid of the lady next door, and the brisk young man at the bank, and the butcher's delivery boy who made faces over unpaid bills, and asked insolent questions for which he could not be rebuked. William Vincent regarded his daughter as an unnecessary expense, as a trap, and as no true expression of God's will. He thought of his wife as an amiable woman whose place was in the home; practically the only person he felt really close to was God, in the heavy Bibles and the ponderous words, in the shabby church and the cheap hymns. Catharine early grew accustomed to hearing her father say across his small desk, or along the dull dinner table, “Do you think you are satisfactory, in God’s sight or mine?”

After Catharine left home, while the train was pulling out of the station, she stopped thinking about her father and mother, except, later, for a weekly letter home. (“I am fine now, my cold is all gone at last. My job is fine, and they said it was all right about my being away three days. I guess I won’t be able to leave work again for a while, so cannot expect to come home just yet.”) Her father across the desk, her mother’s small timid laugh, were emphatically and resolutely put out of her mind, until she was twenty-three and her mother died.

The doctor was there and Catharine waited outside in the apartment-house hall while the doctor and her mother spent the last few minutes together. “She never spoke at all,” the doctor said. “She died very peacefully, Miss Vincent.”

“Good,” Catharine said. Her mother had waited until spring to die; next year she could have a fur coat. “What do I have to do about making arrangements?” she asked the doctor, waving her hand vaguely. “About burying her, and so on?”

The doctor looked at Catharine for a minute. “I’ll help you with all that,” he said.

Catharine spoke to strange people with soft voices, who told her she was brave, or patted her hand and told her her mother was happier now. “She’s with your dear father,” the maid in the apartment house said to Catharine, “They’re together again at last.”

With the funeral over and her mother gone, Catharine put the apartment back the way it had been before her mother came to live with her. The extra bed was moved out and the little table went back by the window. She spent five dollars on a new slip cover for the armchair, and she had the curtains cleaned. The only thing left of her mother was the old trunk full of her mother's memories and hopes. The little money from the sale of the furniture stored in Buffalo had paid for the funeral; Catharine had paid for the doctor and the medicine out of her salary and her fur-coat money. She asked the superintendent to put her mother's trunk in the basement storage room, and the evening before he took it down she opened it, to make sure everything was in moth balls and to take out anything she could use, and, finally, to set her mind dutifully to thinking of her parents.

For a minute or two her parents' memory would be centered in a flood of other memories, the thin teacher who snatched the drawing out of Catharine's hand and snarled, "I should have known better than to assign this to a stupid half-wit." Coming upon a boy named Freddie frantically rubbing out an inscription in chalk on a fence, and, when Freddie ran away, reading with hollow empty sympathy words he had been so anxiously erasing: "Catharine loves Freddie." And then her father: "Catharine, do the girls and boys in your school talk to each other about bad things?" The one or two parties, and the flowered chiffon dress her mother made. Her father sending her next door to get back a nickel she had lent to a school friend. And her mother: "I hardly think, dear, that your father would approve of that little girl. Jane. If I were to speak to her, very tactfully..."

And herself, coming back someday, a famous artist with a secretary and gardenias, stepping off the train where they were all waiting for autographs. And there was Freddie, pressing forward, and Catharine, turning slightly aside, said, "I'm afraid you must be mistaken. I never cared for anyone named Freddie." The tallest in the class, and thin, telling the other unpopular girls at recess: "My father doesn't like me to go out with boys. *You* know, the things they do." And finally, after school, staying by the pretty young teacher, saying, "Don't you like Mary Roberts Rinehart, Miss Henwood? I think she's a terribly good author."

The girls in school had called Catharine "Catty," the teachers and her mother and father had called her "Catharine," the girls in her office called her "Katy" or "Kitty," but Aaron had called her "Cara." "Strange Cara," the one note from him began. Catharine had held it in her hands, sitting by an open window at night and looking at the stars, in Buffalo, with her father moving around suspiciously downstairs; in New York, with her mother dead.

"Ratty Catty, sure is batty." Catharine remembered the jingle from the schoolyard and the notes passed from desk to desk, remembered it and turned it over in her mind while she leaned back with her feet on her dead mother's trunk and felt the soft upholstered chair against her shoulders, saw the traffic moving in the street below her apartment window, knew her job and her paycheck were waiting for her the next day. "Ratty Catty, sure is batty." Catharine smiled comfortably. There had been a kissing game at one of the few parties she went to, a grammar-school graduation party, and Catharine, in the background, had unexpectedly had to come forward to kiss a boy (what boy? she wondered now. Freddie again?). And the boy, moving backward, saying, "Hey, listen," while Catharine stood uncertainly. Then someone had shouted, "Catty's father won't ler her kiss a boy," and Catharine, trying to protect her father, had begun a denial before she realized that it was infinitely worse to admit that the boy had turned away from her. Then she told people, the other unpopular girls during recess, "My father won't let me go to the parties where they play that kind of game," or, "If my father ever caught me doing what those other girls do!"

She went to business school, because her father needed someone to help him with his numerous notes and the books of sermons he might write someday, and held the idea of a secretary in his mind as a signal of success. At business school she was no stranger; the pretty girls had all gone on to college, and Catharine was with the other thin dull girls or fat girls who were vivacious and had crushes on the men instructors. The boys in the school were mostly earnest and hard-working, and stopped in the halls to ask Catharine what she thought of the typing test, and whether she had taken down today's assignment. Aaron came to the school in mid-semester, wearing a yellow sweater suddenly into the typing class, standing thin and small and graceful and smiling while the rows of students sat mutely at their typewriters watching him.

"I fell in love with you right away," Catharine told him afterward. "I never knew what hit me."

Once Catharine had asked her mother impulsively and injudiciously, "Mother, did you fall in love with my father?"

"Catharine," her mother said, letting her hands stand quiet in the dishwater, "is there anything wrong, dear?"

High school had been worse for Catharine than any other time in her life. When the other girls wore sweaters or beer jackets and collected autographs, Catharine sat awkwardly under a badly designed wool dress. Once, with money her father borrowed from his brother, her mother bought Catharine a dark-green sweater and skirt, and when Catharine came into school that morning, one girl said, "What'd you do, rob a fire sale?" and another said, "Look at Catty, in the sweater she knit herself." Years later, Catharine told Aaron, leaning forward with her elbows on the table and her cigarette smoke blowing into her eyes, “I don’t like clothes, at all. I think everyone makes too much fuss over them. I think the human body is too fine.” When the girls with high-heeled shoes and curly hair went to sophomore proms and senior balls, Catharine and her three or four friends gave little hen parties where they served one another cocoa and cake, and said, “You’d be cute, honestly, Catty, if you had a permanent and wore some make-up.” And Catharine, blushing, “My father would kill me.” “You’ve got nice skin, though. Mine’s always breaking out.” “No, it isn’t,” Catharine said, or, “You’re not fat, really. I only wish I looked like you, honestly.”

A terrible thing happened to Catharine in her junior year in high school. One of her friends was to usher in a show put on by the local chapter of the American Legion. It was a performance of *The Mikado* and daughters of some of the members were going to usher, in evening gowns, with a chance to help with the make-up. Edna was the name of Catharine’s friend, and the third and last night of the performance Edna managed to get Catharine invited to usher in place of another girl who was sick. At seven o’clock Catharine, in a blue crepe dress of her mother’s which fitted badly and was cruelly improvised over the shoulders with a white organdy frill, met Edna in the lobby of the auditorium; Mrs. Vincent, who had come over on the streetcar with Catharine, said to Edna, “You’ll be sure and see that Catharine gets home all right?”

“My mother and father are going to drive her home,” Edna said. Mrs. Vincent kissed Catharine good-by, gave one sweeping suspicious glance over the auditorium, and went out to take the streetcar home. “How do I look?” Edna asked. “Look at me.” She held out her skirt and Catharine, horrified, realized that Edna, with her bad complexion and straight hair, looked lovely. “I got a finger wave,” Edna said, “and I’m wearing lipstick.”

Catharine realized even then that once or twice in any girl's life there will be an evening when she looks beautiful; she was not used enough to being ugly to be content to wait until an hour or two of beauty could do her real service. "You look wonderful," Catharine said sickly, "how do I look?" She held her coat open and Edna said, "You look beautiful, listen, we're going to the party for the cast after."

Catharine stayed long enough after the performance to see Edna, with her finger wave uncurling damply and her wide skirts trailing after her, dancing dreamily in the arms of a stout middle-aged man who had been in the chorus; he giggled when he whispered in Edna's ear, and Edna rolled her eyes and slapped his face lightly, while her mother and father, tired and proud, sat at the side of the room and greeted casual acquaintances eagerly.

Catharine walked home, all the way, holding up the blue crepe skirt and not afraid that anyone would notice her. "It's the ugliest thing I ever saw," she was whispering to herself. "Daddy will be furious." Then, only a block from her home, she thought she was a beautiful glorious creature, walking in a garden, her long skirts moving softly over the ground, graceful, with people thronging around her for her autograph. "Please," she said softly, waving a fan, "please don't say I'm beautiful... I'm not really, you know," and a chorus of protests drowned out her voice, and she yielded, laughing softly.

Her father forbade her to speak to Edna again, and wrote Edna's father a sharp note, which was ignored. Her mother had to have the blue dress cleaned, because of the dirt on the hem.

"I don't think the ordinary run of person is able to recognize beauty when they see it," Catharine told Aaron later, years later. "I think that your common person tramples on beauty because it is so far above him."

* * *

"You always were an ungrateful, spoiled child," her mother said, moving uneasily on the bed.

"You're living off me, aren't you?" Catharine answered indifferently. "You eat, don't you? Doesn't the doctor come twice a week to see you?"

"You never had a spark of affection in you," her mother said.

"*Some*thing must make me take care of you and feed you," Catharine said.

Her mother pulled at the blankets, her hands thin and powerless. "I don't know what I did to deserve a daughter like you."

"You must have taken the Lord's name in vain," Catharine said. She was standing leaning against the doorway to the kitchenette, waiting for her mother's oatmeal to cook. She had had a long and dismal day at the office, it was getting on toward winter (the winter when she could have had a cheap fur coat if her mother had not come) and her mother showed no signs of getting better or worse. She was almost completely careless of everything except that she was twenty-three years old, and still tied down; the romance and glory of her life waiting still.

"If your poor father could hear that."

"My poor father can't hear anything," Catharine said, "and I'm happy about it."

Her mother tried to rise on the bed, tried to soften Catharine with tears in her eyes. "He was a good father to you, Catharine. You shouldn't say evil things like that."

Catharine laughed and went into the kitchenette.

When Catharine was twelve her mother tried to give her a party. She bought little invitation cards at the five and ten, and paper hats and small baskets to hold candies. She bought ice cream and made a cake, and bought a game of pin-the-tail-on-the-donkey. "The whole thing didn't cost but about three dollars," she told Catharine's father. "I took most of the money out of my house money this week."

"There's no reason why Catharine should have expensive entertainments," her father said, frowning. "Her position as my daughter explains the absence of worldly frivolity in her life."

"The child has never had a party before," her mother said firmly.

"I don't want a party," Catharine told herself, alone upstairs in her room, lying on the bed. "I don't want any of the kids to come here." Her mother sent out the little invitations (Catharine Vincent, Thursday, August *24*th, *2–5*), and almost all of the twelve children invited had come.

The party was a miserable failure. Catharine, in an old dress with new collar and cuffs, and her mother in the dress she wore to church, greeted the guests at the door and sat them down in the living room where the little baskets of candy sat around on tables. The guests took the candy one piece at a time, played pin-the-tail-on-the-donkey as long as Mrs. Vincent wanted them to, and then sat quietly until one of them thought to say she ought to be getting home now. "But you haven't had your ice cream," Catharine's mother cried with bright gaiety, "you *can't* leave before the ice cream." Catharine's memories of that party were of her mother, working furiously, laughing and humming when she walked from place to place, her old dress showing constantly among the party dresses of the children; her mother saying "Well, don't you look pretty!" and "You must be the smartest little girl in Catharine's class."

Afterward, at the dinner table, her mother said encouragingly, "Did you enjoy your party, dear?"

"I told you they'd act like that," Catharine said without emotion. "They don't like me."

“Catharine has no business wanting parties if her friends don’t know how to behave to her mother,” Mr. Vincent said, devoting himself to a platter of liver and bacon. “You’ve worn yourself out and spent a lot of money to let the child have something she didn’t need to have.”

“Remember the party you gave for me?” Catharine said to her mother lying on the bed. “Remember that terrible party you insisted on having?”

“You are an ungrateful daughter,” her mother said, moving under the blankets. “You always were a cold thoughtless child.”

One day when Catharine was about fourteen her mother came into the bedroom where Catharine was cleaning her dresser drawers. Sitting on the bed, her mother said to Catharine’s back, “Your father wants me to talk to you, Catharine.”

Catharine, frozen, went on piling handkerchiefs and folding scarves. “What does he want you to talk to me about?”

“He thinks it’s time I spoke to you,” her mother said unhappily.

All the time her mother talked, apologizing and fumbling, Catharine sat on the floor folding and unfolding a scarf. “Have the girls at school been talking about things like this?” her mother asked once.

“All the time,” Catharine said.

“You mustn’t listen,” her mother said earnestly. “Your father and I are equipped to tell you the truth, the girls at school don’t know anything. Catharine, I want you to promise me never to talk to anyone but your mother and father about these things.”

“If I have any questions I’ll ask Daddy,” Catharine said.

“Don’t laugh at your mother and father,” her mother said.

Catharine turned around to look at her mother. “Are you all finished?” Her mother nodded. “Then please let’s never talk about it again,” Catharine said. “I don’t want to talk about it again, ever.”

“Neither do I,” her mother said angrily. “It’s hard enough to tell you anything at all, young lady, without having to talk about delicate subjects.”

“You tell Daddy you told me,” Catharine said as her mother went out the door.

“Did you love my father?” Catharine asked her mother lying on the bed, “did you ever love my father, Mother?”

“You never loved him,” her mother said, moving against the pillow, “you were an ungrateful child.”

“When you married him did you think you were going to be happy?”

“He was a good husband,” her mother said, “he tried very hard to be a good father, but you only wanted to make trouble. All your life.”

* * *

Catharine sat on the edge of the seat; she was nineteen and her hands were neatly on the booth table, her books beside her, her eyes on the door. If only someone comes in, just this once, she was thinking if only one of the girls could see me, just this once.

“You look *très sérieuse*,” Aaron said. “Coffee?”

“Yes, please,” Catharine said.

“Now listen,” Aaron said. “I ask you to come out for coffee with me because I think you’re interesting to talk to. You can’t just sit there and not say anything.” Catharine looked up and saw he was smiling. “Say something witty,” he said.

She got a minute to think when the waiter came over and Aaron ordered the coffee, but when the waiter was gone and Aaron turned politely to her, she could only shake her head and smile.

“Let me start a conversation, then,” Aaron said. “What was the book you were carrying yesterday?”

"Did you see me?" Catharine asked before she thought.

"Certainly I saw you," Aaron said. "I see you every day. Sometimes you wear a green sweater."

Catharine felt that this had to be said quickly, urgently, before the moment got away from her. "I don't like clothes at all," she said. "I think everyone makes too much fuss over them. I think the human body is too fine."

Aaron stared. "Well!" he said.

Catharine thought back on what she had said and blushed. "I didn't mean to sound so vulgar," she said.

Another time, when Catharine knew how to answer more easily, Aaron asked her, "Why don't we go to the five and ten and buy you a lipstick?"

"My father would kill me," Catharine said.

"You could just wear it in school," Aaron said. "I want my girl to be pretty."

Catharine carried that "my girl" around with her in her mind ever afterward; she bought a lipstick and powder and rouge and nail polish, and put them on inexpertly in the girl's lavatory every morning before classes, and took them off each afternoon after leaving Aaron. Her father never knew; she kept them in a box in her pocketbook, and had a story prepared ("Gerry's family doesn't like her to wear make-up either, but she does anyway, and she asked me if I'd just keep these things—").

Aaron liked to sit with a cigarette hanging out of the corner of his mouth; he kept his eyes narrow when he talked, and the smoke from the cigarette went past his eyebrow. He smiled more than anyone Catharine had ever known, and she thought once that he looked satanic; she told him so and he smiled at her, smoke in his eyes.

"The devil is the only true god," he said.

Once her father frightened Catharine badly by saying to her abruptly at the dinner table "You're not running around with a young man, are you, Catharine?"

"*Catharine*?" her mother said.

"I was speaking to Mr. Blake this afternoon about a matter of business," her father said ponderously, "and he mentioned that he had seen Catharine walking out of her business school with a young man. No one he knew."

"It was probably one of the instructors," Catharine said in a clear voice. "I was probably asking about an assignment."

"I would not like to think that my daughter is associating with young men she is ashamed to introduce to her parents," her father said.

"Mother and Daddy have a great deal of faith in you," her mother said.

"It was probably Mr. Harley, our typing instructor," Catharine said. "I had to ask him about an assignment and we walked down the hall talking and out the door. I did the wrong assignment and had to find out what to make up."

"You should have told him to go to hell," Aaron said later when Catharine told him.

"Someday I will," Catharine said.

"Yes, Daddy dear," Aaron said in a high voice, "I am associating with a young man I am definitely ashamed to introduce to you, because he is a thief and a murderer. And he rapes young women. Even Mother wouldn't be safe with him."

Catharine shook her head helplessly. "He'd die," she said. "He'd just die."

When Aaron met Mr. and Mrs. Vincent he was very agreeable and Catharine was able to feel for a few minutes as though everything were going to pass off well. Aaron had escorted her home from school very properly and she had very properly invited him in. Her mother and father, sitting in the living room, watched Aaron and Catharine come in, and when Catharine said, “Mother and Daddy, this is Aaron, a friend of mine from school,” her father came over and took Aaron’s hand. “Pleased to meet you, my boy,” he said.

“How do you do.” Aaron stood next to Catharine, comfortable in his yellow sweater.

“Aaron is in school too,” Catharine said to her mother.

“How do you like the school?” Catharine’s mother said.

Conversation had continued without silences, they were sitting down, and Catharine met Aaron’s eye and he smiled. She smiled back, and then realized that her mother and father were silently waiting. Aaron said smoothly, “Look at Cara’s hands, Mrs. Vincent. They’re like white waves on a white shore. They touch her face like white moths.”

Catharine met her father at the dinner table that night, with a sort of sick resignation that left her unsurprised when he said immediately, “I don’t know about that young man.” He thought heavily. “Your mother and I have been talking about him.”

“It seems like your friends ought to be finer, somehow,” her mother said earnestly. “With your background.”

“He doesn’t seem quite right, to me,” her father said. “Not quite right.”

“We’ll find some money somehow,” her mother said, “and see if we can get you another dress. Sensible, but pretty enough to wear to parties.”

Sitting by the window with her mother’s trunk open on the floor and her old report card (“English, B–, History, D, Geography, D”) in her hand, Catharine, to spite her mother, thought about Aaron. Because the dull eyes of William Vincent and his wife were no longer on her, because she was loose, at least, from their questions (“Catharine, have you been seeing—”)

and their sudden quiet when she opened the front door, Catharine went to the little cedar box where she kept all her most secret treasures, and always had, and took out Aaron’s only letter. In the box were a bright cotton handkerchief, and a tarnished silver charm bracelet. In her years in New York she had collected a match folder from a night club, and a printed note which read “We thank you for submitting the enclosed material and regret that we cannot make use of it.” It had come attached to some watercolor impressions Catharine had sent to a magazine; she kept it because of the word “regret” and because it had been addressed to her name and addressed by someone there at the magazine, some bright golden creature who called writers by their first names and sat at chromium bars and walked different streets than Catharine did, from her apartment on West Twentieth Street to her typist’s job on Wall Street. And at the chromium bars Aaron was sitting, and he walked quickly past the bright stores, and he might be in any taxi passing, smiling at someone with his quick sudden amusement, saying, “Catharine? I once cared for a girl named Catharine...”

THE BEAUTIFUL STRANGER

WHAT MIGHT BE called the first intimation of strangeness occurred at the railroad station. She had come with her children, Smalljohn and her baby girl, to meet her husband when he returned from a business trip to Boston. Because she had been oddly afraid of being late, and perhaps even seeming uneager to encounter her husband after a week's separation, she dressed the children and put them into the car at home a long half hour before the train was due. As a result, of course, they had to wait interminably at the station, and what was to have been a charmingly staged reunion, family embracing husband and father, became at last an ill-timed and awkward performance. Smalljohn's hair was mussed, and he was sticky. The baby was cross, pulling at her pink bonnet and her dainty lace-edged dress, whining. The final arrival of the train caught them in mid-movement, as it were; Margaret was tying the ribbons on the baby's bonnet, Smalljohn was half over the back of the car seat. They scrambled out of the car, cringing from the sound of the train, hopelessly out of sorts.

John Senior waved from the high steps of the train. Unlike his wife and children, he looked utterly prepared for his return, as though he had taken some pains to secure a meeting at least painless, and had, in fact, stood just so, waving cordially from the steps of the train, for perhaps as long as half an hour, ensuring that he should not be caught half-ready, his hand not lifted so far as to overemphasize the extent of his delight in seeing them again.

His wife had an odd sense of lost time. Standing now on the platform with the baby in her arms and Smalljohn beside her, she could not for a minute remember clearly whether he was coming home, or whether they were yet standing here to say good-by to him. They had been quarreling when he left, and she had spent the week of his absence determining to forget that in his presence she had been frightened and hurt. This will be a good time to get things straight, she had been telling herself; while John is gone I can try to get hold of myself again. Now, unsure at last whether this was an arrival or a departure, she felt afraid again, straining to meet an unendurable tension. This will not do, she thought, believing that she was being honest with herself, and as he came down the train steps and walked toward them she smiled, holding the baby tightly against her so that the touch of its small warmth might bring some genuine tenderness into her smile.

This will not do, she thought, and smiled more cordially and told him "hello" as he came to her. Wondering, she kissed him and then when he held his arm around her and the baby for a minute the baby pulled back and struggled, screaming. Everyone moved in anger, and the baby kicked and screamed, "No, no, no."

"What a way to say hello to Daddy," Margaret said, and she shook the baby, half-amused, and yet grateful for the baby's sympathetic support. John turned to Smalljohn and lifted him, Smalljohn kicking and laughing helplessly. "Daddy, Daddy," Smalljohn shouted, and the baby screamed, "No, no."

Helplessly, because no one could talk with the baby screaming so, they turned and went to the car. When the baby was back in her pink basket in the car, and Smalljohn was settled with another lollipop beside her, there was an appalling quiet which would have to be filled as quickly as possible with meaningful words. John had taken the driver's seat in the car while Margaret was quieting the baby, and when Margaret got in beside him she felt a little chill of animosity at the sight of his hands on the wheel; I can't bear to relinquish even this much, she thought; for a week no one has driven the car except me. Because she could see so clearly that this was unreasonable — John owned half the car, after all — she said to him with bright interest, “And how was your trip? The weather?”

“Wonderful,” he said, and again she was angered at the warmth in his tone; if she was unreasonable about the car, he was surely unreasonable to have enjoyed himself quite so much. “Everything went very well. I’m pretty sure I got the contract, everyone was very pleasant about it, and I go back in two weeks to settle everything.”

The stinger is in the tail, she thought. He wouldn’t tell it all so hastily if he didn’t want me to miss half of it; I am supposed to be pleased that he got the contract and that everyone was so pleasant, and the part about going back is supposed to slip past me painlessly.

“Maybe I can go with you, then,” she said. “Your mother will take the children.”

“Fine,” he said, but it was much too late; he had hesitated noticeably before he spoke.

“I want to go too,” said Smalljohn. “Can I go with Daddy?”

They came into their house, Margaret carrying the baby, and John carrying his suitcase and arguing delightedly with Smalljohn over which of them was carrying the heavier weight of it. The house was ready for them; Margaret had made sure that it was cleaned and emptied of the qualities which attached so surely to her position of wife alone with small children; the toys which Smalljohn had thrown around with unusual freedom were picked up, the baby’s clothes (no one, after all, came to call when John was gone) were taken from the kitchen radiator where they had been drying. Aside from the fact that the house gave no impression of waiting for any particular people, but only for anyone well-bred and clean enough to fit within its small trim walls, it could have passed for a home, Margaret thought, even for a home where a happy family lived in domestic peace. She set the baby down in the playpen and turned with the baby's bonnet and jacket in her hand and saw her husband, head bent gravely as he listened to Smalljohn. Who? she wondered suddenly; is he taller? That is not my husband.

She laughed, and they turned to her, Smalljohn curious, and her husband with a quick bright recognition; she thought, why, it is *not* my husband, and he knows that I have seen it. There was no astonishment in her; she would have thought perhaps thirty seconds before that such a thing was impossible, but since it was now clearly possible, surprise would have been meaningless. Some other emotion was necessary, but she found at first only peripheral manifestations of one. Her heart was beating violently, her hands were shaking, and her fingers were cold. Her legs felt weak and she took hold of the back of a chair to steady herself. She found that she was still laughing, and then her emotion caught up with her and she knew what it was: it was relief.

"I'm glad you came," she said. She went over and put her head against his shoulder. "It was hard to say hello in the station," she said.

Smalljohn looked on for a minute and then wandered off to his toybox. Margaret was thinking, this is not the man who enjoyed seeing me cry; I need not be afraid. She caught her breath and was quiet; there was nothing that needed saying.

For the rest of the day she was happy. There was a constant delight in the relief from her weight of fear and unhappiness, it was pure joy to know that there was no longer any residue of suspicion and hatred; when she called him "John" she did so demurely, knowing that he participated in her secret amusement; when he answered her civilly there was, she thought, an edge of laughter behind his words. They seemed to have agreed soberly that mention of the subject would be in bad taste, might even, in fact, endanger their pleasure.

They were hilarious at dinner. John would not have made her a cocktail, but when she came downstairs from putting the children to bed the stranger met her at the foot of the stairs, smiling up at her, and took her arm to lead her into the living room where the cocktail shaker and glasses stood on the low table before the fire.

“How nice,” she said, happy that she had taken a moment to brush her hair and put on fresh lipstick, happy that the coffee table which she had chosen with John and the fireplace which had seen many fires built by John and the low sofa where John had slept sometimes, had all seen fit to welcome the stranger with grace. She sat on the sofa and smiled at him when he handed her a glass; there was an odd illicit excitement in all of it; she was “entertaining” a man. The scene was a little marred by the fact that he had given her a martini with neither olive nor onion; it was the way she preferred her martini, and yet he should not have, strictly, known this, but she reassured herself with the thought that naturally he would have taken some pains to inform himself before coming.

He lifted his glass to her with a smile; he is here only because I am here, she thought.

“It’s nice to be here,” he said. He had, then, made one attempt to sound like John, in the car coming home. After he knew that she had recognized him for a stranger, he had never made any attempt to say words like “coming home” or “getting back,” and of course she could not, not without pointing her lie. She put her hand in his and lay back against the sofa, looking into the fire.

“Being lonely is worse than anything in the world,” she said.

“You’re not lonely now?”

“Are you going away?”

“Not unless you come too.” They laughed at his parody of John.

They sat next to each other at dinner; she and John had always sat at formal opposite ends of the table, asking one another politely to pass the salt and the butter.

“I’m going to put in a little set of shelves over there,” he said, nodding toward the corner of the dining room. “It looks empty here, and it needs things. Symbols.”

“Like?” She liked to look at him; his hair, she thought, was a little darker than John’s, and his hands were stronger; this man would build whatever he decided he wanted built.

“We need things together. Things we like, both of us. Small delicate pretty things. Ivory.”

With John she would have felt it necessary to remark at once that they could not afford such delicate pretty things, and put a cold finish to the idea, but with the stranger she said, “We’d have to look for them; not everything would be right.”

“I saw a little creature once,” he said. “Like a tiny little man, only colored all purple and blue and gold.”

* * *

She remembered this conversation; it contained the truth like a jewel set in the evening. Much later, she was to tell herself that it was true; John could not have said these things.

* * *

She was happy, she was radiant, she had no conscience. He went obediently to his office the next morning, saying good-by at the door with a rueful smile that seemed to mock the present necessity for doing the things that John always did, and as she watched him go down the walk she reflected that this was surely not going to be permanent; she could not endure having him gone for so long every day, although she had felt little about parting from John; moreover, if he kept doing John's things he might grow imperceptibly more like John. We will simply have to go away, she thought. She was pleased, seeing him get into the car; she would gladly share with him — indeed, give him outright — all that had been John's, so long as he stayed her stranger.

She laughed while she did her housework and dressed the baby. She took satisfaction in unpacking his suitcase, which he had abandoned and forgotten in a corner of the bedroom, as though prepared to take it up and leave again if she had not been as he thought her, had not wanted him to stay. She put away his clothes, so disarmingly like John's and wondered for a minute at the closet; would there be a kind of delicacy in him about John's things? Then she told herself no, not so long as he began with John's wife, and laughed again.

The baby was cross all day, but when Smalljohn came home from nursery school his first question was — looking up eagerly— "Where is Daddy?"

"Daddy has gone to the office," and again she laughed, at the moment's quick sly picture of the insult to John.

* * *

Half a dozen times during the day she went upstairs, to look at his suitcase and touch the leather softly. She glanced constantly as she passed through the dining room into the corner where the small shelves would be someday, and told herself that they would find a tiny little man, all purple and blue and gold, to stand on the shelves and guard them from intrusion.

When the children awakened from their naps she took them for a walk and then, away from the house and returned violently to her former lonely pattern (walk with the children, talk meaninglessly of Daddy, long for someone to talk to in the evening ahead, restrain herself from hurrying home: he might have telephoned), she began to feel frightened again; suppose she had been wrong? It could not be possible that she was mistaken; it would be unutterably cruel for John to come home tonight.

Then, she heard the car stop and when she opened the door and looked up she thought, no, it is not my husband, with a return of gladness. She was aware from his smile that he had perceived her doubts, and yet he was so clearly a stranger that, seeing him, she had no need of speaking.

She asked him, instead, almost meaningless questions during that evening, and his answers were important only because she was storing them away to reassure herself while he was away. She asked him what was the name of their Shakespeare professor in college, and who was that girl he liked so before he met Margaret. When he smiled and said that he had no idea, that he would not recognize the name if she told him, she was in delight. He had not bothered to master all of the past, then; he had learned enough (the names of the children, the location of the house, how she liked her cocktails) to get to her, and after that, it was not important, because either she would want him to stay, or she would, calling upon John, send him away again.

“What is your favorite food?” she asked him. “Are you fond of fishing? Did you ever have a dog?”

“Someone told me today,” he said once, “that he had heard I was back from Boston, and I distinctly thought he said that he heard I was dead in Boston.”

He was lonely, too, she thought with sadness, and that is why he came, bringing a destiny with him: now I will see him come every evening through the door and think, this is not my husband, and wait for him remembering that I am waiting for a stranger.

“At any rate,” she said, “*you* were not dead in Boston, and nothing else matters.”

She saw him leave in the morning with a warm pride, and she did her housework and dressed the baby; when Smalljohn came home from nursery school he did not ask, but looked with quick searching eyes and then sighed. While the children were taking their naps she thought that she might take them to the park this afternoon, and then the thought of another such afternoon, another long afternoon with no one but the children, another afternoon of widowhood, was more than she could submit to; I have done this too much, she thought, I must see something today beyond the faces of my children. No one should be so much alone.

Moving quickly, she dressed and set the house to rights. She called a high-school girl and asked if she would take the children to the park; without guilt, she neglected the thousand small orders regarding the proper jacket for the baby, whether Smalljohn might have popcorn, when to bring them home. She fled, thinking, I must be with people.

She took a taxi into town, because it seemed to her that the only possible thing to do was to seek out a gift for him, her first gift to him, and she thought she would find him, perhaps, a little creature all blue and purple and gold.

She wandered through the strange shops in the town, choosing small lovely things to stand on the new shelves, looking long and critically at ivories, at small statues, at brightly colored meaningless expensive toys, suitable for giving to a stranger.

It was almost dark when she started home, carrying her packages. She looked from the window of the taxi into the dark streets, and thought with pleasure that the stranger would be home before her, and look from the window to see her hurrying to him; he would think, this is a stranger, I am waiting for a stranger, as he saw her coming. “Here,” she said, tapping on the glass, “right here, driver.” She got out of the taxi and paid the driver, and smiled as he drove away. I must look well, she thought, the driver smiled back at me.

She turned and started for the house, and then hesitated; surely she had come too far? This is not possible, she thought, this cannot be; surely our house was white?

The evening was very dark, and she could see only the houses going in rows, with more rows beyond them and more rows beyond that, and somewhere a house which was hers, with the beautiful stranger inside, and she lost out here.

[c. *1946*]

THE SUMMER PEOPLE

THE ALLISONS' COUNTRY cottage, seven miles from the nearest town, was set prettily on a hill; from three sides it looked down on soft trees and grass that seldom, even at midsummer, lay still and dry. On the fourth side was the lake, which touched against the wooden pier the Allisons had to keep repairing, and which looked equally well from the Allisons' front porch, their side porch or any spot on the wooden staircase leading from the porch down to the water. Although the Allisons loved their summer cottage, looked forward to arriving in the early summer and hated to leave in the fall, they had not troubled themselves to put in any improvements, regarding the cottage itself and the lake as improvement enough for the life left to them. The cottage had no heat, no running water except the precarious supply from the backyard pump, and no electricity. For seventeen summers, Janet Allison had cooked on a kerosene stove, heating all their water; Robert Allison had brought buckets full of water daily from the pump and read his paper by kerosene light in the evenings; and they had both, sanitary city people, become stolid and matter-of-fact about their backhouse. In the first two years they had gone through all the standard vaudeville and magazine jokes about backhouses and by now, when they no longer had frequent guests to impress, they had subsided to a comfortable security which made the backhouse, as well as the pump and the kerosene, an indefinable asset to their summer life.

In themselves, the Allisons were ordinary people. Mrs. Allison was fifty-eight years old and Mr. Allison sixty; they had seen their children outgrow the summer cottage and go on to families of their own and seashore resorts;

their friends were either dead or settled in comfortable year-round houses, their nieces and nephews vague. In the winter they told one another they could stand their New York apartment while waiting for the summer; in the summer they told one another that the winter was well worth while, waiting to get to the country.

Since they were old enough not to be ashamed of regular habits, the Allisons invariably left their summer cottage the Tuesday after Labor Day, and were as invariably sorry when the months of September and early October turned out to be pleasant and almost insufferably barren in the city; each year they recognized that there was nothing to bring them back to New York, but it was not until this year that they overcame their traditional inertia enough to decide to stay in the cottage after Labor Day.

“There isn’t really anything to take us back to the city,” Mrs. Allison told her husband seriously, as though it were a new idea, and he told her, as though neither of them had ever considered it, “We might as well enjoy the country as long as possible.”

Consequently, with much pleasure and a slight feeling of adventure, Mrs. Allison went into their village the day after Labor Day and told those natives with whom she had dealings, with a pretty air of breaking away from tradition, that she and her husband had decided to stay at least a month longer at their cottage.

“It isn’t as though we had anything to take us back to the city,” she said to Mr. Babcock, her grocer. “We might as well enjoy the country while we can.”

“Nobody ever stayed at the lake past Labor Day before,” Mr. Babcock said. He was putting Mrs. Allison’s groceries into a large cardboard carton, and he stopped for a minute to look reflectively into a bag of cookies. “Nobody,” he added.

“But the city!” Mrs. Allison always spoke of the city to Mr. Babcock as though it were Mr. Babcock’s dream to go there. “It’s so hot — you’ve really no idea. We’re always sorry when we leave.”

“Hate to leave,” Mr. Babcock said. One of the most irritating native tricks Mrs. Allison had noticed was that of taking a trivial statement and rephrasing it downward, into an even more trite statement. “I’d hate to leave myself,” Mr. Babcock said, after deliberation, and both he and Mrs. Allison smiled. “But I never heard of anyone ever staying out at the lake after Labor Day before.”

“Well, we’re going to give it a try,” Mrs. Allison said, and Mr. Babcock replied gravely, “Never know till you try.”

Physically, Mrs. Allison decided, as she always did when leaving the grocery after one of her inconclusive conversations with Mr. Babcock, physically, Mr. Babcock could model for a statue of Daniel Webster, but mentally... it was horrible to think into what old New England Yankee stock had degenerated. She said as much to Mr. Allison when she got into the car, and he said, “It’s generations of inbreeding. That and the bad land.”

Since this was their big trip into town, which they made only once every two weeks to buy things they could not have delivered, they spent all day at it, stopping to have a sandwich in the newspaper and soda shop, and leaving packages heaped in the back of the car. Although Mrs. Allison was able to order groceries delivered regularly, she was never able to form any accurate idea of Mr. Babcock’s current stock by telephone, and her lists of odds and ends that might be procured was always supplemented, almost beyond their need, by the new and fresh local vegetables Mr. Babcock was selling temporarily, or the packaged candy which had just come in. This trip Mrs. Allison was tempted, too, by the set of glass baking dishes that had found themselves completely by chance in the hardware and clothing and general store, and which had seemingly been waiting there for no one but Mrs. Allison, since the country people, with their instinctive distrust of anything that did not look as permanent as trees and rocks and sky, had only recently begun to experiment in aluminum baking dishes instead of ironware, and had, apparently within the memory of local inhabitants, discarded stoneware in favor of iron.

Mrs. Allison had the glass baking dishes carefully wrapped, to endure the uncomfortable ride home over the rocky road that led up to the Allisons' cottage, and while Mr. Charley Walpole, who, with his younger brother Albert, ran the hardware-clothing-general store (the store itself was called Johnson's because it stood on the site of the old Johnson cabin, burned fifty years before Charley Walpole was born), laboriously unfolded newspapers to wrap around the dishes, Mrs. Allison said, informally, "Course, I *could* have waited and gotten those dishes in New York, but we're not going back so soon this year."

"Heard you was staying on," Mr. Charley Walpole said. His old fingers fumbled maddeningly with the thin sheets of newspaper, carefully trying to isolate only one sheet at a time, and he did not look up at Mrs. Allison as he went on, "Don't know about staying on up there to the lake. Not after Labor Day."

"Well, you know," Mrs. Allison said, quite as though he deserved an explanation, "it just seemed to us that we've been hurrying back to New York every year, and there just wasn't any need for it. You know what the city's like in the fall." And she smiled confidingly up at Mr. Charley Walpole.

Rhythmically he wound string around the package. He's giving me a piece long enough to save, Mrs. Allison thought, and she looked away quickly to avoid giving any sign of impatience. "I feel sort of like we belong here, more," she said. "Staying on after everyone else has left." To prove this, she smiled brightly across the store at a woman with a familiar face, who might have been the woman who sold berries to the Allisons one year, or the woman who occasionally helped in the grocery and was probably Mr. Babcock's aunt.

"Well," Mr. Charley Walpole said. He shoved the package a little across the counter, to show that it was finished and that for a sale well made, a package well wrapped, he was willing to accept pay. "Well," he said again. "Never been summer people before, at the lake after Labor Day."

Mrs. Allison gave him a five-dollar bill, and he made change methodically, giving great weight even to the pennies. "Never after Labor Day," he said, and nodded at Mrs. Allison, and went soberly along the store to deal with two women who were looking at cotton house dresses.

As Mrs. Allison passed on her way out she heard one of the women say acutely, "Why is one of them dresses one dollar and thirty-nine cents and this one here is only ninety-eight?"

"They're great people," Mrs. Allison told her husband as they went together down the sidewalk after meeting at the door of the hardware store. "They're so solid, and so reasonable, and so *honest*."

"Makes you feel good, knowing there are still towns like this," Mr. Allison said.

"You know, in New York," Mrs. Allison said, "I might have paid a few cents less for these dishes, but there wouldn't have been anything sort of personal in the transaction."

"Staying on to the lake?" Mrs. Martin, in the newspaper and sandwich shop, asked the Allisons. "Heard you was staying on."

"Thought we'd take advantage of the lovely weather this year," Mr. Allison said.

Mrs. Martin was a comparative newcomer to the town; she had married into the newspaper and sandwich shop from a neighboring farm, and had stayed on after her husband's death. She served bottled soft drinks, and fried egg and onion sandwiches on thick bread, which she made on her own stove at the back of the store. Occasionally when Mrs. Martin served a sandwich it would carry with it the rich fragrance of the stew or the pork chops cooking alongside for Mrs. Martin's dinner.

"I don't guess anyone's ever stayed out there so long before," Mrs. Martin said. "Not after Labor Day, anyway."

"I guess Labor Day is when they usually leave," Mr. Hall, the Allisons' nearest neighbor, told them later, in front of Mr. Babcock's store, where the Allisons were getting into their car to go home. "Surprised you're staying on."

"It seemed a shame to go so soon," Mrs. Allison said. Mr. Hall lived three miles away; he supplied the Allisons with butter and eggs, and occasionally, from the top of their hill, the Allisons could see the lights in his house in the early evening before the Halls went to bed.

"They usually leave Labor Day," Mr. Hall said.

The ride home was long and rough; it was beginning to get dark, and Mr. Allison had to drive very carefully over the dirt road by the lake. Mrs. Allison lay back against the seat, pleasantly relaxed after a day of what seemed whirlwind shopping compared with their day-to-day existence; the new glass baking dishes lurked agreeably in her mind, and the half bushel of red eating apples, and the package of colored thumbtacks with which she was going to put up new shelf edging in the kitchen. "Good to get home," she said softly as they came in sight of their cottage, silhouetted above them against the sky.

"Glad we decided to stay on," Mr. Allison agreed.

* * *

Mrs. Allison spent the next morning lovingly washing her baking dishes, although in his innocence Charley Walpole had neglected to notice the chip in the edge of one; she decided, wastefully, to use some of the red eating apples in a pie for dinner, and, while the pie was in the oven and Mr. Allison was down getting the mail, she sat out on the little lawn the Allisons had made at the top of the hill, and watched the changing lights on the lake, alternating gray and blue as clouds moved quickly across the sun.

Mr. Allison came back a little out of sorts; it always irritated him to walk the mile to the mailbox on the state road and come back with nothing, even though he assumed that the walk was good for his health. This morning there was nothing but a circular from a New York department store, and their New York paper, which arrived erratically by mail from one to four days later than it should, so that some days the Allisons might have three papers and frequently none. Mrs. Allison, although she shared with her husband the annoyance of not having mail when they so anticipated it, pored affectionately over the department store circular, and made a mental note to drop in at the store when she finally went back to New York, and check on the sale of wool blankets; it was hard to find good ones in pretty colors nowadays. She debated saving the circular to remind herself, but after thinking about getting up and getting into the cottage to put it away safely somewhere, she dropped it into the grass beside her chair and lay back, her eyes half closed.

“Looks like we might have some rain,” Mr. Allison said, squinting at the sky.

“Good for the crops,” Mrs. Allison said laconically, and they both laughed.

The kerosene man came the next morning while Mr. Allison was down getting the mail; they were getting low on kerosene and Mrs. Allison greeted the man warmly; he sold kerosene and ice, and, during the summer, hauled garbage away for the summer people. A garbage man was only necessary for improvident city folk; country people had no garbage.

"I'm glad to see you," Mrs. Allison told him. "We were getting pretty low."

The kerosene man, whose name Mrs. Allison had never learned, used a hose attachment to fill the twenty-gallon tank which supplied light and heat and cooking facilities for the Allisons; but today, instead of swinging down from his truck and unhooking the hose from where it coiled affectionately around the cab of the truck, the man stared uncomfortably at Mrs. Allison, his truck motor still going.

"Thought you folks'd be leaving," he said.

"We're staying on another month," Mrs. Allison said brightly. "The weather was so nice, and it seemed like—"

"That's what they told me," the man said. "Can't give you no oil, though."

"What do you mean?" Mrs. Allison raised her eyebrows. "We're just going to keep on with our regular—"

"After Labor Day," the man said. "I don't get so much oil myself after Labor Day."

Mrs. Allison reminded herself, as she had frequently to do when in disagreement with her neighbors, that city manners were no good with country people; you could not expect to overrule a country employee as you could a city worker, and Mrs. Allison smiled engagingly as she said, "But can't you get extra oil, at least while we stay?"

"You see," the man said. He tapped his finger exasperatingly against the car wheel as he spoke. "You see," he said slowly, "I order this oil. I order it down from maybe fifty, fifty-five miles away. I order back in June, how much I'll need for the summer. Then I order again... oh, about November. Round about now it's starting to get pretty short." As though the subject were closed, he stopped tapping his finger and tightened his hands on the wheel in preparation for departure.

"But can't you give us *some*?" Mrs. Allison said. "Isn't there anyone else?"

"Don't know as you could get oil anywheres else right now," the man said consideringly. "*I* can't give you none." Before Mrs. Allison could speak, the truck began to move; then it stopped for a minute and he looked at her through the back window of the cab. "Ice?" he called. "I could let you have some ice."

Mrs. Allison shook her head; they were not terribly low on ice, and she was angry. She ran a few steps to catch up with the truck, calling, "Will you try to get us some? Next week?"

"Don't see's I can," the man said. "After Labor Day, it's harder." The truck drove away, and Mrs. Allison, only comforted by the thought that she could probably get kerosene from Mr. Babcock, or, at worst, the Halls, watched it go with anger. "Next summer," she told herself. "Just let *him* try coming around next summer!"

There was no mail again, only the paper, which seemed to be coming doggedly on time, and Mr. Allison was openly cross when he returned. When Mrs. Allison told him about the kerosene man he was not particularly impressed.

"Probably keeping it all for a high price during the winter," he commented. "What's happened to Anne and Jerry, do you think?"

Anne and Jerry were their son and daughter, both married, one living in Chicago, one in the Far West; their dutiful weekly letters were late; so late, in fact, that Mr. Allison's annoyance at the lack of mail was able to settle on a legitimate grievance. "Ought to realize how we wait for their letters," he said. "Thoughtless, selfish children. Ought to know better."

"Well, dear," Mrs. Allison said placatingly. Anger at Anne and Jerry would not relieve her emotions toward the kerosene man. After a few minutes she said, "Wishing won't bring the mail, dear. I'm going to go call Mr. Babcock and tell him to send up some kerosene with my order."

"At least a postcard," Mr. Allison said as she left.

* * *

As with most of the cottage's inconveniences, the Allisons no longer noticed the phone particularly, but yielded to its eccentricities without conscious complaint. It was a wall phone, of a type still seen in only few communities; in order to get the operator, Mrs. Allison had first to turn the sidecrank and ring once. Usually it took two or three tries to force the operator to answer, and Mrs. Allison, making any kind of telephone call, approached the phone with resignation and a sort of desperate patience. She had to crank the phone three times this morning before the operator answered, and then it was still longer before Mr. Babcock picked up the receiver at his phone in the corner of the grocery behind the meat table. He said "Store?" with the rising inflection that seemed to indicate suspicion of anyone who tried to communicate with him by means of this unreliable instrument.

"This is Mrs. Allison, Mr. Babcock. I thought I'd give you my order a day early because I wanted to be sure and get some—"

"What say, Mrs. Allison?"

Mrs. Allison raised her voice a little; she saw Mr. Allison, out on the lawn, turn in his chair and regard her sympathetically. “I said, Mr. Babcock, I thought I’d call in my order early so you could send me—”

“Mrs. Allison?” Mr. Babcock said. “You’ll come and pick it up?”

“Pick it up?” In her surprise Mrs. Allison let her voice drop back to its normal tone and Mr. Babcock said loudly, “What’s that, Mrs. Allison?”

“I thought I’d have you send it out as usual,” Mrs. Allison said.

“Well, Mrs. Allison,” Mr. Babcock said, and there was a pause while Mrs. Allison waited, staring past the phone over her husband’s head out into the sky. “Mrs. Allison,” Mr. Babcock went on finally, “I’ll tell you, my boy’s been working for me went back to school yesterday and now I got no one to deliver. I only got a boy delivering summers, you see.”

“I thought you *always* delivered,” Mrs. Allison said.

“Not after Labor Day, Mrs. Allison,” Mr. Babcock said firmly. “You never been here after Labor Day before, so’s you wouldn’t know, of course.”

“Well,” Mrs. Allison said helplessly. Far inside her mind she was saying, over and over, can’t use city manners on country folk, no use getting mad.

“Are you *sure*?” she asked finally. “Couldn’t you just send out an order today, Mr. Babcock?”

“Matter of fact,” Mr. Babcock said, “I guess I couldn’t, Mrs. Allison. It wouldn’t hardly pay, delivering, with no one else out at the lake.”

“What about Mr. Hall?” Mrs. Allison asked suddenly, “the people who live about three miles away from us out here? Mr. Hall could bring it out when he comes.”

“Hall?” Mr. Babcock said. “John Hall? They’ve gone to visit her folks upstate, Mrs. Allison.”

“But they bring all our butter and eggs,” Mrs. Allison said, appalled.

"Left yesterday," Mr. Babcock said. "Probably didn't think you folks would stay on up there."

"But I told Mr. Hall..." Mrs. Allison started to say, and then stopped. "I'll send Mr. Allison in after some groceries tomorrow," she said.

"You got all you need till then," Mr. Babcock said, satisfied; it was not a question, but a confirmation.

After she hung up, Mrs. Allison went slowly out to sit again in her chair next to her husband. "He won't deliver," she said. "You'll have to go in tomorrow. We've got just enough kerosene to last till you get back."

"He should have told us sooner," Mr. Allison said.

It was not possible to remain troubled long in the face of the day; the country had never seemed more inviting, and the lake moved quietly below them, among the trees, with the almost incredible softness of a summer picture. Mrs. Allison sighed deeply, in the pleasure of possessing for themselves that sight of the lake, with the distant green hills beyond, the gentleness of the small wind through the trees.

* * *

The weather continued fair; the next morning Mr. Allison, duly armed with a list of groceries, with "kerosene" in large letters at the top, went down the path to the garage, and Mrs. Allison began another pie in her new baking dishes. She had mixed the crust and was starting to pare the apples when Mr. Allison came rapidly up the path and flung open the screen door into the kitchen.

"Damn car won't start," he announced, with the end-of-the-tether voice of a man who depends on a car as he depends on his right arm.

"What's wrong with it?" Mrs. Allison demanded, stopping with the paring knife in one hand and an apple in the other. "It was all right on

Tuesday."

"Well," Mr. Allison said between his teeth, "it's not all right on Friday."

"Can you fix it?" Mrs. Allison asked.

"No," Mr. Allison said, "I can not. Got to call someone, I guess."

"Who?" Mrs. Allison asked.

"Man runs the filling station, I guess." Mr. Allison moved purposefully toward the phone. "He fixed it last summer one time."

A little apprehensive, Mrs. Allison went on paring apples absentmindedly, while she listened to Mr. Allison with the phone, ringing, waiting, finally giving the number to the operator, then waiting again and giving the number again, giving the number a third time, and then slamming down the receiver.

"No one there," he announced as he came into the kitchen.

"He's probably gone out for a minute," Mrs. Allison said nervously; she was not quite sure what made her so nervous, unless it was the probability of her husband's losing his temper completely. "He's there alone, I imagine, so if he goes out there's no one to answer the phone."

"That must be it," Mr. Allison said with heavy irony. He slumped into one of the kitchen chairs and watched Mrs. Allison paring apples. After a minute, Mrs. Allison said soothingly, "Why don't you go down and get the mail and then call him again?"

Mr. Allison debated and then said, "Guess I might as well." He rose heavily and when he got to the kitchen door he turned and said, "But if there's no mail—" and leaving an awful silence behind him, he went off down the path.

Mrs. Allison hurried with her pie. Twice she went to the window to glance at the sky to see if there were clouds coming up. The room seemed unexpectedly dark, and she herself felt in the state of tension that preceded a thunderstorm, but both times when she looked the sky was clear and serene, smiling indifferently down on the Allisons' summer cottage as well as on the rest of the world. When Mrs. Allison, her pie ready for the oven, went a third time to look outside, she saw her husband coming up the path; he seemed more cheerful, and when he saw her, he waved eagerly and held a letter in the air.

"From Jerry," he called as soon as he was close enough for her to hear him, "at last — a letter!" Mrs. Allison noticed with concern that he was no longer able to get up the gentle slope of the path without breathing heavily; but then he was in the doorway, holding out the letter. "I saved it till I got here," he said.

Mrs. Allison looked with an eagerness that surprised her on the familiar handwriting of her son; she could not imagine why the letter excited her so, except that it was the first they had received in so long; it would be a pleasant, dutiful letter, full of the doings of Alice and the children, reporting progress with his job, commenting on the recent weather in Chicago, closing with love from all; both Mr. and Mrs. Allison could, if they wished, recite a pattern letter from either of their children.

Mr. Allison slit the letter open with great deliberation, and then he spread it out on the kitchen table and they leaned down and read it together.

"Dear Mother and Dad," it began, in Jerry's familiar, rather childish, handwriting, "Am glad this goes to the lake as usual, we always thought you came back too soon and ought to stay up there as long as you could. Alice says that now that you're not as young as you used to be and have no demands on your time, fewer friends, etc. in the city, you ought to get what fun you can while you can. Since you two are both happy up there, it's a good idea for you to stay."

Uneasily Mrs. Allison glanced sideways at her husband; he was reading intently, and she reached out and picked up the empty envelope, not knowing exactly what she wanted from it. It was addressed quite as usual, in Jerry's handwriting, and was postmarked "Chicago." Of course it's postmarked Chicago, she thought quickly, why would they want to postmark it anywhere else? When she looked back down at the letter, her husband had turned the page, and she read on with him: " — and of course if they get measles, etc. now, they will be better off later. Alice is well, of course; me too. Been playing a lot of bridge lately with some people you don't know, named Carruthers. Nice young couple, about our age. Well, will close now as I guess it bores you to hear about things so far away. Tell Dad old Dickson, in our Chicago office, died. He used to ask about Dad a lot. Have a good time up at the lake, and don't bother about hurrying back. Love from all of us, Jerry."

"Funny," Mr. Allison commented.

"It doesn't sound like Jerry," Mrs. Allison said in a small voice. "He never wrote anything like..." She stopped.

"Like what?" Mr. Allison demanded. "Never wrote anything like what?"

Mrs. Allison turned the letter over, frowning. It was impossible to find any sentence, any word, even, that did not sound like Jerry's regular letters. Perhaps it was only that the letter was so late, or the unusual number of dirty fingerprints on the envelope.

"I don't *know*," she said impatiently.

"Going to try that phone call again," Mr. Allison said.

Mrs. Allison read the letter twice more, trying to find a phrase that sounded wrong. Then Mr. Allison came back and said, very quietly, "Phone's dead."

"What?" Mrs. Allison said, dropping the letter.

"Phone's dead," Mr. Allison said.

* * *

The rest of the day went quickly; after a lunch of crackers and milk, the Allisons went to sit outside on the lawn, but their afternoon was cut short by the gradually increasing storm clouds that came up over the lake to the cottage, so that it was as dark as evening by four o'clock. The storm delayed, however, as though in loving anticipation of the moment it would break over the summer cottage, and there was an occasional flash of lightning, but no rain. In the evening Mr. and Mrs. Allison, sitting close together inside their cottage, turned on the battery radio they had brought with them from New York. There were no lamps lighted in the cottage, and the only light came from the lightning outside and the small square glow from the dial of the radio.

The slight framework of the cottage was not strong enough to withstand the city noises, the music and the voices, from the radio, and the Allisons could hear them far off echoing across the lake, the saxophones in the New York dance band wailing over the water, the flat voice of the girl vocalist going inexorably out into the clean country air. Even the announcer, speaking glowingly of the virtues of razor blades, was no more than an inhuman voice sounding out from the Allisons' cottage and echoing back, as though the lake and the hills and the trees were returning it unwanted.

During one pause between commercials, Mrs. Allison turned and smiled weakly at her husband. "I wonder if we're supposed to... *do* anything," she said.

"No," Mr. Allison said consideringly. "I don't think so. Just wait."

Mrs. Allison caught her breath quickly, and Mr. Allison said, under the trivial melody of the dance band beginning again, "The car had been tampered with, you know. Even I could see that."

Mrs. Allison hesitated a minute and then said very softly, "I suppose the phone wires were cut."

"I imagine so," Mr. Allison said.

After a while, the dance music stopped and they listened attentively to a news broadcast, the announcer's rich voice telling them breathlessly of a marriage in Hollywood, the latest baseball scores, the estimated rise in food prices during the coming week. He spoke to them, in the summer cottage, quite as though they still deserved to hear news of a world that no longer reached them except through the fallible batteries on the radio, which were already beginning to fade, almost as though they still belonged, however tenuously, to the rest of the world.

Mrs. Allison glanced out the window at the smooth surface of the lake, the black masses of the trees, and the waiting storm, and said conversationally, "I feel better about that letter of Jerry's."

"I knew when I saw the light down at the Hall place last night," Mr. Allison said.

The wind, coming up suddenly over the lake, swept around the summer cottage and slapped hard at the windows. Mr. and Mrs. Allison involuntarily moved closer together, and with the first sudden crash of thunder, Mr. Allison reached out and took his wife's hand. And then, while the lightning flashed outside, and the radio faded and sputtered, the two old people huddled together in their summer cottage and waited.

ISLAND

MRS. MONTAGUE'S SON had been very good to her, with the kind affection and attention to her well-being that is seldom found toward mothers in sons with busy wives and growing families of their own; when Mrs. Montague lost her mind, her son came into his natural role of guardian. There had always been a great deal of warm feeling between Mrs. Montague and her son, and although they lived nearly a thousand miles apart by now, Henry Paul Montague was careful to see that his mother was well taken care of; he ascertained, minutely, that the monthly bills for her apartment, her food, her clothes, and her companion were large enough to ensure that Mrs. Montague was getting the best of everything; he wrote to her weekly, tender letters in longhand inquiring about her health; when he came to New York he visited her promptly, and always left an extra check for the companion, to make sure that any small things Mrs. Montague lacked would be given her. The companion, Miss Oakes, had been with Mrs. Montague for six years, and in that time their invariable quiet routine had been broken only by the regular visits from Mrs. Montague's son, and by Miss Oakes's annual six-weeks' leave, during which Mrs. Montague was cared for no less scrupulously by a carefully chosen substitute.

Between such disturbing occasions, Mrs. Montague lived quietly and expensively in her handsome apartment, following with Miss Oakes a life of placid regularity, which it required all of Miss Oakes's competence to engineer, and duly reported on to Mrs. Montague's son. "I *do* think we're very lucky, dear," was Miss Oakes's frequent comment, "to have a good son like Mr. Montague to take care of us so well."

To which Mrs. Montague's usual answer was, "Henry Paul was a good boy."

Mrs. Montague usually spent the morning in bed, and got up for lunch; after the effort of bathing and dressing and eating she was ready for another rest and then her walk, which occurred regularly at four o'clock, and which was followed by dinner sent up from the restaurant downstairs, and, shortly after, by Mrs. Montague's bedtime. Although Miss Oakes did not leave the apartment except in an emergency, she had a great deal of time to herself and her regular duties were not harsh, although Mrs. Montague was not the best company in the world. Frequently Miss Oakes would look up from her magazine to find Mrs. Montague watching her curiously; sometimes Mrs. Montague, in a spirit of petulant stubbornness, would decline all food under any persuasion until it was necessary for Miss Oakes to call in Mrs. Montague's doctor for Mrs. Montague to hear a firm lecture on her duties as a patient. Once Mrs. Montague had tried to run away, and had been recaptured by Miss Oakes in the street in front of the apartment house, going vaguely through the traffic; and always, constantly, Mrs. Montague was trying to give things to Miss Oakes, many of which, in absolute frankness, it cost Miss Oakes a pang to refuse.

Miss Oakes had not been born to the luxury which Mrs. Montague had known all her life; Miss Oakes had worked hard and never had a fur coat; no matter how much she tried Miss Oakes could not disguise the fact that she relished the food sent up from the restaurant downstairs, delicately cooked and prettily served; Miss Oakes was persuaded that she disdained jewelry, and she chose her clothes hurriedly and inexpensively, under the eye of an impatient, badly dressed salesgirl in a department store. No matter how agonizingly Miss Oakes debated under the insinuating lights of the budget dress department, the clothes she carried home with her turned out to be garish reds and yellows in the daylight, inexactly striped or dotted, badly cut. Miss Oakes sometimes thought longingly of the security of her white uniforms, neatly stacked in her dresser drawer, but Mrs. Montague was apt to go into a tantrum at any outward show of Miss Oakes's professional competence, and Miss Oakes dined nightly on the agreeable food from the restaurant downstairs in her red and yellow dresses, with her colorless hair drawn ungracefully to a bun in back, her ringless hands moving appreciatively among the plates. Mrs. Montague, who ordinarily spilled food all over herself, chose her dresses from a selection sent every three or four months from an exclusive dress shop near by; all information as to size and color was predigested in the shop, and the soft-voiced saleslady brought only dresses absolutely right for Mrs. Montague. Mrs. Montague usually chose two dresses each time, and they went, neatly hung on sacheted hangers, to live softly in Mrs. Montague's closet along with other dresses just like them, all in soft blues and grays and mauves.

"We *must* try to be more careful of our pretty clothes," Miss Oakes would say, looking up from her dinner to find Mrs. Montague, almost deliberately, it seemed sometimes, emptying her spoonful of oatmeal down the front of her dress. "Dear, we really *must* try to be more careful; remember what our nice son has to pay for those dresses."

Mrs. Montague stared vaguely sometimes, holding her spoon; sometimes she said, "I want my pudding now; I'll be careful with my pudding." Now and then, usually when the day had gone badly and Mrs. Montague was overtired, or cross for one reason or another, she might turn the dish of oatmeal over onto the tablecloth, and then, frequently, Miss Oakes was angry, and Mrs. Montague was deprived of her pudding and sat blankly while Miss Oakes moved her own dishes to a coffee table and called the waiter to remove the dinner table with its mess of oatmeal.

It was in the late spring that Mrs. Montague was usually at her worst; then, for some reason, it seemed that the stirring of green life, even under the dirty city traffic, communicated a restlessness and longing to her that she felt only spasmodically the rest of the year; around April or May, Miss Oakes began to prepare for trouble, for runnings-away and supreme oatmeal overturnings. In summer, Mrs. Montague seemed happier, because it was possible to walk in the park and feed the squirrels; in the fall, she quieted, in preparation for the long winter when she was almost dormant, like an animal, rarely speaking, and suffering herself to be dressed and undressed without rebellion; it was the winter that Miss Oakes most appreciated, although as the months moved on into spring Miss Oakes began to think more often of giving up her position, her pleasant salary, the odorous meals from the restaurant downstairs.

It was in the spring that Mrs. Montague so often tried to give things to Miss Oakes; one afternoon when their walk was dubious because of the rain, Mrs. Montague had gone as of habit to the hall closet and taken out her coat, and now sat in her armchair with the rich dark mink heaped in her lap, smoothing the fur as though she held a cat. “Pretty,” Mrs. Montague was saying, “pretty, pretty.”

“We’re very lucky to have such lovely things,” Miss Oakes said. Because it was her practice to keep busy always, never to let her knowledgeable fingers rest so long as they might be doing something useful, she was knitting a scarf. It was only half-finished, but already Miss Oakes was beginning to despair of it; the yarn, in the store and in the roll, seemed a soft tender green, but knit up into the scarf it assumed a gaudy chartreuse character that made its original purpose — to embrace the firm fleshy neck of Henry Paul Montague — seem faintly improper; when Miss

Oakes looked at the scarf impartially it irritated her, as did almost everything she created.

"Think of the money," Miss Oakes said, "that goes into all those beautiful things, just because your son is so generous and kind."

"I will give you this fur," Mrs. Montague said suddenly. "Because you have no beautiful things of your own."

"Thank you, dear," Miss Oakes said. She worked busily at her scarf for a minute and then said, "It's not being very grateful for nice things like that, dear, to want to give them away."

"It wouldn't look nice on you," Mrs. Montague said, "it would look awful. You're not very pretty."

Miss Oakes was silent again for a minute, and then she said, "Well, dear, shall we see if it's still raining?" With great deliberation she put down the knitting and walked over to the window. When she pulled back the lace curtain and the heavy dark-red drape she did so carefully, because the curtain and the drape were not precisely her own, but were of service to her, and pleasant to her touch, and expensive. "It's almost stopped," she said brightly. She squinted her eyes and looked up at the sky. "I *do* believe it's going to clear up," she went on, as though her brightness might create a sun of reflected brilliance. "In about fifteen minutes..." She let her voice trail off, and smiled at Mrs. Montague with vast anticipation.

"I don't want to go for any walk," Mrs. Montague said sullenly. "Once when we were children we used to take off all our clothes and run out in the rain."

Miss Oakes returned to her chair and took up her knitting. "We can start to get ready in a few minutes," she promised.

"I couldn't do that *now*, of course," Mrs. Montague said. "I want to color."

She slid out of her chair, dropping the mink coat into a heap on the floor, and went slowly, with her faltering walk, across the room to the card table where her coloring book and box of crayons lay. Miss Oakes sighed, set her knitting down, and walked over to pick up the mink coat; she draped it tenderly over the back of the chair, and went back and picked up her knitting again.

"Pretty, pretty," Mrs. Montague crooned over her coloring, "Pretty blue, pretty water, pretty, pretty."

Miss Oakes allowed a small smile to touch her face as she regarded the scarf; it was a bright color, perhaps too bright for a man no longer very young, but it was gay and not really *unusually* green. His birthday was three weeks off; the card in the box would say "To remind you of your loyal friend and admirer, Polly Oakes." Miss Oakes sighed quickly.

"I want to go for a *walk*," Mrs. Montague said abruptly.

"Just a minute, dear," Miss Oakes said. She put the knitting down again and smiled at Mrs. Montague. "I'll help you," Miss Oakes said, and went over to assist Mrs. Montague in the slow task that getting out of a straight chair always entailed. "Why, look at you," Miss Oakes said, regarding the coloring book over Mrs. Montague's head. She laughed. "You've gone and made the whole thing blue, you silly child." She turned back a page. "And here," she said, and laughed again. "Why does the man have a blue face? And the little girl in the picture — she mustn't be blue, dear, her face should be pink and her hair should be — oh, yellow, for instance. Not *blue*."

Mrs. Montague put her hands violently over the picture. "Mine," she said. "Get away, this is mine."

"I'm sorry," Miss Oakes said smoothly, "I wasn't laughing at you, dear. It was just funny to see a man with a blue face." She helped Mrs. Montague out of the chair and escorted her across the room to the mink coat. Mrs.

Montague stood stiffly while Miss Oakes put the coat over her shoulders and helped her arms into the sleeves, and when Miss Oakes came around in front of her to button the coat at the neck Mrs. Montague turned down the corners of her mouth and said sullenly into Miss Oakes's face, so close to hers, "You don't know what things *are*, really."

"Perhaps I don't," Miss Oakes said absently. She surveyed Mrs. Montague, neatly buttoned into the mink coat, and then took Mrs. Montague's rose-covered hat from the table in the hall and set it on Mrs. Montague's head, with great regard to the correct angle and the neatness of the roses. "Now we look so pretty," Miss Oakes said. Mrs. Montague stood silently while Miss Oakes went to the hall closet and took out her own serviceable blue coat. She shrugged herself into it, settled it with a brisk tug at the collar, and pulled on her hat with a quick gesture from back to front that landed the hatbrim at exactly the usual angle over her eye. It was not until she was escorting Mrs. Montague to the door that Miss Oakes gave one brief, furtive glance at the hall mirror, as one who does so from a nervous compulsion rather than any real desire for information.

Miss Oakes enjoyed walking down the hall; its carpets were so thick that even the stout shoes of Miss Oakes made no sound. The elevator was self-service, and Miss Oakes, with superhuman control, allowed it to sweep soundlessly down to the main floor, carrying with it Miss Oakes herself, and Mrs. Montague, who sat docilely on the velvet-covered bench and stared at the paneling as though she had never seen it before. When the elevator door opened and they moved out into the lobby Miss Oakes knew that the few people who saw them — the girl at the switchboard, the doorman, another tenant coming to the elevator — recognized Mrs. Montague as the rich old lady who lived high upstairs, and Miss Oakes as the infinitely competent companion, without whose unswerving assistance

Mrs. Montague could not live for ten minutes. Miss Oakes walked sturdily and well through the lobby, her firm hand guiding soft little Mrs. Montague; the lobby floor was pale carpeting on which their feet made no sound, and the lobby walls were painted an expensive color so neutral as to be almost invisible; as Miss Oakes went with Mrs. Montague through the lobby it was as though they walked upon clouds, through the noncommittal areas of infinite space. The doorway was their aim, and the doorman, dressed in gray, opened the way for them with a flourish and a "Good afternoon" which began by being directed at Mrs. Montague, as the employer, and ended by addressing Miss Oakes, as the person who would be expected to answer.

"Good afternoon, George," Miss Oakes said, with a stately smile, and passed on through the doorway, leading Mrs. Montague. Once outside on the sidewalk, Miss Oakes steered Mrs. Montague quickly to the left, since, allowed her head, Mrs. Montague might as easily have turned unexpectedly to the right, although they always turned to the left, and so upset Miss Oakes's walk for the day. With slow steps they moved into the current of people walking up the street, Miss Oakes watching ahead to avoid Mrs. Montague's walking into strangers, Mrs. Montague with her face turned up to the gray sky.

"It's a *lovely* day," Miss Oakes said. "Pleasantly cool after the rain."

They had gone perhaps half a block when Mrs. Montague, by a gentle pressure against Miss Oakes's arm, began to direct them toward the inside of the sidewalk and the shop windows; Miss Oakes, resisting at first, at last allowed herself to be reluctantly influenced and they crossed the sidewalk to stand in front of the window to a stationery store.

They stopped here every day, and, as she said every day, Mrs. Montague murmured softly, "*Look* at all the lovely things." She watched with amusement a plastic bird, colored bright red and yellow, which methodically dipped its beak into a glass of water and withdrew it; while they stood watching the bird lowered its head and touched the water, hesitated, and then rose.

"Does it stop when we're not here?" Mrs. Montague asked, and Miss Oakes laughed, and said, "It never stops. It goes on while we're eating and while we're sleeping and all the time."

Mrs. Montague's attention had wandered to the open pages of a diary, spread nakedly to the pages dated June *14*–June *15*. Mrs. Montague, looking at the smooth unwritten paper, caught her breath. "I'd like to have *that*," she said, and Miss Oakes, as she answered every day, said, "What would you write in it, dear?"

The thing that always caught Mrs. Montague next was a softly curved blue bowl which stood in the center of the window display; Mrs. Montague pored lovingly and speechlessly over this daily, trying to touch it through the glass of the window.

"Come *on*, dear," Miss Oakes said finally, with an almost-impatient tug at Mrs. Montague's arm. "We'll never get our walk finished if you don't come *on*."

Docilely Mrs. Montague followed. "Pretty," she whispered, "pretty, pretty."

* * *

She opened her eyes suddenly and was aware that she saw. The sky was unbelievably, steadily blue, and the sand beneath her feet was hot; she could see the water, colored more deeply than the sky, but faintly greener. Far off was the line where the sky and water met, and it was infinitely pure.

“Pretty,” she said inadequately, and was aware that she spoke. She was walking on the sand, and with a sudden impatient gesture she stopped and slipped off her shoes, standing first on one foot and then on the other. This encouraged her to look down at herself; she was very tall, high above her shoes on the sand, and when she moved it was freely and easily except for the cumbering clothes, the heavy coat and the hat, which sat on her head with a tangible, oppressive weight. She threw the hat onto the hot lovely sand, and it looked so offensive, lying with its patently unreal roses against the smooth clarity of the sand, that she bent quickly and covered the hat with handfuls of sand; the coat was more difficult to cover, and the sand ran delicately between the hairs of the short dark fur; before she had half covered the coat she decided to put the rest of her clothes with it, and did so, slipping easily out of the straps and buttons and catches of many garments, which she remembered as difficult to put on. When all her clothes were buried she looked with satisfaction down at her strong white legs, and thought, aware that she was thinking it: they are almost the same color as the sand. She began to run freely, with the blue ocean and the bluer sky on her right, the trees on her left, and the moving sand underfoot; she ran until she came back to the place where a corner of her coat still showed through the sand. When she saw it she stopped again and said, “Pretty, pretty,” and leaned over and took a handful of sand and let it run through her fingers.

Far away, somewhere in the grove of trees that centered the island she could hear the parrot calling. “Eat, eat,” it shrieked, and then something indistinguishable, and then, “Eat, eat.”

An idea came indirectly and subtly to her mind; it was the idea of food, for a minute unpleasant and as though it meant a disagreeable sensation, and then glowingly happy. She turned and ran — it was impossible to move slowly on the island, with the clear hot air all around her, and the ocean stirring constantly, pushing at the island, and the unbelievable blue sky above — and when she came into the sudden warm shade of the trees she ran from one to another, putting her hand for a minute on each.

“Hello,” the parrot gabbled, “Hello, who’s there, eat?” She could see it flashing among the trees, no more than a saw-toothed voice and a flash of ugly red and yellow.

The grass was green and rich and soft, and she sat down by the little brook where the food was set out. Today there was a great polished wooden bowl, soft to the touch, full of purple grapes; the sun that came unevenly between the trees struck a high shine from the bowl, and lay flatly against the grapes, which were dusty with warmth, and almost black. There was a shimmering glass just full of dark red wine; there was a flat blue plate filled with little cakes; she touched one and it was full of cream, and heavily iced with soft chocolate. There were pomegranates, and cheese, and small, sharp-flavored candies. She lay down beside the food, and closed her eyes against the heavy scent from the grapes.

“Eat, eat,” the parrot screamed from somewhere over her head. She opened her eyes lazily and looked up, to see the flash of red and yellow in the trees. “Be still, you noisy beast,” she said, and smiled to herself because it was not important, actually, whether the parrot were quiet or not. Later, after she had slept, she ate some of the grapes and the cheese, and several of the rich little cakes. While she ate the parrot came cautiously closer, begging for food, sidling up near to the dish of cakes and then moving quickly away.

“Beast,” she said pleasantly to the parrot, “greedy beast.”

When she was sure she was quite through with the food, she put one of the cakes on a green leaf and set it a little bit away from her for the parrot. It came up to the cake slowly and fearfully, watching on either side for some sudden prohibitive movement; when it finally reached the cake it hesitated, and then dipped its head down to bury its beak in the soft frosting; it lifted its head, paused to look around, and then lowered its beak to the cake again. The gesture was familiar, and she laughed, not knowing why.

She was faintly aware that she had slept again, and awakened wanting to run, to go out into the hot sand on the beach and run shouting around the island. The parrot was gone, its cake a mess of crumbs and frosting on the ground. She ran out onto the beach, and the water was there, and the sky. For a few minutes she ran, going down to the water and then swiftly back before it could touch her bare feet, and then she dropped luxuriously onto the sand and lay there. After a while she began to draw a picture in the sand; it was a round face with dots for eyes and nose and a line for a mouth. “Henry Paul,” she said, touching the face caressingly with her fingers, and then, laughing, she leaped to her feet and began to run again, around the island. When she passed the face drawn on the sand she put one bare foot on it and ground it away. “Eat, eat,” she could hear the parrot calling from the trees; the parrot was afraid of the hot sand and the water and stayed always in the trees near the food. Far off, across the water, she could see the sweet, the always comforting, line of the horizon.

When she was tired with running she lay down again on the sand. For a little while she played idly, writing words on the sand and then rubbing them out with her hand; once she drew a crude picture of a doorway and punched her fist through it.

Finally she lay down and put her face down to the sand. It was hot, hotter than anything else had ever been, and the soft grits of the sand slipped into her mouth, where she could taste them, deliciously hard and grainy against her teeth; they were in her eyes, rich and warm; the sand was covering her face and the blue sky was gone from above her and the sand was cooler, then grayer, covering her face, and cold.

* * *

“*Nearly* home,” Miss Oakes said brightly, as they turned the last corner of their block. “It’s been a *nice* walk, hasn’t it?”

She tried, unsuccessfully, to guide Mrs. Montague quickly past the bakery, but Mrs. Montague’s feet, moving against Miss Oakes’s pressure from habit, brought them up to stand in front of the bakery window.

“I don’t know *why* they leave those fly-specked éclairs out here,” Miss Oakes said irritably. “There’s nothing *less* appetizing. *Look* at that cake; the cream is positively *curdled*.”

She moved her arm insinuatingly within Mrs. Montague’s; “In a few minutes we’ll be home,” she said softly, “and then we can have our nice cocktail, and rest for a few minutes, and then dinner.”

“Pretty,” Mrs. Montague said at the cakes. “I want some.”

Miss Oakes shuddered violently. “Don’t even *say* it,” she implored. “Just *look* at that stuff. You’d be sick for a week.”

She moved Mrs. Montague along, and they came, moving quicker than they had when they started, back to their own doorway where the doorman in gray waited for them. He opened the door and said, beginning with Mrs. Montague and finishing with Miss Oakes, “Have a nice walk?”

“Very pleasant, thank you,” Miss Oakes said agreeably. They passed through the doorway and into the lobby where the open doors of the elevator waited for them. “Dinner soon,” Miss Oakes said as they went across the lobby.

Miss Oakes was careful, on their own floor, to see that Mrs. Montague found the right doorway; while Miss Oakes put the key in the door Mrs.

Montague stood waiting without expression.

Mrs. Montague moved forward automatically when the door was opened, and Miss Oakes caught her arm, saying shrilly, “Don’t *step* on it!” Mrs. Montague stopped, and waited, while Miss Oakes picked up the dinner menu from the floor just inside the door; it had been slipped under the door while they were out.

Once inside, Miss Oakes removed Mrs. Montague’s rosy hat and the mink coat, and Mrs. Montague took the mink coat in her arms and sat down in her chair with it, smoothing the fur. Miss Oakes slid out of her own coat and hung it neatly in the closet, and then came into the living room, carrying the dinner menu.

“Chicken liver omelette,” Miss Oakes read as she walked. “The last time it was a trifle underdone; I could *mention* it, of course, but they never seem to pay much attention. Roast turkey. Filet mignon. I *really* do think a nice little piece of...” she looked up at Mrs. Montague and smiled. “Hungry?” she suggested.

“No,” Mrs. Montague said. “I’ve had enough.”

“Nice oatmeal?” Miss Oakes said. “If you’re *very* good you can have ice cream tonight.”

“Don’t want ice cream,” Mrs. Montague said.

Miss Oakes sighed, and then said “Well...” placatingly. She returned to the menu. “French-fried potatoes,” she said. “They’re *very* heavy on the stomach, but I do have my heart set on a nice little piece of steak and some french-fried potatoes. It sounds just *right*, tonight.”

“Shall I give you this coat?” Mrs. Montague asked suddenly.

Miss Oakes stopped on her way to the phone and patted Mrs. Montague lightly on the shoulder. “You’re very generous, dear,” she said, “but of course you don’t really want to give me your beautiful coat. What would your dear son say?”

Mrs. Montague ran her hand over the fur of the coat affectionately. Then she stood up, slowly, and the coat slid to the floor. “I’m going to color,” she announced.

Miss Oakes turned back from the phone to pick up the coat and put it over the back of the chair. “All right,” she said. She went to the phone, sat so she could keep an eye on Mrs. Montague while she talked, and said into the phone “Room service.”

Mrs. Montague moved across the room and sat down at the card table. Reflectively she turned the pages of the coloring book, found a picture that pleased her, and opened the crayon box. Miss Oakes hummed softly into the phone. “Room service?” she said finally. “I want to order dinner sent up to Mrs. Montague’s suite, please.” She looked over the phone at Mrs. Montague and said, “You all right, dear?”

Without turning, Mrs. Montague moved her shoulders impatiently, and selected a crayon from the box. She examined the point of it with great care while Miss Oakes said, “I want one very sweet martini, please. And Mrs. Montague’s prune juice.” She picked up the menu and wet her lips, then said, “One crab-meat cocktail. And tonight will you see that Mrs. Montague has milk with her oatmeal; you sent cream last night. Yes, milk, please. You’d think they’d know by *now*,” she added to Mrs. Montague over the top of the phone. “Now let me see,” she said, into the phone again, her eyes on the menu.

Disregarding Miss Oakes, Mrs. Montague had begun to color. Her shoulders bent low over the book, a vague smile on her old face, she was devoting herself to a picture of a farmyard; a hen and three chickens strutted across the foreground of the picture, a barn surrounded by trees was the background. Mrs. Montague had laboriously colored the hen and the three chickens, the barn and the trees a rich blue, and now, with alternate touches of the crayons, was engaged in putting a red and yellow blot far up in the blue trees.

A VISIT

(for Dylan Thomas)

* * *

1

The house in itself was, even before anything had happened there, as lovely a thing as she had ever seen. Set among its lavish grounds, with a park and a river and a wooded hill surrounding it, and carefully planned and tended gardens close upon all sides, it lay upon the hills as though it were something too precious to be seen by everyone; Margaret's very coming there had been a product of such elaborate arrangement, and such letters to and fro, and such meetings and hopings and wishings, that when she alighted with Carla Rhodes at the doorway of Carla's home, she felt that she too had come home, to a place striven for and earned. Carla stopped before the doorway and stood for a minute, looking first behind her, at the vast reaching gardens and the green lawn going down to the river, and the soft hills beyond, and then at the perfect grace of the house, showing so clearly the long-boned structure within, the curving staircases and the arched doorways and the tall thin lines of steadying beams, all of it resting back against the hills, and up, past rows of windows and the flying lines of the roof, on, to the tower — Carla stopped, and looked, and smiled, and then turned and said, "Welcome, Margaret."

"It's a lovely house," Margaret said, and felt that she had much better have said nothing.

The doors were opened and Margaret, touching as she went the warm head of a stone faun beside her, passed inside. Carla, following, greeted the servants by name, and was welcomed with reserved pleasure; they stood for a minute on the rose-and-white tiled floor. “Again, welcome, Margaret,” Carla said.

Far ahead of them the great stairway soared upward, held to the hall where they stood by only the slimmest of carved balustrades; on Margaret’s left hand a tapestry moved softly as the door behind was closed. She could see the fine threads of the weave, and the light colors, but she could not have told the picture unless she went far away, perhaps as far away as the staircase, and looked at it from there; perhaps, she thought, from halfway up the stairway this great hall, and perhaps the whole house, is visible, as a complete body of story together, all joined and in sequence. Or perhaps I shall be allowed to move slowly from one thing to another, observing each, or would that take all the time of my visit?

“I never saw anything so lovely,” she said to Carla, and Carla smiled.

“Come and meet my mama,” Carla said.

They went through doors at the right, and Margaret, before she could see the light room she went into, was stricken with fear at meeting the owners of the house and the park and the river, and as she went beside Carla she kept her eyes down.

“Mama,” said Carla, “This is Margaret, from school.”

“Margaret,” said Carla’s mother, and smiled at Margaret kindly. “We are very glad you were able to come.”

She was a tall lady wearing pale green and pale blue, and Margaret said as gracefully as she could, “Thank you, Mrs. Rhodes; I am very grateful for having been invited.”

“Surely,” said Mrs. Rhodes softly, “surely my daughter’s friend Margaret from school should be welcome here; surely we should be grateful that she has come.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Rhodes,” Margaret said, not knowing how she was answering, but knowing that she was grateful.

When Mrs. Rhodes turned her kind eyes on her daughter, Margaret was at last able to look at the room where she stood next to her friend; it was a pale-green and a pale-blue long room with tall windows that looked out onto the lawn and the sky, and thin colored china ornaments on the mantel. Mrs. Rhodes had left her needlepoint when they came in and from where Margaret stood she could see the pale sweet pattern from the underside; all soft colors it was, melting into one another endlessly, and not finished. On the table near by were books, and one large book of sketches that were most certainly Carla’s; Carla’s harp stood next to the windows, and beyond one window were marble steps outside, going shallowly down to a fountain, where water moved in the sunlight. Margaret thought of her own embroidery — a pair of slippers she was working for her friend — and knew that she should never be able to bring it into this room, where Mrs. Rhodes’s long white hands rested on the needlepoint frame, soft as dust on the pale colors.

“Come,” said Carla, taking Margaret’s hand in her own, “Mama has said that I might show you some of the house.”

They went out again into the hall, across the rose and white tiles which made a pattern too large to be seen from the floor, and through a doorway where tiny bronze fauns grinned at them from the carving. The first room that they went into was all gold, with gilt on the window frames and on the legs of the chairs and tables, and the small chairs standing on the yellow carpet were made of gold brocade with small gilded backs, and on the wall were more tapestries showing the house as it looked in the sunlight with even the trees around it shining, and these tapestries were let into the wall and edged with thin gilded frames.

“There is so much tapestry,” Margaret said.

“In every room,” Carla agreed. “Mama has embroidered all the hangings for her own room, the room where she writes her letters. The other tapestries were done by my grandmamas and my great-grandmamas and my great-great-grandmamas.”

The next room was silver, and the small chairs were of silver brocade with narrow silvered backs, and the tapestries on the walls of this room were edged with silver frames and showed the house in moonlight, with the white light shining on the stones and the windows glittering.

“Who uses these rooms?” Margaret asked.

“No one,” Carla said.

They passed then into a room where everything grew smaller as they looked at it: the mirrors on both sides of the room showed the door opening and Margaret and Carla coming through, and then, reflected, a smaller door opening and a small Margaret and a smaller Carla coming through, and then, reflected again, a still smaller door and Margaret and Carla, and so on, endlessly, Margaret and Carla diminishing and reflecting. There was a table here and nesting under it another lesser table, and under that another one, and another under that one, and on the greatest table lay a carved wooden bowl holding within it another carved wooden bowl, and another within that, and another within that one. The tapestries in this room were of the house reflected in the lake, and the tapestries themselves were reflected, in and out, among the mirrors on the wall, with the house in the tapestries reflected in the lake.

This room frightened Margaret rather, because it was so difficult for her to tell what was in it and what was not, and how far in any direction she might easily move, and she backed out hastily, pushing Carla behind her. They turned from here into another doorway which led them out again into the great hall under the soaring staircase, and Carla said, “We had better go upstairs and see your room; we can see more of the house another time. We have *plenty* of time, after all,” and she squeezed Margaret’s hand joyfully.

They climbed the great staircase, and passed, in the hall upstairs, Carla’s room, which was like the inside of a shell in pale colors, with lilacs on the table, and the fragrance of the lilacs followed them as they went down the halls.

The sound of their shoes on the polished floor was like rain, but the sun came in on them wherever they went. “Here,” Carla said, opening a door, “is where we have breakfast when it is warm; here,” opening another door, “is the passage to the room where Mama does her letters. And that—” nodding “ — is the stairway to the tower, and *here* is where we shall have dances when my brother comes home.”

“A real tower?” Margaret said.

“And *here*,” Carla said, “is the old schoolroom, and my brother and I studied here before he went away, and I stayed on alone studying here until it was time for me to come to school and meet *you*.”

“Can we go up into the tower?” Margaret asked.

“Down here, at the end of the hall,” Carla said, “is where all my grandpapas and my grandmamas and my great-great-grandpapas and grandmamas live.” She opened the door to the long gallery, where pictures of tall old people in lace and pale waistcoats leaned down to stare at Margaret and Carla. And then, to a walk at the top of the house, where they leaned over and looked at the ground below and the tower above, and Margaret looked at the gray stone of the tower and wondered who lived there, and Carla pointed out where the river ran far below, far away, and said they should walk there tomorrow.

“When my brother comes,” she said, “he will take us boating on the river.”

In her room, unpacking her clothes, Margaret realized that her white dress was the only one possible for dinner, and thought that she would have to send home for more things; she had intended to wear her ordinary gray downstairs most evenings before Carla’s brother came, but knew she could not when she saw Carla in light blue, with pearls around her neck. When Margaret and Carla came into the drawing room before dinner Mrs. Rhodes greeted them very kindly, and asked had Margaret seen the painted room or the room with the tiles?

“We had no time to go near that part of the house at all,” Carla said.

“After dinner, then,” Mrs. Rhodes said, putting her arm affectionately around Margaret’s shoulders, “we will go and see the painted room and the room with the tiles, because they are particular favorites of mine.”

“Come and meet my papa,” Carla said.

The door was just opening for Mr. Rhodes, and Margaret, who felt almost at ease now with Mrs. Rhodes, was frightened again of Mr. Rhodes, who spoke loudly and said, “So this is m’girl’s friend from school? Lift up your head, girl, and let’s have a look at you.” When Margaret looked up blindly, and smiled weakly, he patted her cheek and said, “We shall have to make you look bolder before you leave us,” and then he tapped his daughter on the shoulder and said she had grown to a monstrous fine girl.

They went in to dinner, and on the walls of the dining room were tapestries of the house in the seasons of the year, and the dinner service was white china with veins of gold running through it, as though it had been mined and not moulded. The fish was one Margaret did not recognize, and Mr. Rhodes very generously insisted upon serving her himself without smiling at her ignorance. Carla and Margaret were each given a glassful of pale spicy wine.

“When my brother comes,” Carla said to Margaret, “we will not dare be so quiet at table.” She looked across the white cloth to Margaret, and then to her father at the head, to her mother at the foot, with the long table between them, and said, “My brother can make us laugh all the time.”

“Your mother will not miss you for these summer months?” Mrs. Rhodes said to Margaret.

“She has my sisters, ma’am,” Margaret said, “and I have been away at school for so long that she has learned to do without me.”

“We mothers never learn to do without our daughters,” Mrs. Rhodes said, and looked fondly at Carla. “Or our sons,” she added with a sigh.

“When my brother comes,” Carla said, “you will see what this house can be like with life in it.”

“When does he come?” Margaret asked.

“One week,” Mr. Rhodes said, “three days, and four hours.”

When Mrs. Rhodes rose, Margaret and Carla followed her, and Mr. Rhodes rose gallantly to hold the door for them all.

That evening Carla and Margaret played and sang duets, although Carla said that their voices together were too thin to be appealing without a deeper voice accompanying, and that when her brother came they should have some splendid trios. Mrs. Rhodes complimented their singing, and Mr. Rhodes fell asleep in his chair.

Before they went upstairs Mrs. Rhodes reminded herself of her promise to show Margaret the painted room and the room with the tiles, and so she and Margaret and Carla, holding their long dresses up away from the floor in front so that their skirts whispered behind them, went down a hall and through a passage and down another hall, and through a room filled with books and then through a painted door into a tiny octagonal room where each of the sides was paneled and painted, with pink and blue and green and gold small pictures of shepherds and nymphs, lambs and fauns, playing on the broad green lawns by the river, with the house standing lovely behind them. There was nothing else in the little room, because seemingly the paintings were furniture enough for one room, and Margaret felt surely that she could stay happily and watch the small painted people playing, without ever seeing anything more of the house. But Mrs. Rhodes led her on, into the room of the tiles, which was not exactly a room at all, but had one side all glass window looking out onto the same lawn of the pictures in the octagonal room. The tiles were set into the floor of this room, in tiny bright spots of color which showed, when you stood back and looked at them, that they were again a picture of the house, only now the same materials that made the house made the tiles, so that the tiny windows were tiles of glass, and the stones of the tower were chips of gray stone, and the bricks of the chimneys were chips of brick.

Beyond the tiles of the house Margaret, lifting her long skirt as she walked, so that she should not brush a chip of the tower out of place, stopped and said, “What is *this*?” And stood back to see, and then knelt down and said, “*What* is this?”

“Isn’t she enchanting?” said Mrs. Rhodes, smiling at Margaret, “I’ve always loved her.”

“I was wondering what Margaret would say when she saw it,” said Carla, smiling also.

It was a curiously made picture of a girl’s face, with blue-chip eyes and a red-chip mouth, staring blindly from the floor, with long light braids made of yellow stone chips going down evenly on either side of her round cheeks.

“She is pretty,” said Margaret, stepping back to see her better. “What does it say underneath?”

She stepped back again, holding her head up and back to read the letters, pieced together with stone chips and set unevenly in the floor. “Here was Margaret,” it said, “who died for love.”

2

There was, of course, not time to do everything. Before Margaret had seen half the house, Carla’s brother came home. Carla came running up the great staircase one afternoon calling “Margaret, Margaret, he’s come,” and Margaret, running down to meet her, hugged her and said, “I’m so glad.”

He had certainly come, and Margaret, entering the drawing room shyly behind Carla, saw Mrs. Rhodes with tears in her eyes and Mr. Rhodes standing straighter and prouder than before, and Carla said, “Brother, here is Margaret.”

He was tall and haughty in uniform, and Margaret wished she had met him a little later, when she had perhaps been to her room again, and perhaps tucked up her hair. Next to him stood his friend, a captain, small and dark and bitter, and smiling bleakly upon the family assembled. Margaret smiled back timidly at them both, and stood behind Carla.

Everyone then spoke at once. Mrs. Rhodes said “We’ve missed you so,” and Mr. Rhodes said “Glad to have you back, m’boy,” and Carla said “We shall have such times — I’ve promised Margaret—” and Carla’s brother said “So this is Margaret?” and the dark captain said “I’ve been wanting to come.”

It seemed that they all spoke at once, every time; there would be a long waiting silence while all of them looked around with joy at being together, and then suddenly everyone would have found something to say. It was so at dinner: Mrs. Rhodes said “You’re not eating enough,” and “You used to be more fond of pomegranates,” and Carla said “We’re to go boating,” and “We’ll have a dance, won’t we?” and “Margaret and I insist upon a picnic,” and “I saved the river for my brother to show to Margaret.” Mr. Rhodes puffed and laughed and passed the wine, and Margaret hardly dared lift her eyes. The black captain said “Never realized what an attactive old place it could be, after all,” and Carla’s brother said “There’s much about the house I’d like to show Margaret.”

After dinner they played charades, and even Mrs. Rhodes did Achilles with Mr. Rhodes, holding his heel and both of them laughing and glancing at Carla and Margaret and the captain. Carla’s brother leaned on the back of Margaret’s chair and once she looked up at him and said, “No one ever calls you by name. Do you actually have a name?”

“Paul,” he said.

The next morning they walked on the lawn, Carla with the captain and Margaret with Paul. They stood by the lake, and Margaret looked at the pure reflection of the house and said, “It almost seems as though we could open a door and go in.”

“There,” said Paul, and he pointed with his stick at the front entrance, “There is where we shall enter, and it will swing open for us with an underwater crash.”

“Margaret,” said Carla, laughing, “you say odd things, sometimes. If you tried to go into *that* house, you’d be in the lake.”

“Indeed, and not like it much, at all,” the captain added.

“Or would you have the side door?” asked Paul, pointing with his stick.

“I think I prefer the front door,” said Margaret.

“But you’d be drowned,” Carla said. She took Margaret’s arm as they started back toward the house, and said, “We’d make a scene for a tapestry right now, on the lawn before the house.”

“Another tapestry?” said the captain, and grimaced.

They played croquet, and Paul hit Margaret’s ball toward a wicket, and the captain accused her of cheating prettily. And they played word games in the evening, and Margaret and Paul won, and everyone said Margaret was so clever. And they walked endlessly on the lawns before the house, and looked into the still lake, and watched the reflection of the house in the water, and Margaret chose a room in the reflected house for her own, and Paul said she should have it.

“That’s the room where Mama writes her letters,” said Carla, looking strangely at Margaret.

“Not in our house in the lake,” said Paul.

“And I suppose if you like it she would lend it to you while you stay,” Carla said.

“Not at all,” said Margaret amiably. “I think I should prefer the tower anyway.”

“Have you seen the rose garden?” Carla asked.

“Let me take you there,” said Paul.

Margaret started across the lawn with him, and Carla called to her, “Where are you off to now, Margaret?”

“Why, to the rose garden,” Margaret called back, and Carla said, staring, “You are really very odd, sometimes, Margaret. And it’s growing colder, far too cold to linger among the roses,” and so Margaret and Paul turned back.

Mrs. Rhodes’s needlepoint was coming on well. She had filled in most of the outlines of the house, and was setting in the windows. After the first small shock of surprise, Margaret no longer wondered that Mrs. Rhodes was able to set out the house so well without a pattern or a plan; she did it from memory and Margaret, realizing this for the first time, thought "How amazing," and then "But of course; how else *would* she do it?"

To see a picture of the house, Mrs. Montague needed only to lift her eyes in any direction, but, more than that, she had of course never used any other model for her embroidery; she had of course learned the faces of the house better than the faces of her children. The dreamy life of the Rhodeses in the house was most clearly shown Margaret as she watched Mrs. Rhodes surely and capably building doors and windows, carvings and cornices, in her embroidered house, smiling tenderly across the room to where Carla and the captain bent over a book together, while her fingers almost of themselves turned the edge of a carving Margaret had forgotten or never known about until, leaning over the back of Mrs. Rhodes's chair, she saw it form itself under Mrs. Rhodes's hands.

The small thread of days and sunlight, then, that bound Margaret to the house, was woven here as she watched. And Carla, lifting her head to look over, might say, "Margaret, do come and look, here. Mother is always at her work, but my brother is rarely home."

They went for a picnic, Carla and the captain and Paul and Margaret, and Mrs. Rhodes waved to them from the doorway as they left, and Mr. Rhodes came to his study window and lifted his hand to them. They chose to go to the wooded hill beyond the house, although Carla was timid about going too far away— "I always like to be where I can see the roofs, at least," she said — and sat among the trees, on moss greener than Margaret had ever seen before, and spread out a white cloth and drank red wine.

It was a very proper forest, with neat trees and the green moss, and an occasional purple or yellow flower growing discreetly away from the path. There was no sense of brooding silence, as there sometimes is with trees about, and Margaret realized, looking up to see the sky clearly between the branches, that she had seen this forest in the tapestries in the breakfast room, with the house shining in the sunlight beyond.

“Doesn’t the river come through here somewhere?” she asked, hearing, she thought, the sound of it through the trees. “I feel so comfortable here among these trees, so at home.”

“It is possible,” said Paul, “to take a boat from the lawn in front of the house and move without sound down the river, through the trees, past the fields and then, for some reason, around past the house again. The river, you see, goes almost around the house in a great circle. We are very proud of that.”

“The river *is* near by,” said Carla. “It goes almost completely around the house.”

“Margaret,” said the captain. “You must not look rapt on a picnic unless you are contemplating nature.”

“I was, as a matter of fact,” said Margaret. “I was contemplating a caterpillar approaching Carla’s foot.”

“Will you come and look at the river?” said Paul, rising and holding his hand out to Margaret. “I think we can see much of its great circle from near here.”

“Margaret,” said Carla as Margaret stood up. “You are *always* wandering off.”

“I’m coming right back,” Margaret said, with a laugh. “It’s only to look at the river.”

“Don’t be away long,” Carla said. “We must be getting back before dark.”

The river as it went through the trees was shadowed and cool, broadening out into pools where only the barest movement disturbed the ferns along its edge, and where small stones made it possible to step out and see the water all around, from a precarious island, and where without sound a leaf might be carried from the limits of sight to the limits of sight, moving swiftly but imperceptibly and turning a little as it went.

"Who lives in the tower, Paul?" asked Margaret, holding a fern and running it softly over the back of her hand. "I know someone lives there, because I saw someone moving at the window once."

"Not *lives* there," said Paul, amused. "Did you think we kept a political prisoner locked away?"

"I thought it might be the birds, at first," Margaret said, glad to be describing this to someone.

"No," said Paul, still amused. "There's an aunt, or a great-aunt, or perhaps even a great-great-great-aunt. She doesn't live there, at all, but goes there because she says she cannot *endure* the sight of tapestry." He laughed. "She has filled the tower with books, and a huge old cat, and she may practice alchemy there, for all anyone knows. The reason you've never seen her would be that she has one of her spells of hiding away. Sometimes she is downstairs daily."

"Will I ever meet her?" Margaret asked wonderingly.

"Perhaps," Paul said. "She might take it into her head to come down formally one night to dinner. Or she might wander carelessly up to you where you sat on the lawn, and introduce herself. Or you might never see her, at that."

"Suppose I went up to the tower?"

Paul glanced at her strangely. "I suppose you could, if you wanted to," he said. "*I*'ve been there."

"Margaret," Carla called through the woods. "Margaret, we shall be late if you do not give up brooding by the river."

All this time, almost daily, Margaret was seeing new places in the house: the fan room, where the most delicate filigree fans had been set into the walls with their fine ivory sticks painted in exquisite miniature; the small room where incredibly perfect wooden and glass and metal fruits and flowers and trees stood on glittering glass shelves, lined up against the windows. And daily she passed and repassed the door behind which lay the stairway to the tower, and almost daily she stepped carefully around the tiles on the floor which read "Here was Margaret, who died for love."

It was no longer possible, however, to put off going to the tower. It was no longer possible to pass the doorway several times a day and do no more than touch her hand secretly to the panels, or perhaps set her head against and listen, to hear if there were footsteps going up or down, or a voice calling her. It was not possible to pass the doorway once more, and so in the early morning Margaret set her hand firmly to the door and pulled it open, and it came easily, as though relieved that at last, after so many hints and insinuations, and so much waiting and such helpless despair, Margaret had finally come to open it.

The stairs beyond, gray stone and rough, were, Margaret thought, steep for an old lady's feet, but Margaret went up effortlessly, though timidly. The stairway turned around and around, going up to the tower, and Margaret followed, setting her feet carefully upon one step after another, and holding her hands against the warm stone wall on either side, looking forward and up, expecting to be seen or spoken to before she reached the top; perhaps, she thought once, the walls of the tower were transparent and she was clearly, ridiculously visible from the outside, and Mrs. Rhodes and Carla, on the lawn — if indeed they ever looked upward to the tower — might watch her and turn to one another with smiles, saying "There is Margaret, going up to the tower at last," and, smiling, nod to one another.

The stairway ended, as she had not expected it would, in a heavy wooden door, which made Margaret, standing on the step below to find room to raise her hand and knock, seem smaller, and even standing at the top of the tower she felt that she was not really tall.

"Come in," said the great-aunt's voice, when Margaret had knocked twice; the first knock had been received with an expectant silence, as though inside someone had said inaudibly, "Is that someone knocking at *this* door?" and then waited to be convinced by a second knock — and Margaret's knuckles hurt from the effort of knocking to be heard through a heavy wooden door. She opened the door awkwardly from below — how much easier this all would be, she thought, if I knew the way — went in, and said politely, before she looked around, "I'm Carla's friend. They said I might come up to the tower to see it, but of course if you would rather I went away I shall." She had planned to say this more gracefully, without such an implication that invitations to the tower were issued by the downstairs Rhodeses, but the long climb and her being out of breath forced her to say everything at once, and she had really no time for the sounding periods she had composed.

In any case the great-aunt said politely — she was sitting at the other side of the round room, against a window, and she was not very clearly visible— "I am amazed that they told you about me at all. However, since you are here I cannot pretend that I really object to having you; you may come in and sit down."

Margaret came obediently into the room and sat down on the stone bench which ran all the way around the tower room, under the windows which of course were on all sides and open to the winds, so that the movement of the air through the tower room was insistent and constant, making talk difficult and even distinguishing objects a matter of some effort.

As though it were necessary to establish her position in the house emphatically and immediatey, the old lady said, with a gesture and a grin, “My tapestries,” and waved at the windows. She seemed to be not older than a great-aunt, although perhaps too old for a mere aunt, but her voice was clearly able to carry through the sound of the wind in the tower room and she seemed compact and strong beside the window, not at all as though she might be dizzy from looking out, or tired from the stairs.

“May I look out the window?” Margaret asked, almost of the cat, which sat next to her and regarded her without friendship, but without, as yet, dislike.

“Certainly,” said the great-aunt. “Look out the windows, by all means.”

Margaret turned on the bench and leaned her arms on the wide stone ledge of the window, but she was disappointed. Although the tops of the trees did not reach halfway up the tower, she could see only branches and leaves below and no sign of the wide lawns or the roofs of the house or the curve of the river.

“I hoped I could see the way the river went, from here.”

“The river doesn’t *go* from here,” said the old lady, and laughed.

“I mean,” Margaret said, “they told me that the river went around in a curve, almost surrounding the house.”

“Who told you?” said the old lady.

“Paul.”

“I see,” said the old lady. “*He*’s back, is he?”

“He’s been here for several days, but he’s going away again soon.”

“And what’s *your* name?” asked the old lady, leaning forward.

“Margaret.”

“I see,” said the old lady again. “That’s my name, too,” she said.

Margaret thought that “How nice” would be an inappropriate reply to this, and something like “Is it?” or “Just imagine” or “What a coincidence” would certainly make her feel more foolish than she believed she really was, so she smiled uncertainly at the old lady and dismissed the notion of saying “What a lovely name.”

“He should have come and gone sooner,” the old lady went on, as though to herself. “Then we’d have it all behind us.”

“Have all *what* behind us?” Margaret asked, although she felt that she was not really being included in the old lady’s conversation with herself, a conversation that seemed — and probably was — part of a larger conversation which the old lady had with herself constantly and on larger subjects than the matter of Margaret’s name, and which even Margaret, intruder as she was, and young, could not be allowed to interrupt for very long. “Have all *what* behind us?” Margaret asked insistently.

“I say,” said the old lady, turning to look at Margaret, “he should have come and gone already, and we’d all be well out of it by now.”

“I see,” said Margaret. “Well, I don’t think he’s going to be here much longer. He’s talking of going.” In spite of herself, her voice trembled a little. In order to prove to the old lady that the trembling in her voice was imaginary, Margaret said almost defiantly, “It will be very lonely here after he has gone.”

“We’ll be well out of it, Margaret, you and I,” the old lady said. “Stand away from the window, child, you’ll be wet.”

Margaret realized with this that the storm, which had — she knew now — been hanging over the house for long sunny days had broken, suddenly, and that the wind had grown louder and was bringing with it through the windows of the tower long stinging rain. There were drops on the cat’s black fur, and Margaret felt the side of her face wet. “Do your windows close?” she asked. “If I could help you —?”

“*I* don’t mind the rain,” the old lady said. “It wouldn’t be the first time it’s rained around the tower.”

“*I* don’t mind it,” Margaret said hastily, drawing away from the window. She realized that she was staring back at the cat, and added nervously, “Although, of course, getting wet is—” She hesitated and the cat stared back at her without expression. “I mean,” she said apologetically, “some people don’t *like* getting wet.”

The cat deliberately turned its back on her and put its face closer to the window.

“What were you saying about Paul?” Margaret asked the old lady, feeling somehow that there might be a thin thread of reason tangling the old lady and the cat and the tower and the rain, and even, with abrupt clarity, defining Margaret herself and the strange hesitation which had caught at her here in the tower. “He’s going away soon, you know.”

“It would have been better if it were over with by now,” the old lady said. “These things don’t take really long, you know, and the sooner the better, *I* say.”

“I suppose *that’s* true,” Margaret said intelligently.

“After all,” said the old lady dreamily, with raindrops in her hair, “we don’t always see ahead, into things that are going to happen.”

Margaret was wondering how soon she might politely go back downstairs and dry herself off, and she meant to say politely only so long as the old lady seemed to be talking, however remotely, about Paul. Also, the rain and the wind were coming through the window onto Margaret in great driving gusts, as though Margaret and the old lady and the books and the cat would be washed away, and the top of the tower cleaned of them.

“I *would* help you if I could,” the old lady said earnestly to Margaret, raising her voice almost to a scream to be heard over the wind and the rain. She stood up to approach Margaret, and Margaret, thinking she was about to fall, reached out a hand to catch her. The cat stood up and spat, the rain came through the window in a great sweep, and Margaret, holding the old lady’s hands, heard through the sounds of the wind the equal sounds of all the voices in the world, and they called to her saying “Good-by, good-by,” and “All is lost,” and another voice saying “I will always remember you,” and still another called, “It is so dark.” And, far away from the others, she could hear a voice calling, “Come back, come back.” Then the old lady pulled her hands away from Margaret and the voices were gone. The cat shrank back and the old lady looked coldly at Margaret and said, “As I was saying, I would help you if I *could*.”

“I’m so sorry,” Margaret said weakly. “I thought you were going to fall.”

“Good-by,” said the old lady.

3

At the ball Margaret wore a gown of thin blue lace that belonged to Carla, and yellow roses in her hair, and she carried one of the fans from the fan room, a daintily painted ivory thing which seemed indestructible, since she dropped it twice, and which had a tiny picture of the house painted on its ivory sticks, so that when the fan was closed the house was gone. Mrs. Rhodes had given it to her to carry, and had given Carla another, so that when Margaret and Carla passed one another dancing, or met by the punch bowl or in the halls, they said happily to one another, “Have you still got your fan? I gave mine to someone to hold for a minute; I showed mine to everyone. Are you still carrying your fan? I’ve got *mine*.”

Margaret danced with strangers and with Paul, and when she danced with Paul they danced away from the others, up and down the long gallery hung with pictures, in and out between the pillars which led to the great hall opening into the room of the tiles. Near them danced ladies in scarlet silk, and green satin, and white velvet, and Mrs. Rhodes, in black with diamonds at her throat and on her hands, stood at the top of the room and smiled at the dancers, or went on Mr. Rhodes's arm to greet guests who came laughingly in between the pillars looking eagerly and already moving in time to the music as they walked. One lady wore white feathers in her hair, curling down against her shoulder; another had a pink scarf over her arms, and it floated behind her as she danced. Paul was in his haughty uniform, and Carla wore red roses in her hair and danced with the captain.

"Are you really going tomorrow?" Margaret asked Paul once during the evening; she knew that he was, but somehow asking the question — which she had done several times before — established a communication between them, of his right to go and her right to wonder, which was sadly sweet to her.

"I *said* you might meet the great-aunt," said Paul, as though in answer; Margaret followed his glance, and saw the old lady of the tower. She was dressed in yellow satin, and looked very regal and proud as she moved through the crowd of dancers, drawing her skirt aside if any of them came too close to her. She was coming toward Margaret and Paul where they sat on small chairs against the wall, and when she came close enough she smiled, looking at Paul, and said to him, holding out her hands, "I am very glad to see you, my dear."

Then she smiled at Margaret and Margaret smiled back, very glad that the old lady held out no hands to her.

"Margaret told me you were here," the old lady said to Paul, "and I came down to see you once more."

"I'm very glad you did," Paul said. "I wanted to see you so much that I almost came to the tower."

They both laughed and Margaret, looking from one to the other of them, wondered at the strong resemblance between them. Margaret sat very straight and stiff on her narrow chair, with her blue lace skirt falling charmingly around her and her hands folded neatly in her lap, and listened to their talk. Paul had found the old lady a chair and they sat with their heads near together, looking at one another as they talked, and smiling.

"You look very fit," the old lady said. "Very fit indeed." She sighed.

"You look wonderfully well," Paul said.

"Oh, well," said the old lady. "I've aged. I've aged, I know it."

"So have I," said Paul.

"Not noticeably," said the old lady, shaking her head and regarding him soberly for a minute. "*You* never will, I suppose."

At that moment the captain came up and bowed in front of Margaret, and Margaret, hoping that Paul might notice, got up to dance with him.

"I saw you sitting there alone," said the captain, "and I seized the precise opportunity I have been awaiting all evening."

"Excellent military tactics," said Margaret, wondering if these remarks had not been made a thousand times before, at a thousand different balls.

"I could be a splendid tactician," said the captain gallantly, as though carrying on his share of the echoing conversation, the words spoken under so many glittering chandeliers, "if my objective were always so agreeable to me."

"I saw you dancing with Carla," said Margaret.

“Carla,” he said, and made a small gesture that somehow showed Carla as infinitely less than Margaret. Margaret knew that she had seen him make the same gesture to Carla, probably with reference to Margaret. She laughed.

“I forget what I’m supposed to say now,” she told him.

“You’re supposed to say,” he told her seriously, “ ‘And do you really leave us so soon?’”

“And do you really leave us so soon?” said Margaret obediently.

“The sooner to return,” he said, and tightened his arm around her waist. Margaret said, it being her turn, “We shall miss you very much.”

“*I* shall miss *you*,” he said, with a manly air of resignation.

They danced two waltzes, after which the captain escorted her handsomely back to the chair from which he had taken her, next to which Paul and the old lady continued in conversation, laughing and gesturing. The captain bowed to Margaret deeply, clicking his heels.

“May I leave you alone for a minute or so?” he asked. “I believe Carla is looking for me.”

“I’m perfectly all right here,” Margaret said. As the captain hurried away she turned to hear what Paul and the old lady were saying.

“I remember, I remember,” said the old lady laughing, and she tapped Paul on the wrist with her fan. “I never imagined there would be a time when I should find it funny.”

“But it *was* funny,” said Paul.

“We were so young,” the old lady said. “I can hardly remember.”

She stood up abruptly, bowed to Margaret, and started back across the room among the dancers. Paul followed her as far as the doorway and then left her to come back to Margaret. When he sat down next to her he said, “So you met the old lady?”

“I went to the tower,” Margaret said.

“She told me,” he said absently, looking down at his gloves. “Well,” he said finally, looking up with an air of cheerfulness. “Are they *never* going to play a waltz?”

* * *

Shortly before the sun came up over the river the next morning they sat at breakfast, Mr. and Mrs. Rhodes at the ends of the table, Carla and the captain, Margaret and Paul. The red roses in Carla’s hair had faded and been thrown away, as had Margaret’s yellow roses, but both Carla and Margaret still wore their ball gowns, which they had been wearing for so long that the soft richness of them seemed natural, as though they were to wear nothing else for an eternity in the house, and the gay confusion of helping one another dress, and admiring one another, and straightening the last folds to hang more gracefully, seemed all to have happened longer ago than memory, to be perhaps a dream that might never have happened at all, as perhaps the figures in the tapestries on the walls of the dining room might remember, secretly, an imagined process of dressing themselves and coming with laughter and light voices to sit on the lawn where they were woven. Margaret, looking at Carla, thought that she had never seen Carla so familiarly as in this soft white gown, with her hair dressed high on her head — had it really been curled and pinned that way? Or had it always, forever, been so? — and the fan in her hand — had she not always had that fan, held just so? — and when Carla turned her head slightly on her long neck she captured the air of one of the portraits in the long gallery. Paul and the captain were still somehow trim in their uniforms; they were leaving at sunrise.

“Must you really leave this morning?” Margaret whispered to Paul.

"You are all kind to stay up and say good-by," said the captain, and he leaned forward to look down the table at Margaret, as though it were particularly kind of her.

"Every time my son leaves me," said Mrs. Rhodes, "it is as though it were the first time."

Abruptly, the captain turned to Mrs. Rhodes and said, "I noticed this morning that there was a bare patch on the grass before the door. Can it be restored?"

"I had not known," Mrs. Rhodes said, and she looked nervously at Mr. Rhodes, who put his hand quietly on the table and said, "We hope to keep the house in good repair so long as we are able."

"But the broken statue by the lake?" said the captain. "And the tear in the tapestry behind your head?"

"It is wrong of you to notice these things," Mrs. Rhodes said, gently.

"What can I do?" he said to her. "It is impossible not to notice these things. The fish are dying, for instance. There are no grapes in the arbor this year. The carpet is worn to thread near your embroidery frame," he bowed to Mrs. Rhodes, "and in the house itself—" bowing to Mr. Rhodes " —there is a noticeable crack over the window of the conservatory, a crack in the solid stone. Can you repair that?"

Mr. Rhodes said weakly, "It is very wrong of you to notice these things. Have you neglected the sun, and the bright perfection of the drawing room? Have you been recently to the gallery of portraits? Have you walked on the green portions of the lawn, or only watched for the bare places?"

"The drawing room is shabby," said the captain softly. "The green brocade sofa is torn a little near the arm. The carpet has lost its luster. The gilt is chipped on four of the small chairs in the gold room, the silver paint scratched in the silver room. A tile is missing from the face of Margaret, who died for love, and in the great gallery the paint has faded slightly on the portrait of—" bowing again to Mr. Rhodes " — your great-great-great-grandfather, sir."

Mr. Rhodes and Mrs. Rhodes looked at one another, and then Mrs. Rhodes said, "Surely it is not necessary to reproach *us* for these things?"

The captain reddened and shook his head.

"My embroidery is very nearly finished," Mrs. Rhodes said. "I have only to put the figures into the foreground."

"*I* shall mend the brocade sofa," said Carla.

The captain glanced once around the table, and sighed. "I must pack," he said. "We cannot delay our duties even though we have offended lovely women." Mrs. Rhodes, turning coldly away from him, rose and left the table, with Carla and Margaret following.

Margaret went quickly to the tile room, where the white face of Margaret who died for love stared eternally into the sky beyond the broad window. There was indeed a tile missing from the wide white cheek, and the broken spot looked like a tear, Margaret thought; she kneeled down and touched the tile face quickly to be sure that it was not a tear.

Then she went slowly back through the lovely rooms, across the broad rose-and-white tiled hall, and into the drawing room, and stopped to close the tall doors behind her.

"There really is a tile missing," she said.

Paul turned and frowned; he was standing alone in the drawing room, tall and bright in his uniform, ready to leave. "You are mistaken," he said. "It is not possible that anything should be missing."

"I saw it."

"It is not *true*, you know," he said. He was walking quickly up and down the room, slapping his gloves on his wrist, glancing nervously, now and then, at the door, at the tall windows opening out onto the marble stairway. “The house is the same as ever,” he said. “It does not change.”

“But the worn carpet...” It was under his feet as he walked.

“Nonsense,” he said violently. “Don’t you think I’d know my own house? I care for it constantly, even when *they* forget; without this house I could not exist; do you think it would begin to crack while I am here?”

“How can you keep it from aging? Carpets *will* wear, you know, and unless they are replaced...”

“Replaced?” He stared as though she had said something evil. “What could replace anything in this house?” He touched Mrs. Rhodes’s embroidery frame, softly. “All *we* can do is add to it.”

There was a sound outside; it was the family coming down the great stairway to say good-by. He turned quickly and listened, and it seemed to be the sound he had been expecting. “I will always remember you,” he said to Margaret, hastily, and turned again toward the tall windows. “Good-by.”

“It is so dark,” Margaret said, going beside him. “You will come back?”

“I will come back,” he said sharply. “Good-by.” He stepped across the sill of the window onto the marble stairway outside; he was black for a moment against the white marble, and Margaret stood still at the window watching him go down the steps and away through the gardens. “Lost, lost,” she heard faintly, and, from far away, “All is lost.”

She turned back to the room, and, avoiding the worn spot in the carpet and moving widely around Mrs. Rhodes’s embroidery frame, she went to the great doors and opened them. Outside, in the hall with the rose-and-white tiled floor, Mr. and Mrs. Rhodes and Carla were standing with the captain.

“Son,” Mrs. Rhodes was saying, “when will you be back?”

“Don’t *fuss* at me,” the captain said. “I’ll be back when I can.”

Carla stood silently, a little away. “Please be careful,” she said, and, “Here’s Margaret, come to say good-by to you, Brother.”

“Don’t linger, m’boy,” said Mr. Rhodes. “Hard on the women.”

“There are so many things Margaret and I planned for you while you were here,” Carla said to her brother. “The time has been so short.”

Margaret, standing beside Mrs. Rhodes, turned to Carla’s brother (*and Paul; who was Paul*?) and said, “Good-by.” He bowed to her and moved to go to the door with his father.

“It is hard to see him go,” Mrs. Rhodes said. “And we do not know when he will come back.” She put her hand gently on Margaret’s shoulder. “We must show you more of the house,” she said. “I saw you one day try the door of the ruined tower; have you seen the hall of flowers? Or the fountain room?”

“When my brother comes again,” Carla said, “we shall have a musical evening, and perhaps he will take us boating on the river.”

“And my visit?” said Margaret smiling. “Surely there will be an end to my visit?”

Mrs. Rhodes, with one last look at the door from which Mr. Rhodes and the captain had gone, dropped her hand from Margaret’s shoulder and said, “I must go to my embroidery. I have neglected it while my son was with us.”

“You will not leave us before my brother comes again?” Carla asked Margaret.

“I have only to put the figures into the foreground,” Mrs. Rhodes said, hesitating on her way to the drawing room. “I shall have you exactly if you sit on the lawn near the river.”

“We shall be models of stillness,” said Carla, laughing. “Margaret, will you come and sit beside me on the lawn?”

THE ROCK

BEING ON THE water was not precisely a unique, but rather an unusual, experience for Paula Ellison, and for the first few minutes that she sat on the small seat almost too close to the front of the boat, she was perfectly still, afraid not so much of upsetting the boat as of being unprepared when it surely did upset. She had gotten in first, and sat with her back to the island where they were going, watching the young man in the oilskin jacket as he helped first her sister-in-law Virginia, and then her brother Charles, into the more comfortable seats in the center of the boat. Charles, Paula thought, looked tired, and she thought further that she did not grudge him the better seat, or the reassurance of sitting next to Virginia, because Charles had certainly been so very ill, and was still not well, and looked tired after their journey.

"I'm so *excited*," Virginia said, and bounced in the boat almost like a child. Then she added, in the gentle voice both she and Paula were now using toward Charles, "How do you feel, darling?"

"Very well indeed," Charles said. "Very much better."

"It looks so *exciting*," Virginia said. "Look at it, all dark and rocky against the sky and that *perfect* sunset."

"What is that picture?" Charles asked. "*You* know the one."

"Like a pirate stronghold," Virginia continued ecstatically, "or a prison or some—"

Paula said with amusement, "Charles, do you think it entirely wise to bring Virginia to a place where she can indulge her romantic temperament so fully?"

Charles, without hearing her, said to Virginia, “Actually, I’m afraid it’s only a rather ordinary summer resort.” He smiled at his sister. “Do you think we might find one pirate for Virginia?”

Paula, without meaning to, looked over his head to the young man in the oilskin jacket who was running the boat, and found him at that moment looking at her, so that she turned quickly away and said, “It’s cold.”

“It *is* cold.” Virginia pulled her coat closer around her.

“We’re here so late in the year,” Charles said.

Paula said immediately, “That’s *much* better, you know; it means we’ll be practically the only people and won’t have to bother being sociable.”

Virginia added, almost as quickly, “And I *always* think these early fall days are the best, after all. Relaxing,” she added vaguely.

“Well, at least I didn’t keep us from any vacation at all this year,” Charles said.

“I never intended to take any vacation this year,” Virginia said. “I *hate* going away in the summers, and the children are so much better off not going into public resorts.”

“As you know,” Paula said stiffly, “I rarely plan on a vacation at all. If it hadn’t been for your insisting that you needed me—”

Charles laughed. “You worry too much,” he said, turning from Virginia to Paula. “You don’t have to fuss every time I mention being sick.”

“You’re not to think about it,” Paula said.

“We all want to forget it,” Virginia said.

“It’s forgotten,” Charles said. “How much longer will it take to reach the island?” From the inflection of his voice everyone immediately assumed that he was speaking to the young man in the oilskin jacket and did not know how otherwise to address him, whether as “driver” or “captain” or “ferryman” or perhaps “boy.”

After a minute the young man said, “Nearly there.”

“Does the island have a name?” Virginia asked.

“People round here call it mostly Rock Island,” the young man said.

“Even *that* is exciting,” Virginia said. She looked first at Charles and then at Paula. “Even that it should be named Rock Island. Like a stronghold, or a fort, or a—”

“Rock,” Paula said.

“We land on the other side,” the young man said, without being asked; it was as though every person whom he carried to the island asked the same series of questions, made the same comments, spoke of pirates and that picture, *you* know, and went on to ask how long now? and what was the name of the island, and as though the next question had to be “Where do we land?” or “Do we dock there?” or “How are you going to get the boat up onto those rocks?” and this time, for once, impatient and perhaps tired of ferrying, he answered the question before it could be asked. Paula, who thought that Virginia was again going to say “How exciting,” said quickly, “Charles, are you tired?”

“No,” he said, surprised. “Not tired at all; I’m feeling very well, really.”

Although she had not intended to view this island, this site of her unexpected holiday, so soon, had meant ever since she stepped into the boat without being allowed a chance of turning around to keep her back steadfastly against the island and not turn, not turn, until she was close enough to touch it, Paula at last forgot her resolution and turned to look; she saw, looming impossibly large over her head and with the red sunset behind, a great black jagged rock, without signs of humanity or sympathy, with only dreadful reaching black rocks and sharp incredible outlines against the sunset and she said (thinking, I can always go back if it’s *too* awful), “Charles, how do you feel?”

“I feel *fine*,” he said sharply.

“It’s just all *too* exciting,” Virginia said.

As the boat came closer it appeared that the island was composed of a single rock instead of many; there were no pebbles or splinters of rock at the edges of the water in the little cove to which the young man guided the boat, and a series of steps leading up to the house above seemed to be carved out of the rock. The sun had gone by now and only a faint impression of the sunset lay in the sky; it had grown much colder and the coming darkness made the rock look blacker and the steps steep and wet.

“Can we get up there at all?” Paula said, leaning from the boat to look at the steps; realizing that she was expected to stand and move from the boat onto the steps she hesitated and then reflected that she could hardly stay on in the boat unless she chose to go back with the ferryman. I wish for once Virginia would move first, she thought, or Charles, and then rebuked herself with the recollection that after all Virginia could hardly climb over Paula in the end seat to get out, and Charles was ill. The young man stepped easily from the boat onto the rock and held out his hand to Paula, and she remembered that he had helped Virginia into the boat earlier, and took his hand and found herself with less grace than usual almost scrambling onto the rock steps. They were not wet, after all, or slippery, but seemed actually to press back against her feet as though holding firmly against her.

I like it here, she thought, surprising herself, and found the steps irresistible; before Virginia was even out of the boat Paula had turned and begun to climb. At first she only enjoyed the pressure of the steps under her feet, and then she raised her head and saw the house above her and she began to climb faster.

“Look at Paula, so far ahead,” she heard Charles saying below her; he sounded cross, and she thought that perhaps he was annoyed with her for having spoken so much of his illness. Ahead of her the windows of the house showed light and then the door opened and someone came into the doorway, looking down and seeming to peer through the darkness.

“Who is it?” the woman in the doorway called.

Required to identify herself suddenly, Paula hesitated on the steps and then turned and looked behind her. Charles and Virginia were following her slowly, helping one another, and Paula felt first a small pang that she had not stayed with them, but had gone on so easily herself. Then, past the curve of the rock below her, she saw the boat going back, and was suddenly very frightened when she realized that the boat and the ferryman had never intended to stay with them; how will we ever get back? she wondered, and then smiled at herself, thinking that surely the ferryman must come back several times a day.

“Are you all right?” she called down to Charles and Virginia. “Shall I come back and help you?”

“We’re all right,” Virginia called up to her. “The steps are just a little steep for Charles.”

Paula turned and climbed on up to the house while the woman in the doorway stood watching her. “So you’ve come,” said the woman in the doorway when Paula was close enough for her to speak. “I’d almost given up expecting you.”

Not a very gracious hostess, Paula thought. “We’ve been late for everything all day,” she explained. “Trains, busses, meals, everything.”

“You’ll have to take what you can get here tonight,” the woman said. “Dinner’s been done with for an hour, and the dishes washed and put away.”

“I’m sure we won’t want much,” Paula said. She was displeased, and as she came up onto the last, wider steps which led to the doorway she did not stop to look at the woman, but brushed past her and went inside. The room into which she came seemed to be made of the rock of the island, and for a minute she stood staring, forgetting the landlady behind her. A great fire burned on the far side of the huge room, and flickered against the walls in lines that might have been reflecting mica in rock, ran in light up and down the wide dark walls on which no pictures hung, and shattered itself oddly across and along the floor on which no rug lay. The furniture was huge and wooden, a great trestle table with benches on either side, and a long wooden bench with back and arms which brought the word "settle" to Paula's mind, and huge square wooden chairs, worn and smooth with use. There were no ornaments of any kind and no light except from the great fire.

Paula heard the landlady, still behind her in the doorway, calling down to Charles and Virginia that it was only a bit more to come, and then the landlady added very quietly, "You'll want to put in curtains and such, I daresay."

"Were you speaking to me?" Paula asked; there seemed no one else around.

"And flowers, I suppose."

Paula advanced to the fire and stood warming her hands. "It's a most unusual room," she said. She was trying to identify her own feelings; over and above everything else was a great despair and impulsive dislike of this house, this woman, this room; she tried to tell herself that it was the usual reaction to finishing a long journey and finding less comfort than she had been dreaming of since she left home. More than this, however, she was discouraged; this did not seem at all the sort of place in which to spend a belated vacation and she was anxious over how Charles and Virginia would feel about it. It'll be better in the morning when the sun is out, she told herself, and heard Charles and Virginia greeting the landlady.

“Did our suitcases come?” Charles was asking immediately; he had overseen their departure.

“This morning,” said the landlady. “They’re in your rooms.”

“Splendid,” said Charles. He came over to the fire and stood beside Paula. “Chill in the air,” he said.

“It gets cold nights, this time of year,” the landlady said.

“This is an extraordinary room,” Virginia said. “It looks as though it’s made out of rock.”

“It *is* rock, as a matter of fact,” said the landlady. “Most unusual. The greater part of the house is made of rock; I have a small booklet describing it for tourists, and I have put copies in your rooms. It is regarded as a most unusual house.”

“It is *most* unusual,” said Charles. “You are Mrs. Carter, of course?”

“Mrs. Carter,” said the landlady, nodding. “Mr. and Mrs. Ellison.”

“And Miss Ellison,” said Charles, indicating Paula.

“Of course,” said the landlady. “I have your rooms ready.”

“Splendid,” Charles said; he had taken command again now that there was no physical exertion required, and he looked patronizingly over Paula to say to the landlady, “Any chance of our having something to eat?”

The landlady waved her head back and forth sadly. “You came so late, you know,” she said. “I can give you cheese, and beer, and perhaps, if you wanted to wait for a broiled chicken...”

“Just some tea for me, thanks,” said Virginia.

“I should like some tea,” Paula said.

“Whatever you can find, then, in a minute or so,” Charles said. “Nothing that means any trouble.”

The landlady nodded politely and went out of the room, and Charles, looking around with an odd smile, said “Well.”

"Isn't it wonderful?" said Virginia. "That marvelous old woman, and this house..." she gestured at the walls and then, remembering, laughed and turned to Paula. "You know what she said to me, that funny old woman?" she demanded. "When I was just coming in the door, she whispered to me, was the tall woman with our party?" She laughed again. "Meaning *you*," she said to Paula.

"She didn't seem to like me," Paula said.

"These women are unaccountable," Charles said. "Remember she lives practically alone on this island."

"In this *wonderful* house," Virginia said.

* * *

It was substantially better in the daylight. They had slept in rooms adjoining one another, Charles and Virginia in a huge fourposter bed with curtains, and Paula in a small room with windows overlooking the water almost directly, and in the morning, lying awake in her bed, Paula was for a minute surprised at the moving reflections on the ceiling of her room before she realized that it was only the reflection of the sun on the water, reflected again through her windows. She rose from the bed and went to look out on the water and was shocked to see the steep and immediate fall of the island below her; this was the side of the island away from the steps they had come up the night before, and all this part of the house almost hung over the water. Looking down, Paula thought how in many ways this might be extraordinarily good for Charles after his illness, and good for Virginia and Paula too, since the whole aspect of the island lacked that cloying servitude which they all three hated by now, Charles from receiving it for so long, and she and Virginia from giving it; there was here no sense of heavy luxury and overrich surroundings, but only a very clear and distinct effect of an island out of sight of the mainland, sharp and strong alone on the water, and nothing below but solid rock and nothing more to do, perhaps, than endure the constant and incessant triumphs of water over rock, rock over water.

"I could spend all day," she thought, almost speaking aloud, "just standing somewhere watching the horizon, or sitting on a high rock, or walking down to the water and up again."

She put on a pair of heavy shoes, since if she were going to climb rocks she must be protected against their animosity, and went down the wide wooden stairs of the house into the stone room, where already this morning a fire was burning and the heavy furniture looked burnished in the sunlight through the windows. A clean napkin lay on the long wooden table and on it a heavy cup like the one she had had her tea from the night before, and a wooden trencher. Paula went to the door which she had learned led to the kitchen, opened it slightly, and called "Good morning."

"Well, there," said the landlady from somewhere within. "With us already?'

She swung the kitchen door wide and came into the stone room with an earthenware jug which she set down on the table. "Coffee," she said. "You'll have eggs, perhaps? And bacon? Fresh-made rolls?"

"Thank you," Paula said. Even the landlady seemed more cheerful this morning, and Paula thought that perhaps this was because she herself was not so sullen. "I'll have anything I may," she said, smiling. "I never dreamed I could be so hungry."

"It's being near the water," the landlady said profoundly. "You'll always have good appetite here. I've known them eat a whole chicken at a sitting."

"Tell me," Paula said, coming closer to look at the earthenware jug of coffee, "your dishes are so unusual, and so lovely. Where did you ever find them?"

"They came with the house," the landlady said. "I keep them because people seem to think they belong."

"They do, indeed," Paula said.

"Hard to wash clean," said the landlady, disappearing again into the kitchen.

This morning the moving lines of the firelight on the stone walls were caught and pursued by reflections of sunlight, and the broad windows overlooking the sea and the rock glittered until Paula wondered if the island could be seen from the mainland as a bright light on the horizon. She poured herself a cup of coffee from the earthenware jug, admiring its weight and solidity, and stood with her cup by the window, looking out. When the kitchen door opened she said without turning, "What is the rock the island is made of? I'd really swear it was black."

"Jet?" said the landlady's voice, musing, "malachite? I don't remember, but it's in the little book."

Paula came to the table and sat down, and served herself with eggs and bacon onto the wooden trencher. The landlady stood by, silently, and when Paula began to eat she said, "You'll see my other guest this morning."

"Another guest?" said Paula.

"You'll be wanting to meet him as soon as possible," said the landlady.

"Who is he?" said Paula, but the landlady was going into the kitchen. She finished her breakfast and lighted a cigarette, and came back to the window with her cigarette and her coffee cup, and pulled one of the great wooden chairs around to sit in, so that she was almost hidden by the back of it and was surprised for a minute by the landlady's scolding voice until she realized it could not possibly be addressed to her.

"She's been and gone, of course," said the landlady. "You ought to have come an hour ago." There was the dull sound of the wooden trenchers being stacked together and the landlady’s voice went on, “I can’t after all keep coming to look for you when I want you; there are people here needing food and bedding and attention, and where you’ve gone I can never tell.”

Since she was eavesdropping, Paula thought that the only thing to do was stand up immediately and go to the table for more coffee as though she had not been listening at all, which turned out to be more difficult than she thought, when she saw the landlady’s surprised face.

“She’s here again, then,” the landlady said. “This will be the other guest, Miss.”

I hope she doesn’t fall to addressing all her guests so impertinently, Paula thought, and turned to smile at the other guest; she felt an immediate shock of recognition, as though this were someone she had known all her life, and then realized that she had never seen him before. “How do you do,” she said, and then stopped because she did not know his name.

“How do you do, Miss Ellison,” he said courteously but in such a low voice that she was not completely sure if he had called her by name. He seemed so frightened of her that she refrained from asking his name, but only smiled again and said, “I was admiring the view of the water from the window.”

“That’s why I like an island,” he said. His tone and his manner were precisely those of someone excruciatingly shy, who cannot always stop to frame sensible remarks. He was very small, and held his hands in front of him in an attitude of cringing, and the only fact against his being so terribly shy was that he did not avoid looking at her, as a shy person would, but kept his eyes fixed upon her in a sort of hypnotized stare, and, staring back rudely, Paula thought that his eyes must be almost the color and texture of the rock itself.

“I was waiting for your sister-in-law, actually,” he said.

“She’ll be down in a while,” said Paula, trying not to smile. Virginia was small and lovely, and shy little men like this always found her reassuring. “She was very tired after our trip yesterday, and I expect she’ll sleep late.”

“You’ll *do*, of course,” he said ineptly.

“Thank you,” Paula said with gravity. “Have you been here long?”

“Quite a while,” said the little man vaguely. “A very long time, in fact.”

“I understand that this is quite a popular spot earlier in the year.”

“Moderately so. Never more than a few people, that is.” He looked at her earnestly. “Not many people feel at *home* on an island,” he said.

“I suppose only a certain sort of person would find this stimulating,” Paula said. She glanced out the window again and down to the sea below. “It’s an excellent place for my brother to be, right now; he’s been very ill, and needed precisely this kind of lonely, stimulating spot.”

“It will probably do him a great deal of good,” said the little man politely.

“I hope so,” said Paula. She was thinking of how such a concrete, limited world as an island and the sea might be extraordinarily helpful to Charles, since he would be given no choice except rock or water, and could not waste his mind in a thousand distractions; he might come to see everything, as she sternly hoped, in terms of solidity and fluidity, and learn that the rock was, as a place to live, far preferable to the sea. Perhaps, even, confining Charles to an island for a while would result in his taking an island away with him and being thus enabled to preserve for himself this kind of firm rock to live on always... The little man disturbed her by saying, “You mustn’t be *entirely* sure of the rock, you know.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“Well, it’s been here for a number of years, of course... and rock is a hard thing to get rid of...”

"I don't understand."

"It doesn't matter at all," he said nervously. "Your brother's illness — it's given you a good deal of worry?"

"Of course," she said; she had mentioned Charles's illness originally as a sort of warning; it would be wisest, she felt, to let the other guest know immediately that Charles had been very ill indeed and must not be disturbed, and must not, indeed, be allowed to disturb others with vagaries left over from his illness. She had not expected, however, that the conversation might allow this little man to feel that he had any right to ask more personal questions; a polite murmur of sympathy was the most she had felt was required of him.

"It's been very difficult for you," he said.

"Do you expect to be here long?" She hoped she did not sound too emphatic; these little men were sometimes hard to discourage and yet, on the other hand, they might be so easily affronted.

"Not much longer now." He smiled at her, and again she thought that his eyes in the timid face were much like the rock under her feet. "I intend to walk up to the high rock this morning," he said. "The highest point on the island. You can't miss it."

"It must be very interesting," she said flatly.

"I shall be there all morning," he said. "Just follow the path that begins under your windows. Good-by."

As she stood staring at the doorway out of which he had gone so suddenly she heard footsteps on the stairs, and a moment later her sister-in-law came into the room.

"Charles is feeling very tired and plans to stay in bed," she said. "Good morning, Paula dear."

"Good morning, Virginia. I'm so sorry about Charles."

“Is this coffee?”

The landlady came in, bustling and fussing at Virginia; Virginia would have fresh-baked rolls and bacon, and perhaps a gently boiled egg? Would Virginia have peaches brought from the mainland this morning? And the poor sick gentleman; would he have a tray?

Paula stood at the window and watched Virginia breakfast; already the sharp air of the sea outside had made her impatient with being indoors, and she found herself unwilling to move into the room when Virginia invited her to sit at the table and take more coffee; the window was at present as close as she might reasonably go to the outdoors, and she must remain within sight of the sea.

“*Wonderful* coffee,” said Virginia. “I’m so hungry.”

The landlady came over to the window and leaned out, standing near Paula.

“He’ll be up on the high rock,” she said softly.

“I know, he—”

“Mrs. Carter,” said Virginia, “might I possibly have another of your incredible muffins?”

The landlady hurried off and into the kitchen, and Virginia said, without turning around, “Isn’t she unbelievable?”

“Would you like to go for a walk this morning?” Paula asked. “If Charles is resting, you and I could go exploring.”

“*Love* to,” said Virginia. “All over the island — I can’t wait.”

The kitchen door swung open and the landlady returned, saying as she came, “The tray has gone up to the poor gentleman, and I hope he feels the better for it.”

“Mrs. Carter,” said Paula deliberately, “will you tell me the name of your other guest?”

“You ladies will be wanting fresh coffee,” said the landlady, peering into the coffee jug; “shame on me for letting you waste yourselves on this.”

“What other guest?” said Virginia as the landlady hurried off again.

“An odd little man,” Paula said.

“And the view,” said the landlady, returning, “you’ll be wanting to see the view.”

“My sister and I thought we might walk over the island this morning,” Paula said.

“Indeed you will,” said the landlady, “and if the poor gentleman upstairs calls, I’ll be right here.”

“Where would you suggest we start?” Paula asked.

“Well,” said the landlady. She stopped, thinking, her hands on her broad hips, and frowning slightly. “Most people,” she said, “prefer the steps down to the sea and then the path around the seashore. Or if you turn to the right as you leave the front door, you will find a path that takes you through our garden. If it were earlier in the year I might suggest bathing in the cove, but delicate young ladies do not care for bathing when the weather is chilled. Or perhaps—”

“What about the path that starts under my window?”

“That of course,” said the landlady, “takes you just back down to the seashore again. Only if you go so far away and the poor gentleman upstairs should happen to call...”

“We’d better stay near the house,” Virginia said.

“You were asking about my kitchens,” said the landlady to Virginia. “If the other lady chooses to go walking and yet you want to stay within hearing of the poor gentleman upstairs, I would account it a pleasure to show you my kitchens.”

“I should love to see them,” Virginia said. “Paula?”

"The other young lady is aching to be outside," the landlady said. "Some of us cannot resist the sea." She smiled politely at Paula and then turned again to Virginia. "If you are finished with your coffee," she said, "it might be as well to start before the day is much along." As Virginia rose, the landlady said over her shoulder to Paula, "We'll see you back, then, by lunchtime. Mind the slippery rocks."

* * *

"Ah — Johnson," said the little man. "Yes, Johnson."

"I'm Paula Ellison, Mr. Johnson."

"Yes, of course. It was Virginia Ellison I was — yes, of course."

"Marvelous view up here."

"Isn't it? You'll be tired of the sound of your brother's voice, I expect?"

"Why, I don't know that I am, particularly. Of course, he's been so very ill."

"Yes."

"It's been quite a strain on both of us."

"Both of us? Oh, yes, Virginia, I see."

"We've had to take *very* careful charge of him."

"Of course. It must have been most upsetting."

"Well — tiring."

"Your own brother. Yes, I quite understand. And his wife such a — may I say? — such a *dependent* person."

"She did as much as she was able."

"Of course. As much as she was able, yes."

"She is not strong. And she had the children."

"Let me confess — I *do* dislike children. You do too, I take it?"

"Well... not of course my own nieces."

"Of course not. Your own brother's children. But with the responsibility so much on you, and your sister-in-law so dependent, and the children too — it is not surprising you have been allowed to exhaust yourself."

"It has been very tiring, yes."

"And then of course in addition there would be the realization that there is actually no tie like that of flesh and blood. No love like that between brother and sister."

"We have always been very close, Mr. Johnson."

"Of course. Unusually so, I daresay."

"Perhaps we have. Too close, perhaps."

"Neither of you could do very well without the other, I suppose. And it is so hard when one is ill."

"Very hard."

"I suppose you have never been so ill?"

"Never."

"But I daresay if you *were*, your brother would care for you as attentively as you care for him."

"If he could, yes."

"He has so much more to worry about. His children, his wife."

"He would hardly have much time for *me*."

"His wife would need him. She is so dependent, she could hardly spare him to care for his sister. Only his sister, when his wife and children need him at home."

"I am sure she would be most concerned if anything happened to me."

"Most concerned, yes. She is really very fond of you, I suppose."

"We are very fond of each other. Quite companionable."

"Perhaps your mutual concern over your brother brought you even closer together. You share one dear object, after all."

"Charles is very dear to both of us."

"Of course. His wife is probably with him now."

"I ought to go back."

"Not at all. If she is there, you can hardly be needed."

* * *

"Now then," said the landlady heartily, "here you are, back again much before you're wanted. My little joke," she added, looking at Paula's frown. "I am indeed a great joker. And you didn't stay long. Nothing to worry about with your sister, neither. She's up with the poor gentleman has been so ill, and I daresay gives him better medicine than any of us could, with the smile on her sweet face. And so you met Mr. Arnold?"

"Arnold? He said his name was Johnson."

"And so it is, if he says so. I'll be calling you Arnold or Heathen or something, give me my head; I never could remember a name and that's the truth. So you met him, whatever he chooses to call himself?"

"I ran into him by accident."

"So you did, dear, so you did. And you'll be wanting to know now where you can meet him next?"

"Nothing of the sort," said Paula stiffly. "I was about to go up—"

"To the high rock again? He won't be *there* by now. Tomorrow maybe. Try late tonight in front of the great fire, after the rest of us are abed. *There* you will find him."

"Certainly not," said Paula.

"Well, then it'll take you a while," said the landlady. "And the things he can tell you and all. Solid rock," she continued smoothly as Virginia came into the room, "and standing here since no one knows when."

"How is Charles?" Paula asked Virginia.

“Feeling much better, thank you,” Virginia said.

“I’ll just go up for a minute.”

“Please don’t,” said Virginia hastily. “I mean, he said he was going to try to sleep and it would be better not to disturb him.”

* * *

“And then of course there’s Virginia, so weak, and so safe.”

“She’s not entirely safe—”

“Not entirely. But for all you or I could do...”

“She’s very fond of me.”

“And very fond of Charles. But so dependent. So pretty, too, and so weak, and so fragile. Such a pretty girl.”

“I have been very necessary to her.”

“Of course now that Charles is better you will not be quite so necessary. They will have each other again.”

“That is as it should be.”

“As you say. That is as it should be. And you?”

“I shall go home again, I suppose.”

“Home?”

“I have a small apartment. I left there of course while Charles was so very ill. It was necessary for me to stay with Virginia.”

“But now you will go back?”

“I have not been asked to stay with Virginia.”

“They have each other again. And the children, and their home. I suppose they will feel sorry for you?”

“Sorry for me?”

“That you have gone, I mean. Sorry to be without you.”

“I suppose so.”

"See how the fire shines on the walls. It is perfectly safe here in this room, of course. This room is solid rock. It is only in the rest of the house that fire might be a danger. The rest of the house is of wood."

* * *

"Virginia, will you come exploring with me *today*?" Paula stood by the window; it was her daily habit now to take her breakfast there, sitting in the great wooden chair, where she could keep sight of the sea. During the day she found the sound and the smell and the sight of the sea almost a necessity for her, and at night she either sat late in the rock room with the great fire roaring before her and the sound of the sea all outside, or lay straight and silent on her narrow bed with the windows open onto the cliffs below and the sea almost in her room. "We've been here almost a week, and I don't believe you've so much as stepped outdoors."

"It makes me nervous," said Virginia. She smiled across the coffee jug at Paula. "I think I'm beginning to feel caught in by the island. Almost homesick for land on all sides instead of sea."

"Charles likes it."

"Sometimes," said Virginia. "Sometimes he's as much afraid as I am."

"Afraid, Virginia?"

"*You* know," Virginia said, gesturing vaguely. "You get to feeling so sort of cut off from everything. No way of escape. No way to get home again."

"I thought I'd run up and see Charles after breakfast," Paula said. "Is he sleeping?"

"Resting, anyway. Why don't you put it off until after lunch?"

"I will probably not be back. I intended to take a lunch with me and spend all day on the rocks."

"What can you find to *do* out there?"

“I find it stimulating, nothing but the sea and the rocks and nothing between them but me.”

“And do you run across the other guest?” Virginia asked innocently.

“I sometimes gather shells, but there are no very interesting ones.”

“You spoke once of another guest,” Virginia said insistently. “Didn’t you once mention an odd little man?”

“Suppose I just run up and say good morning to Charles, and spend just a minute trying to cheer him up?”

“He’s cheerful enough. Why don’t you wait till tonight?”

“I’d like to see him now, if you’re sure you don’t mind.”

Silently, Virginia followed Paula upstairs and into the room Virginia and Charles shared. Paula had been here daily since they came, but Charles had not yet come downstairs, protesting that he was convalescing well enough in his bed, with the smell of the sea in his room and its sound in his ears always, and the landlady’s good food brought to him regularly. He looked better, Paula thought; he had more color in his face — surprising, since he had not been outdoors or even had fresh air in the room — and he was astonishingly vigorous for someone who had been so very ill for such a long time.

“Good morning, Charles dear,” she said as she entered. “And how well you look today!”

“I feel splendidly well,” Charles said from the bed. He hoisted himself up slightly and turned his cheek for his sister’s morning kiss. “*You* look well, Paula.”

“I love it here. I’m afraid Virginia is bored, though.”

“Is she?” Charles smiled over Paula’s head at Virginia. “I don’t think so,” he said.

"You must try to get outdoors, Charles, and get nearer the sea. I can't tell you how invigorating I find it."

"Perhaps *you* do," Charles said. "Virginia and I prefer it indoors. We like our sea through windows."

"And *here*'s the poor gentleman's breakfast," said the landlady, bustling in with her tray. "Did he think I had forgotten him? When I was only waiting for hot corncakes from the oven? And see that you eat all of it, my poor Mr. Ellison, and we will have you well in no time at all."

"Will you have your breakfast, darling?" Virginia asked. She came closer to the bed. "Excuse me, Paula; let me come in here and see that his tray is right. Darling, are you hungry? I had such a wonderful breakfast downstairs."

"Good morning, Miss Ellison," said Mr. Johnson from the doorway. Paula looked up, over the heads of Charles and Virginia and the landlady and saw him, somehow taller, standing leaning against the doorway. "And how are *you* this morning?"

"I had eggs, and homemade sausage, just as you have, only I didn't have these wonderful corncakes. Just try one, darling. I believe Mrs. Carter made them especially for you."

"And how is your poor sick brother? *Is* he any better? And your sister-in-law, how is she?"

"Good morning, Mr. Johnson," Paula said.

"I beg your pardon, dear?" said Virginia, looking back at Paula over her shoulder. "Did you ask Charles something?"

"I doubt if she will bother with *me*, Miss Ellison. I doubt very much if she would ever be interested in me now."

Paula turned and stared, first at Charles and Virginia, who was bending over him laughing and feeding him, and then at the landlady, who was watching Paula silently and with an expression which might have been humorous.

“Mrs. Carter—” Paula said.

Mrs. Carter shrugged.

Mr. Johnson went on smoothly, “It had to be one or the other of you, you see; I told you I was waiting for your sister-in-law, but you *would* come first. It was your decision, you know; I would have been satisfied with either.”

“Just don’t try to answer him, dear,” Mrs. Carter whispered. “There’s no answer he’ll take.” She put a protective arm around Paula. “Try to hide behind me,” she said very softly.

“No use, Mrs. Carter,” he said, and smiled sadly. “No use at all, you know.” He nodded at Paula. “*She* knows,” he said, and went swiftly and silently away.

[c. *1951*]

A DAY IN THE JUNGLE

THE WHOLE PERFORMANCE of the first two hours was so shockingly, so abominably, easy, that her only vivid feeling about it was surprise that the institution of marriage might pretend to be stable upon such elusive foundations, as though the humiliation of the wedding and the bad dreams of the long nights and the hideous unprivate months were an end and not a means, as though two people sought one another out for no more than this, this surprise that it should all be so easy to leave one another. The other, fainter, emotion, hidden far beneath the surprise, she refused to identify as any kind of fear, but called it excitement instead.

It had been most pleasant packing her suitcase, consciously choosing those clothes she would not ordinarily wear in the middle of the week, the nice dresses and the good suit and — with a distant humorous nod at the popular interpretation of what her position was to be — her black evening dress, and the few pieces of really good jewelry she owned, thinking that perhaps she might not have another chance at her clothes, that they might be packed up and sent her, perhaps, or lumped in with other possessions and sold (item: one blue-and-green print house dress, coffee stain on right sleeve, two small safety pins on lapel) and wondering, briefly, if the nicely chosen, not expensive shoes and the hat so suitable for lunching with other young matrons might, after all, suit her now, since they had so obviously been bought from and for a married state. The suitcase had gone with her on her honeymoon and afterward on the vacations and incidental week ends in the country and to the hospital where she lost the baby, and had its accustomed place, much more than she had herself, on the top closet shelf;

taking it down was in itself an act of departure, dusting it, opening it to the scent of her traveling cologne, its reminiscence of trains, of hotel desks, of distant parts. She was able to get everything in, remembering handkerchiefs, toothbrush, stockings from the rack in the bathroom, which she had washed last night before it was clearly evident that she was leaving, and she had rinsed and hung them up innocently, as though she might never be going away again.

She had been very angry while she washed her stockings, and angry when she finished the dinner dishes and angry even before that, having her dinner alone, and the fact that he did not come home at all had not made her any the less angry, waiting there in her chair by the radio planning neat bitter things to say to him. ("Do you expect a wife to sit alone night after..." "If you prefer the company of your friends to..." "Before we were married you used to...") The phrasing of a note to him had been still another pleasure, since she knew by then that she was leaving and could say anything she pleased. She had written first, "Dear Don, I've decided I don't have to take this any more..." and had torn that one up, and had then written, "Don, I've had enough and I'm leaving," and had torn *that* one up, and had written, "I'm not going to stand for this any longer," and had of course torn *that* one up, and had finally written, "Dear Don, I know I'll be happier somewhere else," and had let that one do because already the enchantment of writing farewell notes was evaporating and she was restless to get on to something else. She had written "love, Elsa," very firmly at the foot of the note, set the note unfolded on his dresser and then on the table in the living room and finally on the telephone pad where they usually left messages for one another, and she carefully tore her previous notes into small pieces and put them into the garbage pail and emptied the coffee grounds onto them, so that Mrs. Hartford, coming in to clean this morning (for she had slept, finally, lying on the bed in her clothes next to the packed suitcase) might not be able to piece them together and know with relish that Mrs. Dayton had fumbled her farewell note before finally walking out on Mr. Dayton and no wonder, too. It was no more than Don deserved if Mrs. Hartford came before he came home and read the note on the telephone pad and met him at the door with knowing glances, watching with satisfaction from the corner of her eye while he in turn read the note, smiling to herself as he went bewildered from living room to bedroom, saw that the suitcase was certainly gone; she debated leaving her wedding ring on the dresser but decided at last that Mrs. Hartford was not trustworthy.

So it was ten o'clock in the morning, half an hour before Mrs. Hartford was due, when Elsa Dayton, leaving her husband as she had always suspected she might, went down the steps of her apartment house with her suitcase. She turned once and looked back up at the windows of what had been until now her home, and found them blank and unexciting as always, and thought, if living with Don had been a little bit more exciting...

Going to a hotel had always been part of leaving Don, because it was not necessary to explain to a hotel clerk, as it would be to a mother or a friend or an aunt, that she had left Don for once and all, and did not want to talk about it, and no, there was no particular reason, even his staying away so much, except that there had just come a point when she wanted to leave, and please, she did *not* want to talk about it.

She had almost no money. It occurred to her as she went to the corner to catch a taxi — something Don's true wife would not have done — that somehow with a crisis like this one ordinary problems were suspended, so that where yesterday she had not had enough money to do her week's shopping, and dared not charge more at the grocer's, she felt today that money was so small a worry, and no longer a concern of hers; Don must simply find a way of providing them both with money, and now that her interests no longer participated in his, she had abandoned the intention of making his meager funds go as far as possible. He was not a partner now, he was an opponent, and vulnerable here, and he could borrow money if he chose. Yesterday's inability to say to — for instance — Roger, in the office, "Can you let me borrow some money?" would vanish under this new way of life; perhaps Don was not a better credit risk because his wife had left him, but she suspected that the deep sympathetic mutual feelings of men about their wives would promote a fund for Don as surely as if his house had been struck by lightning.

Thinking these things for lack of anything else to think about — this was, after all, a new world for her, with new standards and probably new laws, and entering upon it suddenly, equipped with no more than a few dollars and a black evening dress in a suitcase, was a thing to be done warily and without prepared courses of action — she sat in the taxi with her suitcase beside her on the seat, and looked with wonder and delight at the familiar streets which led her from Don's apartment to the hotel she had chosen because (she did not admit this to herself) it figured so prominently in the gossip columns which she read avidly every morning.

She was wearing a dark-red wool dress and her beaver coat and high-heeled black shoes and a black hat which she described to herself, without any deliberate meaning, as flirtatious. She came into the hotel carrying her suitcase and felt that no one observed that she was a local housewife dressed up at ten-thirty in the morning, rather than some freed creature from another town, who might have thought as she went across the lobby, "Right *now*, at home, they're polishing the silver and setting up the plates, and here *I* am in a hotel being waited on and not doing a thing!" She registered at the desk, the first time she had ever done such a thing alone, without betraying anything except that she intended to spend a day or two in the hotel. The facts that she was admitted without comment or even an appraising look, that her room was number *808*, that the quarter she gave the bellboy was accepted with no more than a “Thank you, madam,” could not communicate any awareness of the unbelievable daring of her position. She had even signed her name “Elsa Masters Dayton.”

She was not quite, however, in the position of a visitor; she could not once in her room shower and change to another dress (she had only put this dress on half an hour before, after all, and had showered not ten minutes before *that*) and then go out to visit points of interest about the town. She had no shopping to do, no important items which she could find nowhere else but in town, and nothing she had been waiting and planning to do, no long-anticipated calls to pay. She did do, finally, what she might have done at home; she took off her dress and shoes and lay in her slip on the bed, reading a mystery story.

At one o’clock she dressed again and swung her coat over her shoulders and went out of her room and locked the door and went downstairs in the elevator, standing quietly without interest in other people, with the weight of her coat pulling her shoulders down. She walked into the cocktail lounge, stepping quickly with her high heels across the quiet lobby; she was not at all clear about what she intended to do, except that she knew surely that a cocktail before lunch would not today give her a headache. She chose a table, deliberately but with not more than a swift casual glance around, in a corner and hard against another table where a man (gray hair, she noticed in her one quick look, gray suit) was sitting alone, and when she sat down she thought, It’s as though we were strangers at a dinner party and had been seated next to one another and I have only to speak to him as though our hostess had mumbled both our names. She was acutely conscious of her pink nail polish and wondered, as she might have during the first uncomfortable minutes at a dinner table, if she might disgrace herself by spilling something on him. He was compelled, almost in self-defense, to help her with her coat when she struggled to shift it from her shoulders to the back of her seat, and she smiled at him and said kindly — perhaps he was shy— "They put these tables so close together, don't they?"

He smiled back at her and said, "They certainly do," which, if hardly a cosmopolitan answer, was at least civil and did not sound as though he regularly met lovely women who had nefarious designs upon him; he sounded, in fact, quite as though she reminded him of the wife of one of his younger friends, and she wondered briefly if she would have spoken to him at all if he had been Don's age, or if she had been married too long to know how to talk familiarly to younger men.

She told the waiter that she would like an old-fashioned, please, in the tone of one who regularly orders for herself and knows precisely what she wants, and then she turned to the man next to her and remarked, "I can never get used to this town for the first few days."

"*I* don't like it," he said immediately. "I'd be just as happy if I never had to *see* the place again."

"You're from the West, aren't you?"

"Chicago," he said. "And you?"

"Maine," she said; she *had* come from Maine originally.

"Nice country up there," he said. "Whereabouts in Maine?"

"A small town named Easton," she said. "Near Augusta."

"We drove through Maine one year," he said. "Spent three weeks."

"It's lovely country," she said.

"Beautiful," he said.

"Are you in town on business?"

"Only way they ever *get* me here," he said. "Give me Chicago every time."

"I've never been to Chicago," she said.

"Great town," he said.

It was the moment in the dinner-table conversation when she might properly have turned to the gentleman on her left and asked him where *he* was from, but failing that, she took up her cocktail and sipped at it, and accepted a cigarette and a light, and looked with interest around the room, and smiled at him because she could not think of anything to say. He seemed the very type of man she had expected to meet, without ever realizing it — middle-aged, and quiet, and respectable, a man for whom her black evening dress would be quite daring enough. Although her uneasiness in his presence had not quite worn off, and her larger, less-defined strange feeling (which she had called at various times since the night before, *anger*, and *excitement*, and *pleasure*) still remained at the back of her mind, hampering her free enjoyment of the moment, she leaned back against the soft leather of the chair and thought happily about the black evening dress.

"I'll be mighty glad to get home tomorrow," he said. ("At home, right now, they're all going out to lunch together from the office...")

"*I* wouldn't," she said. ("Mrs. Hartford had probably forgotten to do the kitchen shelves...") "I mean, I always hate to leave."

He hesitated, and she thought for a minute that he would say something indicating that perhaps he did *not* have to leave tomorrow, and then he said, "The town's all right if you just want to enjoy yourself. Shows, you know — nightclubs, and all that. No good for people like *me*, though."

"I don't believe *that*," she said, and thought, I am positively simpering.

"One thing you got to say for this town, though," he said, "people are always ready to help you. Taxi drivers and cops and even people on the street — always give you a hand. That way," he added, thinking deeply, "they're sort of like people out West. You know, out West everyone's more friendly, somehow."

"Perhaps I ought to go out West, then," she said.

"You'd like Chicago. Well," he said, and put out his cigarette, "time to get to work, I guess. I hate these late lunches — people here never seem to get around to eating till sometime in the afternoon. Home," he told her firmly, "we have our lunch at twelve sharp." He rose and half bowed to her. "Very pleasant," he said. "Hope you enjoy your stay."

"Thank you," she said. "And *you* have a nice trip home."

"Thank you," he said. "Good-by."

"Good-by," she said, and noticed that he had taken her check. She smiled deprecatingly at him and he waved gallantly, and she thought, at least he never dreamed I was anything but a nice lady, someone's wife on a vacation.

She lunched alone at the same table, although no one came to sit next to her. She had a second cocktail and although she felt that properly she might be eating strange sophisticated foods — subtle casseroles, spices, wine — she chose for herself a salad and coffee, and thought, at home I'd be having an egg. She lingered over her coffee, watching people come in and sit down, arrive late for appointments or early, drink or eat, speak to one another, laugh, apologize, greet acquaintances, go out again. No one bothered her; the waiter did not hover over her table indicating by his patient watchfulness that the management disapproved of attractive women sitting alone here for over an hour; her lunch, carefully chosen, would not cost more than she could pay, and she had a clear general impression of belonging in this scene of movement, of passage, that sitting here so quietly in the corner she had somehow achieved a status which enabled her to meet these moving creatures as equals.

This is what I have always wanted to do, she told herself with conscious satisfaction, this is the way I have been waiting to live, I have been intending to do this for a long time; right now at home Mrs. Hartford has finished eating whatever was in the refrigerator and is reading the paper, sitting at the kitchen table; perhaps Don is home already. This is where *I* belong, right here.

At about three o’clock she got up and took her coat; she had left enough of a tip for the waiter so that he came over quickly and pulled the table away and reached for her coat, but she shook her head and said, “I’ll carry it, thanks, it’s so warm,” for some reason not wishing him to know that she had only come down from upstairs. She went through the restaurant, not knowing where she was going but feeling strongly that she must certainly seem like a happy woman who was going to keep an agreeable appointment; she felt this so strongly that she almost believed that somehow, perhaps in the next minute or so, she would find herself appointed, engaged, entreated, and she hesitated in the lobby, wandering over to look into the windows of the sleek jewelry shop, stopped by the florist’s, and even spent a minute looking raptly at the hand-painted ties in the window of the men’s furnishings shop.

After a few minutes she was no longer able to persuade herself that she was waiting for someone and so she went back to her room, liking the thought that she had a completely private place here, with her own suitcase set down next to the dresser and her own book on the arm of the chair. She sat by the window for a few minutes enjoying almost as a visitor might the sounds of the traffic below, and she thought complacently that she might shower now, and change her clothes, and in an hour or so go downstairs and perhaps out onto the street, and wander watching people until she chose to go into some other quiet shining place and have her dinner. She might go to a movie afterward, or come back to her room, she might fall into conversation with someone and come back to her room briefly, excited and laughing, to change hurriedly into the black evening dress, brushing her hair with little dancing motions, touching herself with more perfume.

The phone by the bed rang shortly, and then again, and at first she thought it was part of her new life which had suddenly become so real that it was perfectly possible for some vaguely glimpsed stranger to be telephoning her now to ask her to dine, to dance, to go off to Italy, and then she thought could it be that man from Chicago? and then that he did not know her name and could hardly have left his luncheon appointment to follow her, and then she knew of course it was Don. As the phone rang again sharply, almost in Don's angry tones, she lifted her hand from it and turned away, but the realization that he would have to give her some money in any case made her turn back and answer it. "Hello?" she said, hoping until she heard his voice.

"Elsa?"

"Of course, Don."

"For heaven's sake, what are you *doing*? I've called half the hotels in town and your sister's, and scared them half to death."

"You should have read my note." I want to wear pretty clothes all day long, she was thinking, remembering him as she heard his voice, I want to be beautiful and free and luxurious.

"I *read* your note — what on earth is the matter?"

"Well, if you read my note then you know I'm not coming back." I shouldn't have said that, she thought in panic; he didn't ask me if I *was* coming back; suppose he had accepted the fact that I wasn't coming back and now I've given him the idea that I might...

"Don?" she said.

"Look," he said, and his voice was subdued, but she knew so well all the tones of all his voices that these changes no longer meant anything now to her; if Don hoped to convince her at this late date that he could be reasonable after she had offended him so deeply, she would not be deceived. "Suppose you just forget this whole thing?" he said.

Trying to make it sound as though it's all *my* fault, she thought. "I like it here," she said.

"Elsa," he began, and then stopped. "We can't talk over the phone," he said. "If you won't come back now why not at least meet me somewhere and we can sit down and talk sensibly?"

"No," she said childishly, and then smiled to herself, thinking that after all he had been at one time an engaging companion and since she could now afford to choose her own friends he would have to be very entertaining indeed to hold her attention. "Maybe I will," she said.

"You sound funny," he said. "Are you all right?"

"Let me see," she said, one finger reflectively at her cheek, as though he could see her. "I can be at Henry's Restaurant at seven. You may take me to dinner."

There was a short silence, and then he said, "Right. I'll be there at seven." He sounded exactly like a man making a date; perhaps, she thought jubilantly, he perceives that I am to be pursued rather than commanded, and she had already begun to sketch out mentally a more flattering version of the conversation with the man from Chicago, to tell him about at dinner.

"Good-by," she said.

“Mrs. Hartford broke two of the blue cups, by the way,” he said. “Good-by.”

As she hung up she was wondering, most daringly, if she might just possibly wear the black evening gown, but she knew that she could not afford to expose herself to his ridicule, particularly since the black evening gown was as familiar to him as it was to herself, and she decided reluctantly to put on again the dark-red dress she had worn away from home that morning.

She slept again, for an hour or so, and read her mystery story, and did her nails in a new dark-red polish to match the dress, and brushed her shoes. At five minutes to seven — it would certainly do no harm to keep him waiting for a minute or so — she slipped on her beaver coat and went out of the door of her room; she left her housecoat thrown across the bed and her slippers awry on the floor and powder on the glass top of the dresser and a handkerchief on the chair; her mystery story lay open across the arm of the chair and her used towel on the bathroom floor; she turned as she went out and decided to pick up everything when she came home.

She went down in the elevator as she had done before, very conscious that she was a lady who had chosen to dine out with a gentleman rather than having dinner sent up to her room, very much aware of the fact that for the first time she moved knowingly and of choice through a free world, that of all her life this alone was the day when she had followed a path she made alone; she walked across the lobby toward the outer doors with the feeling suddenly very strong that if she desired she might turn and without explanation to anyone leave the hotel by another door, or go even back to her room and refuse to answer the phone.

Free and at peace, she thought as the doorman held the door open for her and she passed out onto the street with dignity and a half-smile for the doorman’s enforced kindness; free and at peace and alone and no one to worry me; she had not gone ten steps from the doorway when the nagging small feeling which she knew clearly now as fear and which had been following her cautiously for hours, perhaps for weeks and years, stepped up suddenly as though it had been waiting outside the door for her, and walked along beside her. The loving concern with which she put her feet down one after another on the sidewalk became without perceptible change, terror — was the cement secure? Down below, perhaps no more than two or three feet below, was the devouring earth, unpredictable and shifty. The sidewalk was set only upon earth, might move under her feet and sink, carrying her down and alone into the wet choking ground, and no one to catch her arm or a corner of her coat and hold her back.

Above her, the neon signs swung dangerously, dipping down almost to her head, bringing their live shattering wires so close that she almost put up an arm to protect herself, and then remembered that a mere arm was no protection against live wires or the weight of the falling signs — could she run? A sign shortly ahead of her, advertising a delicatessen (and one knew how badly these places were cared for, a hand-to-mouth existence and let the insurance take care of the emergencies) was swaying dangerously and obviously loosening; carefully she estimated the direction of its fall, not daring to slow her steps for fear some slight change in timing might mean disaster, not daring to run, with no one to hide behind, no one to say “Watch out, there!” If she could pass under without looking up she was perhaps safe — but beyond, the shuddering of the traffic had shaken a sign reading SHOE REPAIR; was that a wire swinging wild?

She pulled her coat tighter around her, looking from side to side. She was almost alone on this block, and she told herself that it was an hour when most people were at home or in restaurants or at least somewhere not on the streets, and then it came to her that it would be generally regarded as fortunate that only one woman was going down the street when the sign fell; suppose it had been during a heavy traffic hour, people would tell one another, shivering pleasantly and knowing that they rarely passed along this particular street, suppose it had been sometime when crowds of other people were near, suppose fifteen people had been under the sign when it fell instead of just that poor woman; well, they would say to one another wisely, lightning never strikes twice in the same place, at least *that* street is safe for a while.

She saw herself turning and going back to her hotel, explaining to the desk clerk and the elevator operator that she had changed her mind about going out, that it looked like rain or that she had sprained her ankle or that she felt a cold coming on? She turned once and saw with sinking horror the precarious rocking of the signs overhead, the dangerous slipping sideways of the upper stories of the buildings, the final and unutterable emptiness of the street; what can I do? she asked herself, who will help me? She could hear in her mind the proprietor of the delicatessen berating himself for not having taken care of his sign when he first noticed it was insecurely fastened, explaining to the police and the doctors and the faces in the crowd that he never dreamed it might fall, telling the strangers looking with grim curiosity at the poor woman that it had been there without falling for twelve, fifteen years, and it seemed to her that she could hear the strangers in the crowd telling one another, “Well, that’s the way it goes — perfectly all right for fifteen years and then one day — it’s all over. Who was she, do you know?”

What am I doing? she wondered abruptly; this is madness, this is idiotic; I am not supposed to be *afraid* of anything; I am a free person, and the path I have chosen for myself does not include fear. I am walking down the street because it is a pleasant walk to the restaurant where I am meeting a fascinating man for dinner. I have been down this street before and nothing happened to me or to anyone else, and if anything happens tonight it might just as well happen to the next person instead of me. How have I managed to stay safe this long? she wondered.

She was struck by the thought of how suddenly visible she was. An enemy, hidden in a second-floor room, peering out through the half-open window, could shoot her easily even with a small pistol and most probably escape and never be detected; not even an enemy, but a stranger, mistaking her for someone else, never knowing until later that she was the wrong one, the one who need not have been killed. Or, even worse, a madman, chuckling and raising the gun and estimating, telling himself he would shoot the tenth person who came, or the first woman who walked by wearing a fur coat, or anyone who glanced upward at his window where he waited unseen, shaken with silent laughter. Then a window ahead showed movement; was he there? Perhaps in the car turning into the street, the red car slowing down not for the corner, perhaps looking out the back window aiming carefully to compensate for the movement of the car, and he would be finished and away while the strangers passing a block away stopped and stared, and screamed, and then hurried, too late to be of any assistance.

What, on the other hand, was to prevent the red car, or any other, from driving up onto the sidewalk and crushing her against the side of the building? These things *did* happen, and perhaps the people they happened to had wondered, looking up, if the red car were not coming dangerously close to the curb, and then thought, that crazy driver ought to be arrested, and then, in the last second of sudden panic, tried to turn, seeing at the last the horrified face of the driver, pulling at the useless wheel and calling for help while the passers-by, useless against the weight of the car, watched in sickness, moving against one another and turning away their heads; or — suppose a pane of glass fell suddenly from a window and crashed shatteringly down onto her head without her ever seeing it fall? Or if she slipped suddenly while she was watching the red car and the buildings, turned her ankle in the high-heeled shoes and fell and smashed her face against the stone while people going by laughed for a minute before hesitating and then realizing...

Or, see, the trolley coming. It swayed dangerously from side to side; was it going to fall sideways, its steel and glass construction bending out of shape against the ground; that whole heavy weight would have to be moved before they could rescue anyone trapped beneath it, and people tomorrow might tell one another, “Lucky there was only this one woman going down the street — suppose there had been a crowd? They say she screamed for half an hour before...” Unidentified explosions had happened before, many times. People went quietly down a street, on their way to dinner, not expecting anything except possibly being late, and suddenly — it might be a gas stove left on, or just one of those incredible coincidences, of air and pressure and a harmless household preparation left uncovered, and of course the manufacturers could disclaim responsibility and deplore the tragedy — and the world buckled top and bottom, there was only a convulsive, brain-splitting terror, and there was the restaurant ahead, and there was no other way to go except on and inside, hesitating only for a moment before the heavy doors which could so easily slip their hinges and instead of swinging docilely, fall flatly and with full weight...

Don was there, waving tentatively from across the room. Suddenly the world fell into place outside, and she waved back; he was so wonderfully safe and familiar in the worn gray suit she had seen as many times as he had seen the red dress she was wearing; she waved and smiled and thought, I have been alone for so long.

PAJAMA PARTY

It was planned by Jannie herself. I was won over reluctantly, by much teasing and promises of supernatural good behavior; as a matter of fact Jannie even went so far as to say that if she could have a pajama party she would keep her room picked up for one solid month, a promise so far beyond the realms of possibility that I could only believe that she wanted the pajama party more than anything else in the world. My husband thought it was a mistake. “You are making a terrible, an awful mistake,” he said to me. “And don’t try to say I didn’t tell you so.” My older son Laurie told me it was a mistake. “Man,” he said, “*this* you will regret. For the rest of your life you will be saying to yourself ‘Why did I let that dopey girl ever *ever* have a pajama party that night?’ For the rest of your life. When you’re an old lady you will be saying—”

“What can I do?” I said. “I promised.” We were all at the breakfast table, and it was seven-thirty on the morning of Jannie’s eleventh birthday. Jannie sat unhearing, her spoon poised blissfully over her cereal, her eyes dreamy with speculation over what was going to turn up in the packages to be presented that evening after dinner. Her list of wanted birthday presents had included a live pony, a pair of roller skates, high-heeled shoes of her very own, a make-up kit with real lipstick, a record player and records, and a dear little monkey to play with, and any or all of these things might be in the offing. She sighed, and set down her spoon, and sighed.

“You know of course,” Laurie said to me, “I have the room right next to her? I’m going to be sleeping in there like I do every night? You know I’m going to be in my bed trying to sleep?” He shuddered. “Giggle,” he said.

“Giggle, giggle, giggle, giggle, giggle, giggle. Two, three o’clock in the morning — giggle giggle giggle. A human being can’t bear it.”

Jannie focused her eyes on him. “Why don’t we burn up this boy’s birth certificate?” she asked.

“Giggle, giggle,” Laurie said.

Barry spoke, waving his toast. “When Jannie gets her birthday presents can I play with it?” he asked. “If I am very very careful can I please play with just the—”

Everyone began to talk at once to drown him out. “Giggle, giggle,” Laurie shouted. “Don’t say I didn’t warn you,” my husband said loudly. “Anyway I promised,” I said. “Happy birthday dear sister,” Sally sang. Jannie giggled.

“There,” Laurie said. “You hear her? All night long — five of them.” Shaking his head as one who has been telling them and telling them and *telling* them not to bring that wooden horse through the gates of Troy, he stamped off to get his schoolbooks and his trumpet. Jannie sighed happily. Barry opened his mouth to speak and his father and Sally and I all said “Shhh.”

Jannie had to be excused from her cereal, because she was too excited to eat. It was a cold frosty morning, and I forced the girls into their winter coats and warm hats, and put Barry into his snow suit. Laurie, who believes that he is impervious to cold, came downstairs, said, “Mad, I tell you, mad,” sympathetically to me, “ ‘By, cat,” to his father, and went out the back door toward his bike, ignoring my frantic insistence that he put on some kind of a jacket or at least a sweater.

I checked that teeth had been brushed, hair combed, handkerchiefs secured, told the girls to hold Barry’s hand crossing the street, told Barry to hold the girls’ hands crossing the street, put Barry’s mid-morning cookies into his jacket pocket, reminded Jannie for the third time about her spelling book, held the dogs so they could not get out when the door was opened, told everyone good-by and happy birthday again to Jannie, and watched from the kitchen window while they made their haphazard way down the driveway, lingering, chatting, stopping to point to things. I opened the door once more to call to them to move along, they would be late for school, and they disregarded me. I called to hurry *up*, and for a minute they moved more quickly, hopping, and then came to the end of the driveway and onto the sidewalk where they merged at once into the general traffic going to school, the collection of red hoods and blue jackets and plaid caps that goes past every morning and comes past again at noontime and goes back after lunch and returns at last, lingering, at three o'clock. I came back to the table and sat down wearily, reaching for the coffeepot. "Five of them are too many," my husband explained. "One would have been quite enough."

"You can't have a pajama party with just one guest," I said sullenly. "And anyway no matter who she invited the other three would have been offended."

By lunchtime I had set up four cots, two of them borrowed from a neighbor who was flatly taken aback when she heard what I wanted them for. "I think you must be crazy," she said. Jannie's bedroom is actually two rooms, one small and one, which she calls her library because her bookcase is in there, much larger. I put one cot in her bedroom next to her bed, which left almost no room in there to move around. The other three cots I lined up in her library, making a kind of dormitory effect. Beyond Jannie's library is the guest room, and all the bedrooms except Laurie's are on the other side of the guest room. Laurie's room is separated by only the thinnest wall from Jannie's library. I used all my colored sheets and flowered pillowcases to make up the five beds, and every extra blanket in the house; I finally had to use the pillows from the couch.

When Jannie came home from school I made her lie down and rest, pointing out in one of the most poignant understatements of my life that she would probably be up late that night. In fifteen minutes she was downstairs asking if she could get dressed for her party. I said her party was not going to start until eight o'clock and to take an apple and go lie down again. In another ten minutes she was down to explain that she would probably be too excited to dress later and it would really be only common sense to put her party dress on now. I said if she came downstairs again before dinner was on the table I would personally call her four guests and cancel the pajama party. She finally rested for half an hour or so in the chair by the upstairs phone, talking to her friend Carole.

She was of course unable to eat her dinner, although she had chosen the menu. She nibbled at a piece of lamb, rearranged her mashed potatoes, and told her father and me that she could not understand how we had endured as many birthdays as we had. Her father said that he personally had gotten kind of used to them, and that as a matter of fact a certain quality of excitement did seem to go out of them after — say — thirty, and Jannie sighed unbelievingly.

"One more birthday like this would *kill* her," Laurie said. He groaned. "Carole," he said, as one telling over a fearful list, "Kate. Laura. Linda, Jannie. You must be *crazy*," he said to me.

"I suppose your friends are so much?" Jannie said. "I suppose Ernie didn't get sent down to Miss Corcoran's office six times today for throwing paper wads? I suppose Charlie—"

"You didn't seem to think Charlie was so bad, walking home from school," Laurie said. "I guess that wasn't *you* walking with—"

Jannie turned pink. “Does my own brother have any right to insult me on my own birthday?” she asked her father.

In honor of Jannie’s birthday Sally helped me clear the table, and Jannie sat in state with her hands folded, waiting. When the table was cleared we left Jannie there alone, and assembled in the study. While my husband lighted the candles on the pink-and-white cake, Sally and Barry took from the back of the closet the gifts they had chosen themselves and lovingly wrapped. Barry’s gift was clearly a leathercraft set, since his most careful wrapping had been unable to make the paper go right round the box, and the name showed clearly. Sally had three books. Laurie had an album of records he had chosen himself. (“This is for my *sister*,” he had told the clerk in the music store, most earnestly, with an Elvis Presley record in each hand, “for my sister — not me, my *sister.*”) Laurie also had to carry the little blue record player which my husband and I had decided was a more suitable gift for our elder daughter than a dear little monkey or even a pair of high-heeled shoes. I carried the boxes from the two sets of grandparents, one holding a flowered quilted skirt and a fancy blouse, and the other holding a stiff crinoline petticoat. With the cake leading, we filed into the dining room where Jannie sat. “Happy birthday to you,” we sang, and Jannie looked once and then leaped past us to the phone. “Be there in a minute,” she said, and then, “Carole? Carole, listen, I *got* it, the record player. ‘By.”

By a quarter to eight Jannie was dressed in the new blouse and skirt, over the petticoat, Barry was happily taking apart the leathercraft set, the record player had been plugged in and we had heard, more or less involuntarily, four sides of Elvis Presley. Laurie had shut himself in his room, dissociating himself utterly from the festivities. “I was willing to *buy* them,” he explained, “I even spent good money out of the bank, but no one can make me *listen*.”

I took a card table up to Jannie's room and squeezed it in among the beds; on it I put a pretty cloth and a bowl of apples, a small dish of candy, a plate of decorated cupcakes, and an ice bucket in which were five bottles of grape soda imbedded in ice. Jannie brought her record player upstairs and put it on the table and Laurie plugged it in for her on condition that she would not turn it on until he was safely back in his room. With what Laurie felt indignantly was an absolute and complete disregard for the peace of mind and healthy sleep of a cherished older son I put a deck of fortunetelling cards on the table, and a book on the meaning of dreams.

Everything was ready, and Jannie and her father and I were sitting apprehensively in the living room when the first guest came. It was Laura. She was dressed in a blue party dress, and she brought Jannie a charm bracelet which Jannie put on. Then Carole and Linda arrived together, one wearing a green party dress and the other a fancy blouse and skirt, like Jannie. They all admired Jannie's new blouse and skirt, and one of them had brought her a book and the other had brought a dress and hat for her doll. Kate came almost immediately afterward. She was wearing a wide skirt like Jannie's, and she had a crinoline, too. She and Jannie compared crinolines, and each of them insisted that the other's was much, *much* prettier. Kate had brought Jannie a pocketbook with a penny inside for luck. All the girls carried overnight bags but Kate, who had a small suitcase. "You'll think I'm going to stay for a *month*, the stuff I brought," she said, and I felt my husband shudder.

Each of the girls complimented, individually, each item of apparel on each of the others. It was conceded that Jannie's skirt, which came from California, was of a much more advanced style than skirts obtainable in Vermont. The pocketbook was a most fortunate choice, they agreed, because it perfectly matched the little red flowers in Jannie's skirt. Laura's shoes were the prettiest anyone had *ever* seen. Linda's party dress was of orlon, which all of them simply *adored*. Linda said if she *did* say it herself, the ruffles never got limp. Carole was wearing a necklace which no one could *possibly* tell was not made of real pearls. Linda said that we had the *nicest* house, she was always telling her mother and father that she wished they had one just like it. My husband said we would sell any time. Kate said our dogs were just *darling*, and Laura said she *loved* that green chair. I said somewhat ungraciously that they had all of them spent a matter of thousands of hours in our house and the green chair was no newer or prettier than it had been the last time Laura was here, when she was bouncing up and down on the seat. Jannie said hastily that there were cupcakes and Elvis Presley records up in her room, and they were gone. They went up the back stairs like a troop of horses, saying "Cupcakes, cupcakes."

Sally and Barry were in bed, but permitted to stay awake because it was Friday night and Jannie's birthday. Barry had taken Jannie's leathercraft set up to his room, planning to make his dear sister a pair of moccasins. Because Sally and Barry were not invited to the party I took them each a tray with one cupcake, a glass of fruit juice, and three candies. Sally asked if she could play *her* phonograph while she read fairy tales and ate her cupcake and I said certainly, since in the general air of excitement prevailing I did not think that even Barry would fall asleep for a while yet. As I started downstairs Barry called after me to ask if *he* could play *his* phonograph and of course I could hardly say no.

When I got downstairs my husband had settled down to reading freshman themes in the living room. "Everything seems..." he said; I believe he was going to finish "quiet," but Elvis Presley started then from Jannie's room. There was a howl of fury from Laurie's room, and then *his* phonograph started; to answer Elvis Presley he had chosen an old Louis Armstrong record, and he was holding his own. From the front of the house upstairs drifted down the opening announcement of “Peter and the Wolf,” from Sally, and then, distantly, from Barry’s room the crashing chords which heralded (blast off!) “Space Men on the Moon.”

“What did you say?” I asked my husband.

“Oh, when the saints, come marching in...”

“I said it seemed quiet,” my husband yelled.

“The cat, by a clarinet in a loooow register...”

“I want you, I need you...”

“Prepare for blast: five — four — three — two—”

“I want to be in their number...”

“It sure does,” I yelled back.

“Boom.” Barry’s rocket was in space.

Barry took control for a minute, because he can sing every word of (blast off!) “Space Men on the Moon,” but then the wolf came pacing up to Peter’s gate, Jannie switched to “Blue Suede Shoes,” and Laurie took out his trumpet. He played without a mute, ordinarily forbidden in the house, so for a few minutes he was definitely ascendant, even though a certain undeniable guitar beat intruded from Jannie, but then Jannie and her guests began to sing and Laurie faltered, lost the Saints, fell irresistibly into “Blue Suede Shoes,” cursed, picked up the Saints, and finally conceded defeat in time for four — three — two — one — Boom. Peter’s gay strain came through clearly for a minute and then Jannie finished changing records and our house rocked to its foundations with “Heartbreak Hotel.”

“Mommy,” Sally called down, “I can’t even hear the hunters coming.”

“Blast off!”

Laurie’s door slammed and he came pounding down the back stairs and into the living room. He was carrying his record player and his trumpet. “Dad,” he said pathetically.

His father nodded. “Play the loudest,” he said.

“Got you, man.” They finally decided on Duke Ellington, and I went to sit in the kitchen with all the doors shut so that all I could hear was a kind of steady combined beat which shivered the window frames and got the pots and pans crashing together softly where they hung on the wall. When it got close to nine-thirty I came out to check on Sally and Barry, and found that Sally, fading but grim, had taken off “Peter and the Wolf” and put on another record which featured a kind of laughing woodpecker, but she was getting sleepy. I told her good night, and went on to Barry’s room, where Barry had fallen asleep in his space suit somewhere on the dim craters of the moon, fragments of leather all over his bed. I closed his phonograph, covered him, and by the time I came back to Sally she was asleep, with her fairy-tale book open on her stomach and her kitten next to her cheek on the pillow. I put away her book, and moved the kitten to the foot of the bed, where he waited until I was convincingly on the stairs going down again and then moved softly, tiptoeing, back onto Sally’s pillow. Sally wiggled comfortably, the kitten purred, and I went on downstairs to find Laurie and my husband relaxing over “Take the A Train.”

Laurie was about to change the record when he hesitated, lifted his head, listened, and looked at his father. His father was listening too. The phonograph upstairs had stopped, and Laurie shook his head gloomily. “Now it comes,” he said.

He was right.

After about half an hour I went to the foot of the back stairs and tried to call up to the girls to be quiet, but they could not hear me. They were apparently using the fortunetelling cards, because I could hear someone calling on a tall dark man and someone else remarking bitterly upon jealousy from a friend. I went halfway up the stairs and shouted, but they still could not hear me. I went to the top and pounded on the door and I could have been banging my head against a stone wall. I could hear the name of a young gentleman of Laurie's acquaintance being bandied about lightly by the ladies inside, coupled — I think — with Laura's name and references to a certain cake-sharing incident at recess, and insane shrieks, presumably from the maligned Laura. Then Kate brought up another name, joining it with Linda's, and the voices rose, Linda disclaiming. I banged both fists on the door, and there was silence for a second until someone said, "Maybe it's your *brother*," and there was a great screaming of "Go away! Stay out! Don't come in!"

"Joanne," I said, and there was absolute silence.

"Yes, mother?" said Jannie at last.

"May I come in?" I asked gently.

"Oh, yes," said all the little girls.

I opened the door and went in. They were all sitting on the two beds in Jannie's room. The needle arm had been taken off the record, but I could see Elvis Presley going around and around. All the cupcakes were gone, and so was the candy. The fortunetelling cards were scattered over the two beds. Jannie was wearing her pink shortie pajamas, which were certainly too light for that cold night. Linda was wearing blue shortie pajamas. Kate was wearing college-girl-type ski pajamas. Laura was wearing a lace-trimmed nightgown, white, with pink roses. Carole was wearing yellow shortie pajamas. Their hair was mussed, their cheeks were pink, they were crammed uncomfortably together onto the two beds, and they were clearly awake long after their several bedtimes.

“Don’t you think,” I said, “that you had better get some sleep?”

“Oh, nooooo,” they all said, and Jannie added, “The party’s just *beginning*.” They were like a pretty bouquet of femininity, and I said — with what I knew Laurie would find a deplorable lack of firmness — that they could stay up for just a few minutes more.

“Dickie,” Kate whispered, clearly referring to some private joke, and all the little girls dissolved into helpless giggles, all except Carole, who cried out indignantly, “I did *not*, I never *did*, I *don’t*.”

Downstairs I said nostalgically to my husband and Laurie, “I can remember, when I was about Jannie’s age—”

“I just hope the neighbors are all asleep,” my husband said. “Or maybe they just won’t know it’s coming from here.”

“Probably everyone in the neighborhood saw those characters coming in,” Laurie said.

“Mommy,” Jannie said urgently from the darkness of the dining room. Startled, I hurried in.

“Listen,” she said, “something’s gone *terribly* wrong.”

“What’s the matter?”

“Shh,” Jannie said. “It’s Kate and Linda. I thought they would both sleep in my library but now Kate isn’t talking to Linda because Linda took her lunch box today in school and said she didn’t and wouldn’t give it back so now Kate won’t sleep with Linda.”

“Well, then, why not put Linda—”

“Well, you see, I was going to have Carole in with me because really only don’t tell the others, but really she’s my *best* friend of all of them only now I can’t put Kate and Linda together and—”

“Why not put one of them in with you?”

“Well, I *can’t* put Carole in with Laura.”

"Why not?" I was getting tired of whispering.

"Well, because they *both* like Jimmy *Watson*."

"Oh," I said.

"And anyway Carole's wearing a shortie and Kate and Laura *aren't*."

"Look," I said, "how about I sneak up right now through the front hall and make up the guest-room bed? Then you can put someone in there. Jimmy Watson, maybe."

"*Mother*," Jannie turned bright red.

"Sorry," I said. "Take a pillow from one of the beds in your library. Put someone in the guest room. Keep them busy for a few minutes and I'll have it ready. I just hope I have two more sheets."

"Oh, *thank* you." Jannie turned, and then stopped. "Mother?" she said. "Don't think from what I said that *I* like Jimmy Watson."

"The thought never crossed my mind," I said.

I raced upstairs and found two sheets; they were smallish, and not colored, which meant that they were the very bottom of the pile, but as I closed the guest-room door behind me I thought optimistically that at least Jannie's problems were solved if I excepted Jimmy Watson and the dangerous rivalry of Carole, who is a natural platinum blonde.

Laurie played "Muskrat Ramble." Jannie came down to the dining room again in about fifteen minutes. "Shh," she said, when I came in to talk to her. "Kate and Linda want to sleep together in the guest room."

"But I thought you just said that Kate and Linda—"

"But they made up and Kate apologized for taking Linda's lunch box and Linda apologized for thinking she did, and they're all friends now except Laura is kind of mad because now Kate says she likes Harry Benson better."

"Better than Laura?" I asked stupidly.

"Oh, *Mother*. Better than Jimmy Watson, of course. Except *I* think Harry Benson is goony."

"If he was the one on patrol who let your brother Barry go across the street by himself he certainly *is* goony. As a matter of fact if there is one word I would automatically and instinctively apply to young Harry Benson it would surely be—"

"Oh, *Mother*. He is *not*."

I had been kept up slightly past my own bedtime. "All right," I said. "Harry Benson is not goony and it is fine with me if Kate and Carole sleep in the guest room if they don't—"

"Kate and *Linda*."

"Kate and Linda. If they don't, if they *only* don't giggle any more."

"*Thank* you. And may I sleep in the guest room too?"

"What?"

"It's a big bed. And we wanted to talk very quietly about—"

"Never mind," I said. "Sleep anywhere, but *sleep*."

She was downstairs again about ten minutes later. Laurie and his father were eating crackers and cheese and discussing the probable derivation of "cool," as in "cool jazz."

"Listen," Jannie said in the dining room, "can Kate sleep in the guest room too?"

"But I thought Kate was already—"

"Well, she was, but they couldn't sleep, because Kate *did* take Linda's lunch box and she broke the Thermos and Carole saw her so Carole told Linda and then Kate wouldn't let Carole in the guest room but I can't leave Carole with Laura because Laura said Carole's shortie pajamas were goony and Linda went and told her."

"That was unkind of Linda," I said, floundering.

"So then Carole said Linda—"

"Never mind, I said. "Just tell me who is sleeping where."

"Well, Kate and I are sleeping in the guest room, because now everyone else is mad at Kate. And Carole is mad at Linda so Carole is sleeping in my room and Linda and Laura are sleeping in my library, except I just really don't know *what* will happen," she sighed, "if anyone tells Laura what Linda said about Jerry. Jerry Harper."

"But can't Carole change with Linda and sleep with Laura?"

"Oh, *Mother*. You *know* about Carole and Laura and Jimmy Watson."

"I guess I just forgot for a minute," I said.

"Well," Jannie said, "I just thought I'd let you know where everyone was."

About half-past one Laurie held up his hand and said, "Listen." I had been trying to identify the sensation, and thought it was like the sudden lull in a heavy wind which has been beating against the trees and the windows for hours, and then stops. "Can it be possible?" my husband said.

Laurie began to put his records away, moving very softly. I went up the back stairs in my stocking feet, not making a sound, and opened the door to Jannie's room, easing it to avoid the slightest squeak.

Jannie was peacefully asleep in her own bed. The other bed in her room and the three beds in her library were empty. Reflecting upon the cataclysmic powers of Jimmy Watson's name, I found the four other girls all asleep on the guest-room bed. None of them was covered, but there was no way of putting a blanket over them without smothering somebody. I closed the window, and tiptoed away, and came downstairs to tell Laurie it was safe, he could go to bed now.

Then I got myself upstairs and fell into bed, and slept soundly until seventeen minutes past three by the bedroom clock, when I was awakened by Jannie.

“Kate feels sick,” she said. “You’ve got to get up right away and take her home.”

LOUISA, PLEASE COME HOME

"Louisa," my mother's voice came over the radio; it frightened me badly for a minute. "Louisa," she said, "please come home. It's been three long long years since we saw you last; Louisa, I promise you that everything will be all right. We all miss you so. We want you back again. Louisa, please come home."

Once a year. On the anniversary of the day I ran away. Each time I heard it I was frightened again, because between one year and the next I would forget what my mother's voice sounded like, so soft and yet strange with that pleading note. I listened every year. I read the stories in the newspapers — "Louisa Tether vanished one year ago" — or two years ago, or three; I used to wait for the twentieth of June as though it were my birthday. I kept all the clippings at first, but secretly; with my picture on all the front pages I would have looked kind of strange if anyone had seen me cutting it out. Chandler, where I was hiding, was close enough to my old home so that the papers made a big fuss about all of it, but of course the reason I picked Chandler in the first place was because it was a big enough city for me to hide in.

I didn't just up and leave on the spur of the moment, you know. I always knew that I was going to run away sooner or later, and I had made plans ahead of time, for whenever I decided to go. Everything had to go right the first time, because they don't usually give you a second chance on that kind of thing and anyway if it had gone wrong I would have looked like an awful fool, and my sister Carol was never one for letting people forget it when they made fools of themselves. I admit I planned it for the day before

Carol's wedding on purpose, and for a long time afterward I used to try and imagine Carol's face when she finally realized that my running away was going to leave her one bridesmaid short. The papers said that the wedding went ahead as scheduled, though, and Carol told one newspaper reporter that her sister Louisa would have wanted it that way; "She would never have meant to spoil my wedding," Carol said, knowing perfectly well that that would be exactly what I'd meant. I'm pretty sure that the first thing Carol did when they knew I was missing was go and count the wedding presents to see what I'd taken with me.

Anyway, Carol's wedding may have been fouled up, but *my* plans went fine — better, as a matter of fact, than I had ever expected. Everyone was hurrying around the house putting up flowers and asking each other if the wedding gown had been delivered, and opening up cases of champagne and wondering what they were going to do if it rained and they couldn't use the garden, and I just closed the front door behind me and started off. There was only one bad minute when Paul saw me; Paul has always lived next door and Carol hates him worse than she does me. My mother always used to say that every time I did something to make the family ashamed of me Paul was sure to be in it somewhere. For a long time they thought he had something to do with my running away, even though he told over and over again how hard I tried to duck away from him that afternoon when he met me going down the driveway. The papers kept calling him "a close friend of the family," which must have overjoyed my mother, and saying that he was being questioned about possible clues to my whereabouts. Of course he never even knew that I was running away; I told him just what I told my mother before I left — that I was going to get away from all the confusion and excitement for a while; I was going downtown and would probably have a sandwich somewhere for supper and go to a movie. He bothered me for a minute there, because of course he wanted to come too. I hadn't meant to take the bus right there on the corner but with Paul tagging after me and wanting me to wait while he got the car so we could drive out and have dinner at the Inn, I had to get away fast on the first thing that came along, so I just ran for the bus and left Paul standing there; that was the only part of my plan I had to change.

I took the bus all the way downtown, although my first plan had been to walk. It turned out much better, actually, since it didn't matter at all if anyone saw me on the bus going downtown in my own home town, and I managed to get an earlier train out. I bought a round-trip ticket; that was important, because it would make them think I was coming back; that was always the way they thought about things. If you did something you had to have a reason for it, because my mother and my father and Carol never did anything unless *they* had a reason for it, so if I bought a round-trip ticket the only possible reason would be that I was coming back. Besides, if they thought I was coming back they would not be frightened so quickly and I might have more time to hide before they came looking for me. As it happened, Carol found out I was gone that same night when she couldn't sleep and came into my room for some aspirin, so at the time I had less of a head start than I thought.

I knew that they would find out about my buying the ticket; I was not silly enough to suppose that I could steal off and not leave any traces. All my plans were based on the fact that the people who get caught are the ones who attract attention by doing something strange or noticeable, and what I intended all along was to fade into some background where they would never see me. I knew they would find out about the round-trip ticket, because it was an odd thing to do in a town where you've lived all your life, but it was the last unusual thing I did. I thought when I bought it that knowing about that round-trip ticket would be some consolation to my mother and father. They would know that no matter how long I stayed away at least I always had a ticket home. I did keep the return-trip ticket quite a while, as a matter of fact. I used to carry it in my wallet as a kind of lucky charm.

I followed everything in the papers. Mrs. Peacock and I used to read them at the breakfast table over our second cup of coffee before I went off to work.

“What do you think about this girl disappeared over in Rockville?” Mrs. Peacock would say to me, and I’d shake my head sorrowfully and say that a girl must be really crazy to leave a handsome, luxurious home like that, or that I had kind of a notion that maybe she didn’t leave at all — maybe the family had her locked up somewhere because she was a homicidal maniac. Mrs. Peacock always loved anything about homicidal maniacs.

Once I picked up the paper and looked hard at the picture. “Do you think she looks something like me?” I asked Mrs. Peacock, and Mrs. Peacock leaned back and looked at me and then at the picture and then at me again and finally she shook her head and said, “No. If you wore your hair longer, and curlier, and your face was maybe a little fuller, there might be a little resemblance, but then if you looked like a homicidal maniac I wouldn’t ever of let you in my house.”

“I think she kind of looks like me,” I said.

“You get along to work and stop being vain,” Mrs. Peacock told me.

Of course when I got on the train with my round-trip ticket I had no idea how soon they’d be following me, and I suppose it was just as well, because it might have made me nervous and I might have done something wrong and spoiled everything. I knew that as soon as they gave up the notion that I was coming back to Rockville with my round-trip ticket they would think of

Crain, which is the largest city that train went to, so I only stayed in Crain part of one day. I went to a big department store where they were having a store-wide sale; I figured that would land me in a crowd of shoppers and I was right; for a while there was a good chance that I'd never get any farther away from home than the ground floor of that department store in Crain. I had to fight my way through the crowd until I found the counter where they were having a sale of raincoats, and then I had to push and elbow down the counter and finally grab the raincoat I wanted right out of the hands of some old monster who couldn't have used it anyway because she was much too fat. You would have thought she had already paid for it, the way she howled. I was smart enough to have the exact change, all six dollars and eighty-nine cents, right in my hand, and I gave it to the salesgirl, grabbed the raincoat and the bag she wanted to put it in, and fought my way out again before I got crushed to death.

That raincoat was worth every cent of the six dollars and eighty-nine cents; I wore it right through until winter that year and not even a button ever came off it. I finally lost it the next spring when I left it somewhere and never got it back. It was tan, and the minute I put it on in the ladies' room of the store I began thinking of it as my "old" raincoat; that was good. I had never before owned a raincoat like that and my mother would have fainted dead away. One thing I did that I thought was kind of clever. I had left home wearing a light short coat; almost a jacket, and when I put on the raincoat of course I took off my light coat. Then all I had to do was empty the pockets of the light coat into the raincoat and carry the light coat casually over to a counter where they were having a sale of jackets and drop it on the counter as though I'd taken it off a little way to look at it and had decided against it. As far as I ever knew no one paid the slightest attention to me, and before I left the counter I saw a woman pick up my jacket and look it over; I could have told her she was getting a bargain for three ninety-eight.

It made me feel good to know that I had gotten rid of the light coat. My mother picked it out for me and even though I liked it and it was expensive it was also recognizable and I had to change it somehow. I was sure that if I put it in a bag and dropped it into a river or into a garbage truck of something like that sooner or later it would be found and even if no one saw me doing it, it would almost certainly be found, and then they would know I had changed my clothes in Crain.

That light coat never turned up. The last they ever found of me was someone in Rockville who caught a glimpse of me in the train station in Crain, and she recognized me by the light coat. They never found out where I went after that; it was partly luck and partly my clever planning. Two or three days later the papers were still reporting that I was in Crain; people thought they saw me on the streets and one girl who went into a store to buy a dress was picked up by the police and held until she could get someone to identify her. They were really looking, but they were looking for Louisa Tether, and I had stopped being Louisa Tether the minute I got rid of that light coat my mother bought me.

One thing I was relying on: there must be thousands of girls in the country on any given day who are nineteen years old, fair-haired, five feet four inches tall, and weighing one hundred and twenty-six pounds. And if there are thousands of girls like that, there must be, among those thousands, a good number who are wearing shapeless tan raincoats; I started counting tan raincoats in Crain after I left the department store and I passed four in one block, so I felt well hidden. After that I made myself even more invisible by doing just what I told my mother I was going to — I stopped in and had a sandwich in a little coffee shop, and then I went to a movie. I wasn’t in any hurry at all, and rather than try to find a place to sleep that night I thought I would sleep on the train.

It’s funny how no one pays any attention to you at all. There were hundreds of people who saw me that day, and even a sailor who tried to pick me up in the movie, and yet no one really *saw* me. If I had tried to check into a hotel the desk clerk might have noticed me, or if I had tried to get dinner in some fancy restaurant in that cheap raincoat I would have been conspicuous, but I was doing what any other girl looking like me and dressed like me might be doing that day. The only person who might be apt to remember me would be the man selling tickets in the railroad station, because girls looking like me in old raincoats didn’t buy train tickets, usually, at eleven at night, but I had thought of that, too, of course; I bought a ticket to Amityville, sixty miles away, and what made Amityville a perfectly reasonable disguise is that at Amityville there is a college, not a little fancy place like the one I had left so recently with nobody’s blessing, but a big sprawling friendly affair, where my raincoat would look perfectly at home. I told myself I was a student coming back to the college after a week end at home. We got to Amityville after midnight, but it still didn’t look odd when I left the train and went into the station, because while I was in the station, having a cup of coffee and killing time, seven other girls — I counted — wearing raincoats like mine came in or went out, not seeming to think it the least bit odd to be getting on or off trains at that hour of the night. Some of them had suitcases, and I wished that I had had some way of getting a suitcase in Crain, but it would have made me noticeable in the movie, and college girls going home for week ends often don’t bother; they have pajamas and an extra pair of stockings at home, and they drop a toothbrush into one of the pockets of those invaluable raincoats. So I didn’t worry about the suitcase then, although I knew I would need one soon.

While I was having my coffee I made my own mind change from the idea that I was a college girl coming back after a week end at home to the idea that I was a college girl who was on her way home for a few days; all the time I tried to think as much as possible like what I was pretending to be, and after all, I *had* been a college girl for a while. I was thinking that even now the letter was in the mail, traveling as fast as the U.S. Government could make it go, right to my father to tell him why I wasn't a college student any more; I suppose that was what finally decided me to run away, the thought of what my father would think and say and do when he got that letter from the college.

That was in the paper, too. They decided that the college business was the reason for my running away, but if that had been all, I don't think I would have left. No, I had been wanting to leave for so long, ever since I can remember, making plans till I was sure they were foolproof, and that's the way they turned out to be.

Sitting there in the station at Amityville, I tried to think myself into a good reason why I was leaving college to go home on a Monday night late, when I would hardly be going home for the week end. As I say, I always tried to think as hard as I could the way that suited whatever I wanted to be, and I liked to have a good reason for what I was doing. Nobody ever asked me, but it was good to know that I could answer them if they did. I finally decided that my sister was getting married the next day and I was going home at the beginning of the week to be one of her bridesmaids. I thought that was funny. I didn't want to be going home for any sad or frightening reason, like my mother being sick, or my father being hurt in a car accident, because I would have to look sad, and that might attract attention. So I was going home for my sister's wedding. I wandered around the station as though I had nothing to do, and just happened to pass the door when another girl was going out; she had on a raincoat just like mine and anyone who happened to notice would have thought that it was me who went out. Before I bought my ticket I went into the ladies' room and got another twenty dollars out of my shoe. I had nearly three hundred dollars left of the money I had taken from my father's desk and I had most of it in my shoes because I honestly couldn't think of another safe place to carry it. All I kept in my pocketbook was just enough for whatever I had to spend next. It's uncomfortable walking around all day on a wad of bills in your shoe, but they were good solid shoes, the kind of comfortable old shoes you wear whenever you don't really care how you look, and I had put new shoelaces in them before I left home so I could tie them good and tight. You can see, I planned pretty carefully, and no little detail got left out. If they had let me plan my sister's wedding there would have been a lot less of that running around and screaming and hysterics.

I bought a ticket to Chandler, which is the biggest city in this part of the state, and the place I'd been heading for all along. It was a good place to hide because people from Rockville tended to bypass it unless they had some special reason for going there — if they couldn't find the doctors or orthodontists or psychoanalysts or dress material they wanted in Rockville or Crain, they went directly to one of the really big cities, like the state capital; Chandler was big enough to hide in, but not big enough to look like a metropolis to people from Rockville. The ticket seller in the Amityville station must have seen a good many college girls buying tickets for Chandler at all hours of the day or night because he took my money and shoved the ticket at me without even looking up.

Funny. They must have come looking for me in Chandler at some time or other, because it's not likely they would have neglected any possible place I might be, but maybe Rockville people never seriously believed that anyone would go to Chandler from choice, because I never felt for a minute that anyone was looking for me there. My picture was in the Chandler papers, of course, but as far as I ever knew no one ever looked at me twice, and I got up every morning and went to work and went shopping in the stores and went to movies with Mrs. Peacock and went out to the beach all that summer without ever being afraid of being recognized. I behaved just like everyone else, and dressed just like everyone else, and even *thought* just like everyone else, and the only person I ever saw from Rockville in three years was a friend of my mother's, and I knew *she* only came to Chandler to get her poodle bred at the kennels there. She didn't look as if she was in a state to recognize anybody but another poodle-fancier, anyway, and all I had to do was step into a doorway as she went by, and she never looked at me.

Two other college girls got on the train to Chandler when I did; maybe both of them were going home for their sisters' weddings. Neither of them was wearing a tan raincoat, but one of them had on an old blue jacket that gave the same general effect. I fell asleep as soon as the train started, and once I woke up and for a minute I wondered where I was and then I realized that I was doing it, I was actually carrying out my careful plan and had gotten better than halfway with it, and I almost laughed, there in the train with everyone asleep around me. Then I went back to sleep and didn't wake up until we got into Chandler about seven in the morning.

So there I was. I had left home just after lunch the day before, and now at seven in the morning of my sister's wedding day I was so far away, in every sense, that I *knew* they would never find me. I had all day to get myself settled in Chandler, so I started off by having breakfast in a restaurant near the station, and then went off to find a place to live, and a job. The first thing I did was buy a suitcase, and it's funny how people don't really notice you if you're buying a suitcase near a railroad station. Suitcases look *natural* near railroad stations, and I picked out one of those stores that sell a little bit of everything, and bought a cheap suitcase and a pair of stockings and some handkerchiefs and a little traveling clock, and I put everything into the suitcase and carried that. Nothing is hard to do unless you get upset or excited about it.

Later on, when Mrs. Peacock and I used to read in the papers about my disappearing, I asked her once if she thought that Louisa Tether had gotten as far as Chandler and she didn’t.

“They’re saying now she was kidnapped,” Mrs. Peacock told me, “and that’s what *I* think happened. Kidnapped, and murdered, and they do *terrible* things to young girls they kidnap.”

“But the papers say there wasn’t any ransom note.”

“That’s what they *say*.” Mrs. Peacock shook her head at me. “How do we know what the family is keeping secret? Or if she was kidnapped by a homicidal maniac, why should *he* send a ransom note? Young girls like you don’t know a lot of the things that go on, *I* can tell you.”

“I feel kind of sorry for the girl,” I said.

“You can’t ever tell,” Mrs. Peacock said. “Maybe she went with him willingly.”

I didn’t know, that first morning in Chandler, that Mrs. Peacock was going to turn up that first day, the luckiest thing that ever happened to me. I decided while I was having breakfast that I was going to be a nineteen-year-old girl from upstate with a nice family and a good background who had been saving money to come to Chandler and take a secretarial course in the business school there. I was going to have to find some kind of a job to keep on earning money while I went to school; courses at the business school wouldn’t start until fall, so I would have the summer to work and save money and decide if I really wanted to take secretarial training. If I decided not to stay in Chandler I could easily go somewhere else after the fuss about my running away had died down. The raincoat looked wrong for the kind of conscientious young girl I was going to be, so I took it off and carried it over my arm. I think I did a pretty good job on my clothes, altogether. Before I left home I decided that I would have to wear a suit, as quiet and unobtrusive as I could find, and I picked out a gray suit, with a white blouse, so with just one or two small changes like a different blouse or some kind of a pin on the lapel, I could look like whoever I decided to be. Now the suit looked absolutely right for a young girl planning to take a secretarial course, and I looked like a thousand other people when I walked down the street carrying my suitcase and my raincoat over my arm; people get off trains every minute looking just like that. I bought a morning paper and stopped in a drugstore for a cup of coffee and a look to see the rooms for rent. It was all so usual — suitcase, coat, rooms for rent — that when I asked the soda clerk how to get to Primrose Street he never even looked at me. He certainly didn't care whether I ever got to Primrose Street or not, but he told me very politely where it was and what bus to take. I didn't really need to take the bus for economy, but it would have looked funny for a girl who was saving money to arrive in a taxi.

"I'll never forget how you looked that first morning," Mrs. Peacock told me once, much later. "I knew right away you were the kind of girl I like to rent rooms to — quiet, and well-mannered. But you looked almighty scared of the big city."

"I wasn't scared," I said. "I was worried about finding a nice room. My mother told me so many things to be careful about I was afraid I'd never find anything to suit her."

"*Any*body's mother could come into my house at any time and know that her daughter was in good hands," Mrs. Peacock said, a little huffy.

But it was true. When I walked into Mrs. Peacock’s rooming house on Primrose Street, and met Mrs. Peacock, I knew that I couldn’t have done this part better if I’d been able to plan it. The house was old, and comfortable, and my room was nice, and Mrs. Peacock and I hit it off right away. She was very pleased with me when she heard that my mother had told me to be sure the room I found was clean and that the neighborhood was good, with no chance of rowdies following a girl if she came home after dark, and she was even more pleased when she heard that I wanted to save money and take a secretarial course so I could get a really good job and earn enough to be able to send a little home every week; Mrs. Peacock believed that children owed it to their parents to pay back some of what had been spent on them while they were growing up. By the time I had been in the house an hour Mrs. Peacock knew all about my imaginary family upstate: my mother, who was a widow, and my sister, who had just gotten married and still lived at my mother’s home with her husband, and my young brother Paul, who worried my mother a good deal because he didn’t seem to want to settle down. My name was Lois Taylor, I told her. By that time, I think I could have told her my real name and she would never have connected it with the girl in the paper, because by then she was feeling that she almost knew my family, and she wanted me to be sure and tell my mother when I wrote home that Mrs. Peacock would make herself personally responsible for me while I was in the city and take as good care of me as my own mother would. On top of everything else, she told me that a stationery store in the neighborhood was looking for a girl assistant, and there I was. Before I had been away from home for twenty-four hours I was an entirely new person. I was a girl named Lois Taylor who lived on Primrose Street and worked down at the stationery store.

I read in the papers one day about how a famous fortuneteller wrote to my father offering to find me and said that astral signs had convinced him that I would be found near flowers. That gave me a jolt, because of Primrose Street, but my father and Mrs. Peacock and the rest of the world thought that it meant that my body was buried somewhere. They dug up a vacant lot near the railroad station where I was last seen, and Mrs. Peacock was very disappointed when nothing turned up. Mrs. Peacock and I could not decide whether I had run away with a gangster to be a gun moll, or whether my body had been cut up and sent somewhere in a trunk. After a while they stopped looking for me, except for an occasional false clue that would turn up in a small story on the back pages of the paper, and Mrs. Peacock and I got interested in the stories about a daring daylight bank robbery in Chicago. When the anniversary of my running away came around, and I realized that I had really been gone for a year, I treated myself to a new hat and dinner downtown, and came home just in time for the evening news broadcast and my mother's voice over the radio.

"Louisa," she was saying, "please come home."

"That poor poor woman," Mrs. Peacock said. "Imagine how she must feel. They say she's never given up hope of finding her little girl alive someday."

"Do you like my new hat?" I asked her.

I had given up all idea of the secretarial course because the stationery store had decided to expand and include a lending library and a gift shop, and I was now the manager of the gift shop and if things kept on well would someday be running the whole thing; Mrs. Peacock and I talked it over, just as if she had been my mother, and we decided that I would be foolish to leave a good job to start over somewhere else. The money that I had been saving was in the bank, and Mrs. Peacock and I thought that one of these days we might pool our savings and buy a little car, or go on a trip somewhere, or even a cruise.

What I am saying is that I was free, and getting along fine, with never a thought that I knew about ever going back. It was just plain rotten bad luck that I had to meet Paul. I had gotten so I hardly ever thought about any of them any more, and never wondered what they were doing unless I happened to see some item in the papers, but there must have been something in the back of my mind remembering them all the time because I never even stopped to think; I just stood there on the street with my mouth open, and said *"Paul!"* He turned around and then of course I realized what I had done, but it was too late. He stared at me for a minute, and then frowned, and then looked puzzled; I could see him first trying to remember, and then trying to believe what he remembered; at last he said, "Is it possible?"

He said I had to go back. He said if I didn't go back he would tell them where to come and get me. He also patted me on the head and told me that there was still a reward waiting there in the bank for anyone who turned up with conclusive news of me, and he said that after he had collected the reward I was perfectly welcome to run away again, as far and as often as I liked.

Maybe I did want to go home. Maybe all that time I had been secretly waiting for a chance to get back; maybe that's why I recognized Paul on the street, in a coincidence that wouldn't have happened once in a million years — he had never even *been* to Chandler before, and was only there for a few minutes between trains; he had stepped out of the station for a minute, and found me. If I had not been passing at that minute, if he had stayed in the station where he belonged, I would never have gone back. I told Mrs.

Peacock I was going home to visit my family upstate. I thought that was funny.

Paul sent a telegram to my mother and father, saying that he had found me, and we took a plane back; Paul said he was still afraid that I'd try to get away again and the safest place for me was high up in the air where he knew I couldn't get off and run.

I began to get nervous, looking out the taxi window on the way from the Rockville airport; I would have sworn that for three years I hadn't given a thought to that town, to those streets and stores and houses I used to know so well, but here I found that I remembered it all, as though I hadn't ever seen Chandler and *its* houses and streets; it was almost as though I had never been away at all. When the taxi finally turned the corner into my own street, and I saw the big old white house again, I almost cried.

"Of course I wanted to come back," I said, and Paul laughed. I thought of the return-trip ticket I had kept as a lucky charm for so long, and how I had thrown it away one day when I was emptying my pocketbook; I wondered when I threw it away whether I would ever want to go back and regret throwing away my ticket. "Everything looks just the same," I said. "I caught the bus right there on the corner; I came down the driveway that day and met you."

"If I had managed to stop you that day," Paul said, "you would probably never have tried again."

Then the taxi stopped in front of the house and my knees were shaking when I got out. I grabbed Paul's arm and said, "Paul... wait a minute," and he gave me a look I used to know very well, a look that said "If you back out on me now I'll see that you never forget it," and put his arm around me because I was shivering and we went up the walk to the front door.

I wondered if they were watching us from the window. It was hard for me to imagine how my mother and father would behave in a situation like this, because they always made such a point of being quiet and dignified and proper; I thought that Mrs. Peacock would have been halfway down the walk to meet us, but here the front door ahead was still tight shut. I wondered if we would have to ring the doorbell; I had never had to ring this doorbell before. I was still wondering when Carol opened the door for us. "Carol!" I said. I was shocked because she looked so old, and then I thought that of course it had been three years since I had seen her and she probably thought that *I* looked older, too. "Carol," I said, "Oh, Carol!" I was honestly glad to see her.

She looked at me hard and then stepped back and my mother and father were standing there, waiting for me to come in. If I had not stopped to think I would have run to them, but I hesitated, not quite sure what to do, or whether they were angry with me, or hurt, or only just happy that I was back, and of course once I stopped to think about it all I could find to do was just stand there and say "Mother?" kind of uncertainly.

She came over to me and put her hands on my shoulders and looked into my face for a long time. There were tears running down her cheeks and I thought that before, when it didn't matter, I had been ready enough to cry, but now, when crying would make me look better, all I wanted to do was giggle. She looked old, and sad, and I felt simply foolish. Then she turned to Paul and said, "Oh, *Paul* — how can you do this to me again?"

Paul was frightened; I could see it. "Mrs. Tether—" he said.

"What is your name, dear?" my mother asked me.

"Louisa Tether," I said stupidly.

"No, dear," she said, very gently, "your *real* name?"

Now I could cry, but now I did not think it was going to help matters any. “Louisa Tether,” I said. “That’s my name.”

“Why don’t you people leave us alone?” Carol said; she was white, and shaking, and almost screaming because she was so angry. “We’ve spent years and years trying to find my lost sister and all people like you see in it is a chance to cheat us out of the reward — doesn’t it mean *any*thing to you that *you* may think you have a chance for some easy money, but *we* just get hurt and heartbroken all over again? Why don’t you leave us *alone*?”

“Carol,” my father said, “you’re frightening the poor child. Young lady,” he said to me, “I honestly believe that you did not realize the cruelty of what you tried to do. You look like a nice girl; try to imagine your own mother—”

I tried to imagine my own mother; I looked straight at her.

“ — if someone took advantage of her like this. I am sure you were not told that twice before, this young man—” I stopped looking at my mother and looked at Paul— “has brought us young girls who pretended to be our lost daughter; each time he protested that he had been genuinely deceived and had no thought of profit, and each time we hoped desperately that it would be the right girl. The first time we were taken in for several days. The girl *looked* like our Louisa, she *acted* like our Louisa, she knew all kinds of small family jokes and happenings it seemed impossible that anyone *but* Louisa could know, and yet she was an imposter. And the girl’s mother — my wife — has suffered more each time her hopes have been raised.” He put his arm around my mother — his wife — and with Carol they stood all together looking at me.

“Look,” Paul said wildly, “give her a *chance* — she *knows* she’s Louisa. At least give her a chance to *prove* it.”

“How?” Carol asked. “I’m sure if I asked her something like — well — like what was the color of the dress she was supposed to wear at my wedding—”

“It was pink,” I said. “I wanted blue but you said it had to be pink.”

“I’m sure she’d know the answer,” Carol went on as though I hadn’t said anything. “The other girls you brought here, Paul — *they* both knew.”

It wasn’t going to be any good. I ought to have known it. Maybe they were so used to looking for me by now that they would rather keep on looking than have me home; maybe once my mother had looked in my face and seen there nothing of Louisa, but only the long careful concentration I had put into being Lois Taylor, there was never any chance of my looking like Louisa again.

I felt kind of sorry for Paul; he had never understood them as well as I did and he clearly felt there was still some chance of talking them into opening their arms and crying out “Louisa! Our long-lost daughter!” and then turning around and handing him the reward; after that, we could all live happily ever after. While Paul was still trying to argue with my father I walked over a little way and looked into the living room again; I figured I wasn’t going to have much time to look around and I wanted one last glimpse to take away with me; sister Carol kept a good eye on me all the time, too. *I* wondered what the two girls before me had tried to steal, and I wanted to tell her that if *I* ever planned to steal anything from that house I was three years too late; I could have taken whatever I wanted when I left the first time. There was nothing there I could take now, any more than there had been before. I realized that all I wanted was to stay — I wanted to stay so much that I felt like hanging onto the stair rail and screaming, but even though a temper tantrum might bring them some fleeting recollection of their dear lost Louisa I hardly thought it would persuade them to invite me to stay. I could just picture myself being dragged kicking and screaming out of my own house.

“Such a lovely old house,” I said politely to my sister Carol, who was hovering around me.

“Our family has lived here for generations,” she said, just as politely.

“Such beautiful furniture,” I said.

“My mother is fond of antiques.”

“Fingerprints,” Paul was shouting. We were going to get a lawyer, I gathered, or at least Paul thought we were going to get a lawyer and I wondered how he was going to feel when he found out that we weren’t. I couldn’t imagine any lawyer in the world who could get my mother and my father and my sister Carol to take me back when they had made up their minds that I was not Louisa; could the law make my mother look into my face and recognize me?

I thought that there ought to be some way I could make Paul see that there was nothing we could do, and I came over and stood next to him. “Paul,” I said, “can’t you see that you’re only making Mr. Tether angry?”

“Correct, young woman,” my father said, and nodded at me to show that he thought I was being a sensible creature. “He’s not doing himself any good by threatening me.”

“Paul,” I said, “these people don’t want us here.”

Paul started to say something and then for the first time in his life thought better of it and stamped off toward the door. When I turned to follow him — thinking that we’d never gotten past the front hall in my great homecoming — my father — excuse me, Mr. Tether — came up behind me and took my hand. “My daughter was younger than you are,” he said to me very kindly, “but I’m sure you have a family somewhere who love you and want you to be happy. Go back to them, young lady. Let me advise you as though I were really your father — stay away from that fellow, he's wicked and he's worthless. Go back home where you belong."

"We know what it's like for a family to worry and wonder about a daughter," my mother said. "Go back to the people who love you."

That meant Mrs. Peacock, I guess.

"Just to make sure you get there," my father said, "let us help toward your fare." I tried to take my hand away, but he put a folded bill into it and I had to take it. "I hope someday," he said, "that someone will do as much for our Louisa."

"Good-by, my dear," my mother said, and she reached up and patted my cheek. "Very good luck to you."

"I hope your daughter comes back someday," I told them. "Good-by."

* * *

The bill was a twenty, and I gave it to Paul. It seemed little enough for all the trouble he had taken and, after all, I could go back to my job in the stationery store. My mother still talks to me on the radio, once a year, on the anniversary of the day I ran away.

"Louisa," she says, "Please come home. We all want our dear girl back, and we need you and miss you so much. Your mother and father love you and will never forget you. Louisa, please come home."

THE LITTLE HOUSE

I'LL HAVE TO get some decent lights, was her first thought, and her second: *and* a dog or something, or at least a bird, anything *alive*. She stood in the little hall beside her suitcase, in a little house that belonged to her, her first home. She held the front-door key in her hand, and she knew, remembering her aunt, that the back-door key hung, labeled, from a hook beside the back door, and the side-door key hung from a hook beside the side door, and the porch-door key hung from a hook beside the porch door, and the cellar-door key hung from a hook beside the cellar-door, and perhaps when she slammed the front door behind her all the keys swung gently, once, back and forth. Anything that can move and make some kind of a friendly noise, she thought, maybe a monkey or a cat or anything not stuffed — as she realized that she was staring, hypnotized, at the moose head over the hall mirror.

Wanting to make some kind of a noise in the silence, she coughed, and the small sound moved dustily into the darkness of the house. Well, I'm here, she told herself, and it belongs to me and I can do anything I want here and no one can ever make me leave, because it's mine. She moved to touch the carved newel post at the foot of the narrow stairway — it was hers, it belonged to her — and felt a sudden joy at the tangible reality of the little house; this is really something to own, she thought, thank you, Aunt. And my goodness, she thought, brushing her hand, couldn't my very own house do with a little dusting; she smiled to herself at the prospect of the very pleasant work she would do tomorrow and the day after, and for all the days after that, living in her house and keeping it clean and fresh.

Wanting to whistle, to do something to bring noise and movement into the house, she turned and opened the door on her right and stepped into the dim crowded parlor. I wish I didn’t have to see it first at dusk, she thought, Aunt certainly didn’t believe in bright light; I wonder how she ever found her way around this room. A dim shape on a low table beside the door resolved itself into a squat lamp; when she pressed the switch a low radiance came into the room and she was able to leave the spot by the door and venture into what had clearly been her aunt’s favorite room. The parlor had certainly not been touched, or even opened or lighted, since her aunt’s death; a tea towel, half-hemmed, lay on the arm of a chair, and she felt a sudden tenderness and a half-shame at the thought of the numbers of tea towels, hemmed, which had come to her at birthdays and Christmases over the years and now lay still in their tissue paper, at the bottom of her trunk still at the railroad station. At least I’ll use her towels now, in her own house, she thought, and then: but it’s my house now. She would stack the tea towels neatly in the linen closet, she might even finish hemming this one, and she took it up and folded it neatly, leaving the needle still tucked in where her aunt had left it, to await the time when she should sit quietly in her chair, in her parlor in her house, and take up her sewing. Her aunt’s glasses lay on the table; had her aunt put down her sewing and taken off her glasses at the very end? Prepared, neatly, to die?

Don’t think about it, she told herself sternly, she’s gone now, and soon the house will be busy again; I’ll clear away tomorrow, when it’s not so dark; how did she ever manage to sew in here with this light? She put the half-hemmed towel over the glasses to hide them, and took up a little picture in a silver frame; her aunt, she recognized, and some smiling woman friend, standing together under trees; this must have been important to Aunt, she thought, I’ll put it away safely somewhere. The house was distantly familiar to her; she had come here sometimes as a child, but that was long ago, and the memories of the house and her aunt were overlaid with cynicism and melancholy and the wearying disappointments of many years; perhaps it was the longing to return to the laughter of childhood which had brought her here so eagerly to take up her inheritance. The music box was in the corner where it had always been and, touching it gently, she brought from it one remote, faintly sweet, jangle of a note. Tomorrow I'll play the music box, she promised herself, with the windows wide open and the good fresh air blowing through and all the bric-a-brac safely stowed away in the attic; this could be such a pretty room — and she turned, her head to one side, considering — once I take out the junk and the clutter. I can keep the old couch and maybe have it recovered in something colorful, and the big chair can stay, and perhaps one or two of these tiny tables; the mantel is fine, and I'll keep a bowl of flowers there, flowers from my own garden. I'll have a great fire in the fireplace and I'll sit here with my dog and my needlework — and two or three good floor lamps; I'll get those tomorrow — and never be unhappy again. Tomorrow, lamps, and air the room, and play the music box.

Leaving a dim trail of lighted lamps behind her, she went from the parlor through a little sunporch where a magazine lay open on the table; Aunt never finished the story she was reading, she thought, and closed the magazine quickly and set it in order on the pile on the table; I'll subscribe to magazines, she thought, and the local newspaper, and take books from the village library. From the sunporch she went into the kitchen and remembered to turn on the light by pulling the cord hanging from the middle of the ceiling; her aunt had left a tomato ripening on the window sill, and it scented the kitchen with a strong air of decay. She shivered, and realized that the back door was standing open, and remembered her aunt saying, as clearly as though she heard it now, “Darn that door, I wish I could remember to get that latch looked at.”

And now I have to do it for her, she thought; I’ll get a man in the morning. She found a paper bag in the pantry drawer where paper bags had always been kept, and scraped the rotten tomato from the window sill and carried the bag to the garbage pail by the back steps. When she came back she slammed the back door correctly and the latch caught; the key was hanging where she knew it had been, beside the door, and she took it down and locked the door; I’m alone in the house, after all, she thought with a little chill touching the back of her neck.

The cup from which her aunt had drunk her last cup of tea lay, washed and long since drained dry, beside the sink; perhaps she put her sewing down, she thought, and came to the kitchen to make a cup of tea before going to bed; I wonder where they found her; she always had a cup of tea at night, all alone; I wish I had come to see her at least once. The lovely old dishes are mine now, she thought, the family dishes and the cut glass and the silver tea service. Her aunt’s sweater hung from the knob of the cellar door, as though she had only just this minute taken it off, and her apron hung from a hook beside the sink. Aunt always put things away, she thought, and she never came back for her sweater. She remembered dainty little hand-embroidered aprons in the hall chest, and thought of herself, aproned, serving a charming tea from the old tea service, using the thin painted cups, perhaps to neighbors who had come to see her delightful, open, light, little house; I must have a cocktail party too, she thought; I’ll bet there’s nothing in the house but dandelion wine.

It would seem strange at first, coming downstairs in the morning to make herself breakfast in her aunt’s kitchen, and she suddenly remembered herself, very small, eating oatmeal at the kitchen table; it would seem strange to be using her aunt’s dishes, and the big old coffeepot — although perhaps not the coffeepot, she thought; it had the look of something crotchety and temperamental, not willing to submit docilely to a strange hand; I’ll have tea tomorrow morning, and get a new little coffeepot just for me. Lamps, coffeepot, man to fix the latch.

After a moment’s thought she took her aunt’s sweater and apron and bundled them together and carried them out to the garbage pail. It isn’t as though they were any good to anyone, she told herself reassuringly; *all* her clothes will have to be thrown away, and she pictured herself standing in her bright parlor in her smart city clothes telling her laughing friends about the little house; “Well, you should have seen it when I came,” she would tell them, “you should have seen the place the first night I walked in. Murky little lamps, and the place simply crawling with bric-a-brac, and a stuffed moose head — *really*, a stuffed moose head, I mean it — and Aunt’s sewing on the table, and what was positively her last cup in the sink.” Will I tell them, she wondered, about how Aunt set her sewing down when she was ready to die? And never finished her magazine, and hung up her sweater, and felt her heart go? “You should have seen it when I came,” she would tell them, sipping from her glass, “dark, and dismal; I used to come here when I was a child, but I honestly never remembered it as such a mess. It couldn’t have come as more of a surprise, her leaving me the house, I never dreamed of having it.”

Suddenly guilty, she touched the cold coffeepot with a gentle finger. I’ll clean you tomorrow, she thought; I’m sorry I never got to the funeral, I should have tried to come. Tomorrow I’ll start cleaning. Then she whirled, startled, at the knock at the back door; I hadn’t realized it was so quiet here, she thought, and breathed again and moved quickly to the door. “Who is it?” she said. “Just a minute.” Her hands shaking, she unlocked and opened the door. “Who is it?” she said into the darkness, and then smiled timidly at the two old faces regarding her. “Oh,” she said, “how do you do?”

“You’ll be the niece? Miss Elizabeth?”

“Yes.” Two old pussycats, she thought, wearing hats with flowers, couldn’t wait to get a look at me. “Hello,” she said, thinking, I’m the charming niece Elizabeth, and this is my house now.

“We are the Dolson sisters. I am Miss Amanda Dolson. This is my sister Miss Caroline Dolson.”

“We’re your nearest neighbors.” Miss Caroline put a thin brown hand on Elizabeth’s sleeve. “We live down the lane. We were your poor poor aunt’s nearest neighbors. But we didn’t hear anything.”

Miss Amanda moved a little forward and Elizabeth stepped back. “Won’t you come in?” Elizabeth asked, remembering her manners. “Come into the parlor. I was just looking at the house. I only just got here,” she said, moving backward, “I was just turning on some lights.”

“We saw the lights.” Miss Amanda went unerringly toward the little parlor. “This is not our formal call, you understand; we pay our calls by day. But I confess we wondered at the lights.”

“We thought *he* had come back.” Miss Caroline’s hand was on Elizabeth’s sleeve again, as though she were leading Elizabeth to the parlor. “They say they do, you know.”

Miss Amanda seated herself, as though by right of long acquaintance, on the soft chair by the low table, and Miss Caroline took the only other comfortable chair; my own house indeed, Elizabeth thought, and sat down uneasily on a stiff chair near the door; I must get lamps first thing tomorrow, she thought, the better to see people with.

“Have you lived here long?” she asked foolishly.

“I hope you don’t plan to change things,” Miss Amanda said. “Aunt loved her little house, you know.”

“I haven’t had much time to plan.”

“You’ll find everything just the way she left it. I myself took her pocketbook upstairs and put it into the drawer of the commode. Otherwise nothing has been touched. Except the body, of course.”

Oh, that’s not still here? she wanted to ask, but said instead, “I used to come here when I was a child.”

“So he wasn’t after her money,” Miss Caroline said. “Sister took her pocketbook off the kitchen table; I saw her do it. She took it upstairs and nothing was missing.”

Miss Amanda leaned a little forward. “You’ll be bringing in television sets? From the city? Radios?”

“I hadn’t thought much about it yet.”

“We’ll be able to hear your television set, no doubt. We are your closest neighbors and we see your lights; no doubt your television set will be very loud.”

“We would have heard if she had screamed,” Miss Caroline said, lifting her thin hand in emphasis. “They say she must have recognized him, and indeed it is my belief that Sheriff Knowlton has a very shrewd notion who he is. It is my belief that we all have our suspicions.”

“Sister, this is gossip. Miss Elizabeth detests gossip.”

“We were here the first thing in the morning, Miss Elizabeth, and I spoke to the Sheriff myself.”

“Sister, Miss Elizabeth does not trouble her mind with wild stories. Let Miss Elizabeth remember Aunt as happy.”

“I don’t understand.” Elizabeth looked from one of the tight old faces to the other; the two old bats, she thought, and said, “My aunt died of a heart attack, they said."

"It is *my* belief—"

"My sister is fond of gossip, Miss Elizabeth. I suppose you'll be packing away all of Aunt's pretty things?"

Elizabeth glanced at the table near her. A pink china box, a glass paperweight, a crocheted doily on which rested a set of blue porcelain kittens. "Some of them," she said.

"To make room for the television set. Poor Aunt; she thought a good deal of her small possessions." She frowned. "You won't find an ash tray in here."

Elizabeth put her cigarette down defiantly on the lid of the small pink box.

"Sister," Miss Amanda said, "bring Miss Elizabeth a saucer from the kitchen, from the daily china. Not the floral set."

Miss Caroline, looking shocked, hurried from the room, holding her heavy skirt away from the tables and Elizabeth's cigarette. Miss Amanda leaned forward again. "I do not permit my sister to gossip, Miss Elizabeth. You are wrong to encourage her."

"But what is she trying to say about my aunt?"

"Aunt has been dead and buried for two months. You were not, I think, at the funeral?"

"I couldn't get away."

"From the city. Exactly. I daresay you were delighted to have the house."

"Indeed I was."

"I suppose Aunt could hardly have done otherwise. Sister, give Miss Elizabeth the saucer. Quickly, before the room catches fire."

"Thank you." Elizabeth took the chipped saucer from Miss Caroline and put out her cigarette; ash trays, she thought, lamps, ash trays, coffeepot.

"Her apron is gone," Miss Caroline told her sister.

"Already?" Miss Amanda turned to look fully at Elizabeth. "I am afraid we will see many changes, Sister. And now Miss Elizabeth is waiting for us to leave. Miss Elizabeth is determined to begin her packing tonight."

"Really," Elizabeth said helplessly, gesturing, "really—"

"All of Aunt's pretty things. This is not our formal call, Miss Elizabeth." Miss Amanda rose grandly, and Miss Caroline followed. "You will see us within three days. Poor Aunt."

Elizabeth followed them back to the kitchen. "Really," she said again, and "Please don't leave," but Miss Amanda overrode her.

"This door does not latch properly," Miss Amanda said. "See that it is securely locked behind us."

"They say that's how he got in," Miss Caroline whispered. "Keep it locked *always*."

"Good night, Miss Elizabeth. I am happy to know that you plan to keep the house well lighted. We see your lights, you know, from our windows."

"Good night," Miss Caroline said, turning to put her hand once more on Elizabeth's arm. "Locked, *remember*."

"Good night," Elizabeth said, "good night." Old bats, she was thinking, old bats. Sooner or later I'm going to have words with them; they're probably the pests of the neighborhood. She watched as they went side by side down the path, their heads not yet turned to one another, their long skirts swinging. "Good night," she called once more, but neither of them turned. Old bats, she thought, and slammed the door correctly; the latch caught, and she took down the key and locked it. I'll give them the moose head, she thought, my aunt would have wanted them to have it. It's late, I've got to find myself a bed, I haven't even been upstairs yet. I'll give them each a piece of the junk; my very own, my pretty little house.

Humming happily, she turned back toward the parlor; I wonder where they found her? she thought suddenly; was it in the parlor? She stopped in the doorway, staring at the soft chair and wondering: did he come up behind her there? While she was sewing? And then pick up her glasses from the floor and set them on the table? Perhaps she was reading her magazine when he caught her, perhaps she had just washed her cup and saucer and was turning back to get her sweater; would it have been this quiet in the house? Is it always this quiet?

"No, no," she said aloud. "This is silly. Tomorrow I'll get a dog."

Pressing her lips together firmly, she walked across the room and turned off the light, then came back and turned off the lamp beside the door, and the soft darkness fell around her; did they find her here? she wondered as she went through the sunporch, and then said aloud "This is silly," and turned off the light. With the darkness following close behind her she came back to the kitchen and checked that the back door was securely locked. He won't get in *here* again, she thought, and shivered.

There was no light on the stairs. I can leave the kitchen light on all night, she thought, but no; they'll see it from their windows; did he wait for her on the stairs? Pressing against the wall, the kitchen light still burning dimly behind her, she went up the stairs, staring into the darkness, feeling her way with her feet. At the top was only darkness, and she put out her hands blindly; there was a wall, and then a door, and she ran her hand down the side of the door until she had the doorknob in her fingers.

What's waiting behind the door? she thought, and turned and fled wildly down the stairs and into the lighted kitchen with the locked back door. "Don't leave me here alone," she said, turning to look behind her, "please don't leave me here alone."

* * *

Miss Amanda and Miss Caroline cuddled on either side of their warm little stove. Miss Amanda had a piece of fruitcake and a cup of tea and Miss Caroline had a piece of marshmallow cake and a cup of tea. “Just the same,” Miss Caroline was saying, “she should have served something.”

“City ways.”

“She could have offered some of the city cake she brought with her. The coffeepot was right there in the kitchen. It’s not polite to wait until the company goes and then eat by yourself.”

“It’s city ways, Sister. I doubt she’ll be a good neighbor for us.”

“Her aunt would not have done it.”

“When I think of her searching that little house for valuables I feel very sorry for Aunt.”

Miss Caroline set down her plate, and nodded to herself. “She might not like it here,” she said. “Perhaps she won’t stay.”

THE BUS

OLD MISS HARPER was going home, although the night was wet and nasty. Miss Harper disliked traveling at any time, and she particularly disliked traveling on this dirty small bus which was her only way of getting home; she had frequently complained to the bus company about their service because it seemed that no matter where she wanted to go, they had no respectable bus to carry her. Getting away from home was bad enough — Miss Harper was fond of pointing out to the bus company — but getting home always seemed very close to impossible. Tonight Miss Harper had no choice: if she did not go home by this particular bus she could not go for another day. Annoyed, tired, depressed, she tapped irritably on the counter of the little tobacco store which served also as the bus station. Sir, she was thinking, beginning her letter of complaint, although I am an elderly lady of modest circumstances and must curtail my fondness for travel, let me point out that your bus service falls far below...

Outside, the bus stirred noisily, clearly not anxious to be moving; Miss Harper thought she could already hear the weary sound of its springs sinking out of shape. I just can't make this trip again, Miss Harper thought, even seeing Stephanie isn't worth it, they really go out of their way to make you uncomfortable. "Can I get my ticket, please?" she said sharply, and the old man at the other end of the counter put down his paper and gave her a look of hatred.

Miss Harper ordered her ticket, deploring her own cross voice, and the old man slapped it down on the counter in front of her and said, "You got three minutes before the bus leaves."

He’d love to tell me I missed it, Miss Harper thought, and made a point of counting her change.

The rain was beating down, and Miss Harper hurried the few exposed steps to the door of the bus. The driver was slow in opening the door and as Miss Harper climbed in she was thinking, Sir, I shall never travel with your company again. Your ticket salesmen are ugly, your drivers are surly, your vehicles indescribably filthy...

There were already several people sitting in the bus, and Miss Harper wondered where they could possibly be going; were there really this many small towns served only by this bus? Were there really other people who would endure this kind of trip to get somewhere, even home? I’m very out of sorts, Miss Harper thought, very out of sorts; it’s too strenuous a visit for a woman of my age; I need to get home. She thought of a hot bath and a cup of tea and her own bed, and sighed. No one offered to help her put her suitcase on the rack, and she glanced over her shoulder at the driver sitting with his back turned and thought, he’d probably rather put me off the bus than help me, and then, perceiving her own ill nature, smiled. The bus company might write a letter of complaint about *me*, she told herself and felt better. She had providentially taken a sleeping pill before leaving for the bus station, hoping to sleep through as much of the trip as possible, and at last, sitting near the back, she promised herself that it would not be unbearably long before she had a bath and a cup of tea, and tried to compose the bus company’s letter of complaint. Madam, a lady of your experience and advanced age ought surely to be aware of the problems confronting a poor but honest little company which wants only...

She was aware that the bus had started, because she was rocked and bounced in her seat, and the feeling of rattling and throbbing beneath the soles of her shoes stayed with her even when she slept at last. She lay back uneasily, her head resting on the seat back, moving back and forth with the motion of the bus, and around her other people slept, or spoke softly, or stared blankly out the windows at the passing lights and the rain.

Sometime during her sleep Miss Harper was jostled by someone moving into the seat behind her, her head was pushed and her hat disarranged; for a minute, bewildered by sleep, Miss Harper clutched at her hat, and said vaguely, “Who?”

“Go back to sleep,” a young voice said, and giggled. “I’m just running away from home, that’s all.”

Miss Harper was not awake, but she opened her eyes a little and looked up to the ceiling of the bus. “That’s wrong,” Miss Harper said as clearly as she could. “That’s wrong. Go back.”

There was another giggle. “Too late,” the voice said. “Go back to sleep.”

Miss Harper did. She slept uncomfortably and awkwardly, her mouth a little open. Sometime, perhaps an hour later, her head was jostled again and the voice said, “I think I’m going to get off here. ‘By now.”

“You’ll be sorry,” Miss Harper said, asleep. “Go back.”

Then, still later, the bus driver was shaking her. “Look, lady,” he was saying, “I’m not an alarm clock. Wake up and get off the bus.”

“What?” Miss Harper stirred, opened her eyes, felt for her pocketbook.

“I’m not an alarm clock,” the driver said. His voice was harsh and tired. “I’m not an alarm clock. Get off the bus.”

“What?” said Miss Harper again.

“This is as far as you go. You got a ticket to here. You’ve arrived. And I am not an alarm clock waking up people to tell them when it’s time to get off; you got here, lady, and it’s not part of my job to carry you off the bus. I’m not—”

"I intend to report you," Miss Harper said, awake. She felt for her pocketbook and found it in her lap, moved her feet, straightened her hat. She was stiff and moving was difficult.

"Report me. But from somewhere else. I got a bus to run. Now will you please get off so I can go on my way?"

His voice was loud, and Miss Harper was sickeningly aware of faces turned toward her from along the bus, grins, amused comments. The driver turned and stamped off down the bus to his seat, saying, "She thinks I'm an alarm clock," and Miss Harper, without assistance and moving clumsily, took down her suitcase and struggled with it down the aisle. Her suitcase banged against seats, and she knew that people were staring at her; she was terribly afraid that she might stumble and fall.

"I'll certainly report you," she said to the driver, who shrugged.

"Come on, lady," he said. "It's the middle of the night and I got a bus to run."

"You ought to be *ashamed* of yourself," Miss Harper said wildly, wanting to cry.

"Lady," the driver said with elaborate patience, "please get off my bus."

The door was open, and Miss Harper eased herself and her suitcase onto the steep step. "She thinks everyone's an alarm clock, got to see she gets off the bus," the driver said behind her, and Miss Harper stepped onto the ground. Suitcase, pocketbook, gloves, hat; she had them all. She had barely taken stock when the bus started with a jerk, almost throwing her backward, and Miss Harper, for the first time in her life, wanted to run and shake her fist at someone. I'll report him, she thought, I'll see that he loses his job, and then she realized that she was in the wrong place.

Standing quite still in the rain and the darkness Miss Harper became aware that she was not at the bus corner of her town where the bus should have left her. She was on an empty crossroads in the rain. There were no stores, no lights, no taxis, no people. There was nothing, in fact, but a wet dirt road under her feet and a signpost where two roads came together. Don't panic, Miss Harper told herself, almost whispering, don't panic; it's all right, it's all right, you'll see that it's all right, don't be frightened.

She took a few steps in the direction the bus had gone, but it was out of sight and when Miss Harper called falteringly, "Come back," and, "Help," there was no answer to the shocking sound of her own voice out loud except the steady drive of the rain. I sound old, she thought, but I will not panic. She turned in a circle, her suitcase in her hand, and told herself, don't panic, it's all right.

There was no shelter in sight, but the signpost said RICKET'S LANDING; so that's where I am, Miss Harper thought, I've come to Ricket's Landing and I don't like it here. She set her suitcase down next to the signpost and tried to see down the road; perhaps there might be a house, or even some kind of a barn or shed where she could get out of the rain. She was crying a little, and lost and hopeless, saying Please, won't someone come? when she saw headlights far off down the road and realized that someone was really coming to help her. She ran to the middle of the road and stood waving, her gloves wet and her pocketbook draggled. "Here," she called, "here I am, please come and help me."

Through the sound of the rain she could hear the motor, and then the headlights caught her and, suddenly embarrassed, she put her pocketbook in front of her face while the lights were on her. The lights belonged to a small truck, and it came to an abrupt stop beside her and the window near her was rolled down and a man's voice said furiously, "You want to get killed? You trying to get killed or something? What you doing in the middle of the road, trying to get killed?” The young man turned and spoke to the driver. “It’s some dame. Running out in the road like that.”

“Please,” Miss Harper said, as he seemed almost about to close the window again, “please help me. The bus put me off here when it wasn’t my stop and I’m lost.”

“Lost?” The young man laughed richly. “First I ever heard anyone getting lost in Ricket’s Landing. Mostly they have trouble *finding* it.” He laughed again, and the driver, leaning forward over the steering wheel to look curiously at Miss Harper, laughed too. Miss Harper put on a willing smile, and said, “Can you take me somewhere? Perhaps a bus station?”

“No bus station.” The young man shook his head profoundly. “Bus comes through here every night, stops if he’s got any passengers.”

“Well,” Miss Harper’s voice rose in spite of herself; she was suddenly afraid of antagonizing these young men; perhaps they might even leave her here where they found her, in the wet and dark. “Please,” she said, “can I get in with you, out of the rain?”

The two young men looked at each other. “Take her down to the old lady’s,” one of them said.

“She’s pretty wet to get in the truck,” the other one said.

“Please,” Miss Harper said, “I’ll be glad to pay you what I can.”

“We’ll take you to the old lady,” the driver said. “Come on, move over,” he said to the other young man.

“Wait, my suitcase.” Miss Harper ran back to the signpost, no longer caring how she must look, stumbling about in the rain, and brought her suitcase over to the truck.

“That’s awful wet,” the young man said. He opened the door and took the suitcase from Miss Harper. “I’ll just throw it in the back,” he said, and turned and tossed the suitcase into the back of the truck; Miss Harper heard the sodden thud of its landing, and wondered what things would look like when she unpacked; my bottle of cologne, she thought despairingly. “Get *in*,” the young man said, and, “My God, you’re wet.”

Miss Harper had never climbed up into a truck before, and her skirt was tight and her gloves slippery from the rain. Without help from the young man she put one knee on the high step and somehow hoisted herself in; this cannot be happening to me, she thought clearly. The young man pulled away fastidiously as Miss Harper slid onto the seat next to him.

“You are pretty wet,” the driver said, leaning over the wheel to look around at Miss Harper. “Why were you out in the rain like that?”

“The bus driver.” Miss Harper began to peel off her gloves; somehow she had to make an attempt to dry herself. “He told me it was my stop.”

“That would be Johnny Talbot,” the driver said to the other young man. “He drives that bus.”

“Well, I’m going to report him,” Miss Harper said. There was a little silence in the truck, and then the driver said, “Johnny’s a good guy. He means all right.”

“He’s a bad bus driver,” Miss Harper said sharply.

The truck did not move. “You don’t want to report old Johnny,” the driver said.

“I most certainly—” Miss Harper began, and then stopped. Where am I? she thought, what is happening to me? “No,” she said at last, “I won’t report old Johnny.”

The driver started the truck, and they moved slowly down the road, through the mud and the rain. The windshield wipers swept back and forth hypnotically, there was a narrow line of light ahead from their headlights, and Miss Harper thought, what is happening to me? She stirred, and the young man next to her caught his breath irritably and drew back. “She’s soaking wet,” he said to the driver. “I’m wet already.”

“We’re going down to the old lady’s,” the driver said. “She’ll know what to do.”

“What old lady?” Miss Harper did not dare to move, even turn her head. “Is there any kind of a bus station? Or even a taxi?”

“You could,” the driver said consideringly, “you could wait and catch that same bus tomorrow night when it goes through. Johnny’ll be driving her.”

“I just want to get home as soon as possible,” Miss Harper said. The truck seat was dreadfully uncomfortable, she felt steamy and sticky and chilled through, and home seemed so far away that perhaps it did not exist at all.

“Just down the road a mile or so,” the driver said reassuringly.

“I’ve never heard of Ricket’s Landing,” Miss Harper said. “I can’t imagine how he came to put me off there.”

“Maybe somebody else was supposed to get off there and he thought it was you by mistake.” This deduction seemed to tax the young man’s mind to the utmost, because he said, “See, someone else might of been supposed to get off instead of you.”

“Then *he’s* still on the bus,” said the driver, and they were both silent, appalled.

Ahead of them a light flickered, showing dimly through the rain, and the driver pointed and said, “There, that’s where we’re going.” As they came closer Miss Harper was aware of a growing dismay. The light belonged to what seemed to be a roadhouse, and Miss Harper had never been inside a roadhouse in her life. The house itself was only a dim shape looming in the darkness, and the light, over the side door, illuminated only a sign, hanging crooked, which read BEER *Bar & Grill*.

"Is there anywhere else I could go?" Miss Harper asked timidly, clutching her pocketbook. "I'm not at all sure, you know, that I ought—"

"Not many people here tonight," the driver said, turning the truck into the driveway and pulling up in the parking lot which had once, Miss Harper was sad to see, been a garden. "Rain, probably."

Peering through the window and the rain, Miss Harper felt, suddenly, a warm stir of recognition, of welcome; it's the house, she thought, why, of course, the house is lovely. It had clearly been an old mansion once, solidly and handsomely built, with the balance and style that belonged to a good house of an older time. "Why?" Miss Harper asked, wanting to know why such a good house should have a light tacked on over the side door, and a sign hanging crooked but saying BEER *Bar & Grill;* "Why?" asked Miss Harper, but the driver said, "This is where you wanted to go. Get her suitcase," he told the other young man.

"In here?" asked Miss Harper, feeling a kind of indignation on behalf of the fine old house, "into this saloon?" Why, I used to live in a house like this, she thought, what are they doing to our old houses?

The driver laughed. "You'll be safe," he said.

Carrying her suitcase and her pocketbook Miss Harper followed the two young men to the lighted door and passed under the crooked sign. Shameful, she thought, they haven't even bothered to take care of the place; it needs paint and tightening all around and probably a new roof, and then the driver said, "Come on, come on," and pushed open the heavy door.

"I used to live in a house like this," Miss Harper said, and the young men laughed.

"I bet you did," one of them said, and Miss Harper stopped in the doorway, staring, and realized how strange she must have sounded. Where there had certainly once been comfortable rooms, high-ceilinged and square, with tall doors and polished floors, there was now one large dirty room, with a counter running along one side and half a dozen battered tables; there was a jukebox in a corner and torn linoleum on the floor. "Oh, no," Miss Harper said. The room smelled unpleasant, and the rain slapped against the bare windows.

Sitting around the tables and standing around the jukebox were perhaps a dozen young people, resembling the two who had brought Miss Harper here, all looking oddly alike, all talking and laughing flatly. Miss Harper leaned back against the door; for a minute she thought they were laughing about her. She was wet and disheartened and these noisy people did not belong at all in the old house. Then the driver turned and gestured to her. "Come and meet the old lady," he said, and then, to the room at large, "Look, we brought company."

"Please," Miss Harper said, but no one had given her more than a glance. With her suitcase and her pocketbook she followed the two young men across to the counter; her suitcase bumped against her legs and she thought, I must not fall down.

"Belle, Belle," the driver said, "look at the stray cat we found."

An enormous woman swung around in her seat at the end of the counter, and looked at Miss Harper; looking up and down, looking at the suitcase and Miss Harper's wet hat and wet shoes, looking at Miss Harper's pocketbook and gloves squeezed in her hand, the woman seemed hardly to move her eyes; it was almost as though she absorbed Miss Harper without any particular effort. "Hell you say," the woman said at last. Her voice was surprisingly soft. "Hell you say."

“She’s wet,” the second young man said; the two young men stood one on either side of Miss Harper, presenting her, and the enormous woman looked her up and down. “Please,” Miss Harper said; here was a woman at least, someone who might understand and sympathize, “please, they put me off my bus at the wrong stop and I can’t seem to find my way home. Please.”

“Hell you say,” the woman said, and laughed, a gentle laugh. “She sure is wet,” she said.

“Please,” Miss Harper said.

“You’ll take care of her?” the driver asked. He turned and smiled down at Miss Harper, obviously waiting, and, remembering, Miss Harper fumbled in her pocketbook for her wallet. How much, she was wondering, not wanting to ask, it was such a short ride, but if they hadn’t come I might have gotten pneumonia, and paid all those doctor’s bills; I have caught cold, she thought with great clarity, and chose two five-dollar bills from her wallet. They can’t argue over five dollars each, she thought, and sneezed. The two young men and the large woman were watching her with great interest, and all of them saw that after Miss Harper took out the two five-dollar bills there were a single and two tens left in the wallet. The money was not wet. I suppose I should be grateful for that, Miss Harper thought, moving slowly. She handed a five-dollar bill to each young man and felt that they glanced at one another over her head.

“Thanks,” the driver said; I could have gotten away with a dollar each, Miss Harper thought. “Thanks,” the driver said again, and the other young man said, “Say, thanks.”

“Thank *you*,” Miss Harper said formally.

“I’ll put you up for the night,” the woman said. “You can sleep here. Go tomorrow.” She looked Miss Harper up and down again. “Dry off a little,” she said.

“Is there anywhere else?” Then, afraid that this might seem ungracious, Miss Harper said, “I mean, is there any way of going on tonight? I don’t want to impose.”

“We got rooms for rent.” The woman half turned back to the counter. “Cost you ten for the night.”

She’s leaving me bus fare home, Miss Harper thought; I suppose I should be grateful. “I’d better, I guess,” she said, taking out her wallet again. “I mean, thank you.”

The woman accepted the bill and half turned back to the counter. “Upstairs,” she said. “Take your choice. No one’s around.” She glanced sideways at Miss Harper. “I’ll see you get a cup of coffee in the morning. I wouldn’t turn a dog out without a cup of coffee.”

“Thank you.” Miss Harper knew where the staircase would be, and she turned and, carrying her suitcase and her pocketbook, went to what had once been the front hall and there was the staircase, so lovely in its still proportions that she caught her breath. She turned back and saw the large woman staring at her, and said, “I used to live in a house like this. Built about the same time, I guess. One of those good old houses that were made to stand forever, and where people—”

“Hell you say,” the woman said, and turned back to the counter.

The young people scattered around the big room were talking; in one corner a group surrounded the two who had brought Miss Harper and now and then they laughed. Miss Harper was touched with a little sadness now, looking at them, so at home in the big ugly room which had once been so beautiful. It would be nice, she thought, to speak to these young people, perhaps even become their friend, talk and laugh with them; perhaps they might like to know that this spot where they came together had been a lady’s drawing room. Hesitating a little, Miss Harper wondered if she might call “Good night,” or “Thank you” again, or even “God bless you all.” Then, since no one looked at her, she started up the stairs. Halfway there was a landing with a stained-glass window, and Miss Harper stopped, holding her breath. When she had been a child the stained-glass window on the stair landing in her house had caught the sunlight, and scattered it on the stairs in a hundred colors. Fairyland colors, Miss Harper thought, remembering; I wonder why we don’t live in these houses now. I’m lonely, Miss Harper thought, and then she thought, but I must get out of these wet clothes; I really am catching cold.

Without thinking she turned at the top of the stairs and went to the front room on the left; that had always been her room. The door was open and she glanced in; this was clearly a bedroom for rent, and it was ugly and drab and cheap. The light turned on with a cord hanging beside the door, and Miss Harper stood in the doorway, saddened by the peeling wallpaper and the sagging floor; what have they done to the house, she thought; how can I sleep here tonight?

At last she moved to cross the room and set her suitcase on the bed. I must get dry, she told herself, I must make the best of things. The bed was correctly placed, between the two front windows, but the mattress was stiff and lumpy, and Miss Harper was frightened at the faint smell of dark couplings and a remote echo in the springs; I will not think about such things, Miss Harper thought, I will not let myself dwell on any such thing; this might be the room where I slept as a girl. The windows were almost right — two across the front, two at the side — and the door was placed correctly; how they did build these old places to a square-cut pattern, Miss Harper thought, how they did put them together; there must be a thousand houses all over the country built exactly like this. The closet, however, was on the wrong side. Some oddness of construction had set the closet to Miss Harper's right as she sat on the bed, when it ought really to have been on her left; when she was a girl the big closet had been her playhouse and her hiding place, but it had been on the left.

The bathroom was wrong, too, but that was less important. Miss Harper had thought wistfully of a hot tub before she slept, but a glance at the bathtub discouraged her; she could simply wait until she got home. She washed her face and hands, and the warm water comforted her. She was further comforted to find that her bottle of cologne had not broken in her suitcase and that nothing inside had gotten wet. At least she could sleep in a dry nightgown, although in a cold bed.

She shivered once in the cold sheets, remembering a child's bed. She lay in the darkness with her eyes open, wondering at last where she was and how she had gotten here: first the bus and then the truck, and now she lay in the darkness and no one knew where she was or what was to become of her. She had only her suitcase and a little money in her pocketbook; she did not know where she was. She was very tired and she thought that perhaps the sleeping pill she had taken much earlier had still not quite worn off; perhaps the sleeping pill had been affecting all her actions, since she had been following docilely, bemused, wherever she was taken; in the morning, she told herself sleepily, I'll show them I can make decisions for myself.

The noise downstairs which had been a jukebox and adolescent laughter faded softly into a distant melody; my mother is singing in the drawing room, Miss Harper thought, and the company is sitting on the stiff little chairs listening; my father is playing the piano. She could not quite distinguish the song, but it was one she had heard her mother sing many times; I could creep out to the top of the stairs and listen, she thought, and then became aware that there was a rustling in the closet, but the closet was on the wrong side, on the right instead of the left. It is more a rattling than rustling, Miss Harper thought, wanting to listen to her mother singing, it is as though something wooden were being shaken around. Shall I get out of bed and quiet it so I can hear the singing? Am I too warm and comfortable, am I too sleepy?

The closet was on the wrong side, but the rattling continued, just loud enough to be irritating, and at last, knowing she would never sleep until it stopped, Miss Harper swung her legs over the side of the bed and, sleepily, padded barefoot over to the closet door, reminding herself to go to the right instead of the left.

"What are you doing in there?" she asked aloud, and opened the door. There was just enough light for her to see that it was a wooden snake, head lifted, stirring and rattling itself against the other toys. Miss Harper laughed. "It's my snake," she said aloud, "it's my old snake, and it's come alive." In the back of the closet she could see her old toy clown, bright and cheerful, and as she watched, enchanted, the toy clown flopped languidly forward and back, coming alive. At Miss Harper's feet the snake moved blindly, clattering against a doll house where the tiny people inside stirred, and against a set of blocks, which fell and crashed. Then Miss Harper saw the big beautiful doll sitting on a small chair, the doll with long golden curls and wide-lashed blue eyes and a stiff organdy party dress; as Miss Harper held out her hands in joy the doll opened her eyes and stood up.

"Rosabelle," Miss Harper cried out, "Rosabelle, it's me."

The doll turned, looking widely at her, smile painted on. The red lips opened and the doll quacked, outrageously, a flat slapping voice coming out of that fair mouth. "Go away, old lady," the doll said, "go away, old lady, go away."

Miss Harper backed away, staring. The clown tumbled and danced, mouthing at Miss Harper, the snake flung its eyeless head viciously at her ankles, and the doll turned, holding her skirts, and her mouth opened and shut. “Go away,” she quacked, “go away, old lady, go away.”

The inside of the closet was all alive; a small doll ran madly from side to side, the animals paraded solemnly down the gangplank of Noah’s ark, a stuffed bear wheezed asthmatically. The noise was louder and louder, and then Miss Harper realized that they were all looking at her hatefully and moving toward her. The doll said “Old lady, old lady,” and stepped forward; Miss Harper slammed the closet door and leaned against it. Behind her the snake crashed against the door and the doll’s voice went on and on. Crying out, Miss Harper turned and fled, but the closet was on the wrong side and she turned the wrong way and found herself cowering against the far wall with the door impossibly far away while the closet door slowly opened and the doll’s face, smiling, looked for her.

Miss Harper fled. Without stopping to look behind she flung herself across the room and through the door, down the hall and on down the wide lovely stairway. “Mommy,” she screamed, “Mommy, Mommy.”

Screaming, she fled out the door. “Mommy,” she cried, and fell, going down and down into darkness, turning, trying to catch onto something solid and real, crying.

“Look, lady,” the bus driver said. “I’m not an alarm clock. Wake up and get off the bus.”

“You’ll be sorry,” Miss Harper said distinctly.

“Wake up,” he said, “wake up and get off the bus.”

“I intend to report you,” Miss Harper said. Pocketbook, gloves, hat, suitcase.

“I’ll certainly report you,” she said, almost crying.

“This is as far as you go,” the driver said.

The bus lurched, moved, and Miss Harper almost stumbled in the driving rain, her suitcase at her feet, under the sign reading RICKET’S LANDING.

THREE LECTURES, WITH TWO STORIES

EXPERIENCE AND FICTION

It is most agreeable to be a writer of fiction for several reasons — one of the most important being, of course, that you can persuade people that it is really work if you look haggard enough — but perhaps the most useful thing about being a writer of fiction is that nothing is ever wasted; all experience is good for something; you tend to see everything as a potential structure of words. One of my daughters made this abruptly clear to me when she came not long ago into the kitchen where I was trying to get the door of our terrible old refrigerator open; it always stuck when the weather was wet, and one of the delights of a cold rainy day was opening the refrigerator door. My daughter watched me wrestling with it for a minute and then she said that I was foolish to bang on the refrigerator door like that; why not use magic to open it? I thought about this. I poured myself another cup of coffee and lighted a cigarette and sat down for a while and thought about it; and then decided that she was right. I left the refrigerator where it was and went in to my typewriter and wrote a story about not being able to open the refrigerator door and getting the children to open it with magic. When a magazine bought the story I bought a new refrigerator. That is what I would like to talk about now — the practical application of magic, or where do stories come from?

People are always asking me — and every other writer I know — where story ideas come from. Where *do* you get your ideas, they ask; how do you ever manage to think them up? It's certainly the hardest question in the world to answer, since stories originate in everyday happenings and emotions, and any writer who tried to answer such a question would find himself telling over, in some detail, the story of his life. Fiction uses so many small items, so many little gestures and remembered incidents and unforgettable faces, that trying to isolate any one inspiration for any one story is incredibly difficult, but basically, of course, the genesis of any fictional work has to be human experience. This translation of experience into fiction is not a mystic one. It is, I think, part recognition and part analysis. A bald description of an incident is hardly fiction, but the same incident, carefully taken apart, examined as to emotional and balanced structure, and then as carefully reassembled in the most effective form, slanted and polished and weighed, may very well be a short story. Let me try an example.

I have lifted this from a story written several years ago by a college student I knew; it has always stayed in my mind as the most perfect nonstory I ever read. This is how the plot goes: In a small town the people are having a church fair, the high point of which is the raffling off of a particularly beautiful quilt made by one of the local ladies; the quilt has been the talk of the town for weeks, and the admiration and envy of all the women; all of them want it badly. The raffle is held, and the quilt is won by a summer visitor, a wealthy woman who has no use for the quilt and no desire for it. She sends her chauffeur over to the platform to pick up the quilt and bring it back to her car.

Now, this story written straight, as I just read it, is almost meaningless. It is a simple anecdote, and carries only the statement that the women in the small town resent the summer visitor, and dislike having her win the quilt; its only actual impact is the ironic point that the quilt should have been won by the only woman attending the raffle who really did not want it. Now, suppose this were taken apart and reassembled. We would then have to examine more particularly four or five people most concerned — the summer visitor, the chauffeur, the woman who made the quilt, the minister who raffled it off, and perhaps the one village woman — I believe there always *is* one — who was most open and loud in her disapproval; as things stand now, these people have no faces, only parts to play. Suppose we were to give them personalities, sketch in people, lightly at first, experimentally; suppose the summer visitor is actually a shy, friendly person who very much wants to be liked, and thinks that accepting the quilt will endear her to the villagers; suppose she is foolish enough to try to give the quilt back again afterward? Suppose the minister had intended this church fair as an attempt to make peace among the quarreling women in the village, and now sees their quarrels ended when they unite in hatred of the outsider? Then consider the chauffeur; as the story stands now he has the most agonizing two or three minutes of all — the walk from the car, through the people of the village, to the platform to take up the quilt and carry it back; if the chauffeur came from a small town himself, and knew what such people were like, how would he feel during those few minutes? Suppose the chauffeur were a boy from that town, hired for the summer to drive the wealthy visitor's car? And, beyond all else, how do the *men* in the village feel at the feuding over the quilt?

If the story is going to be a short one, it is of course only necessary to focus on one of these characters — I like the chauffeur, myself — and follow this character from beginning to end; in a short story the time would of course be limited to the actual moments of the raffle, with the background sketched in through conversation and small incidents — the way the village women look at the fancy car, perhaps, or the minister's nervousness when he comes to draw the number; the point of the story might be indicated early, telegraphed, as it were, if the story opened with the summer visitor buying a cake at one of the stands, while the village women watch her and make their private comments; I keep calling them "village women," by the way; I do not mean by that that they are primitive, or uneducated, or unsophisticated; I think of them only as a tightly knit group, interested in their own concerns, and as resentful of outsiders as any of us.

If it were going to be a longer story, these people would be examined in more detail, and there would have to be more incidents, all paralleling the final one, the characters would have to be more firmly drawn, and the scene of the fair made more vivid as a background. The longer story might open with the village ladies decorating the fair grounds in the morning, with their bickering and arguing over whose booth was going to have the best location, and the woman who made the quilt would have to be there, set in with a definite character — perhaps they all hate her, but will defend her and her quilt because the summer visitor is the outsider?

It is almost silly to say that no one will read a story which does not interest him. Yet many writers forget it. They write a story which interests *them*, forgetting that the particular emotional investment they brought to the incident had never been communicated to the reader because, writing the story, they wrote down only what happened and not what was felt. In our story of the quilt, the girl who orginally wrote it had been, as a daughter of the woman who made the quilt, very much involved in both the excitement and the indignation, but there was nothing of that in the story. She only wrote down what happened when an outsider won a quilt at a church fair. She said she didn't want the story to be autobiographical, and so she had kept herself entirely out of it. She had kept herself out of it so successfully, in fact, that the story was hopelessly dull; it had nothing in it except its one small ironic point; the rest of the story was waste, and padding. The village ladies were named Mrs. Smith and Mrs. Jones and it was not possible to tell one from another. Even the minister merged into the general flat landscape, recognizable only by his name. She pointed out that these were real people, and if she described them any more clearly they might read the story and be offended. And she couldn't change any of it because that was the way it had really *happened*. What was the purpose, she thought, of changing the events when this ironic little incident *had* really happened, she had been there and seen it, and had always wanted, she said, to write it down because it seemed just perfect material for a story.

Now there are three elements here, three mistaken conceptions, which would keep this anecdote from ever turning into a story. I think it cannot be too firmly emphasized that in the writing of any kind of fiction no scene and no character can be allowed to wander off by itself; there must be some furthering of the story in every sentence, and even the most fleeting background characters must partake of the story in some way; they must be characters peculiar to *this* story and no other. A boy who climbs an apple tree to watch the raffling off of the quilt only wastes time and attention if that is *all* he does; the reader's mind is taken away from the story while he watches that boy climb the tree directly over the visitor's fancy car, and amuses himself by dropping green apples down onto the roof of the car and snickering, he is still a background character but he has added to the story by reinforcing the village attitude toward the outsider. The reader has, presumably, seen small boys climb apple trees before, but this boy exists nowhere else in the world than in this story and this village, and it must be made clear that that is where he belongs.

The second point I want to emphasize is that people in stories are called characters because that is what they are. They are not real people. It is, of course, possible to choose a character and describe him so completely that the reader sees him as a whole personality, rounded and recognizable. The only trouble with that is that it takes several thousand pages of solid description, including a lot of very dull reading. Most of us have enough trouble understanding ourselves and our families and friends without wanting to know *everything* about a fictional character. A person in a story is identified through small things — little gestures, turns of speech, automatic reactions; suppose one of the women in our quilt story is excessively and foolishly modest; suppose that when someone praises her cakes she answers that they're really not very good, actually; she made *much* better cakes for the church fair last year; she just wishes that no one would even *taste* a piece of this year's cake, because it's really not any good at all; or if someone else remarks on how delicate her embroidery is, she will say that it's really nowhere near as good as everyone else's, and she could do much better if she had more time, although of *course* nothing she ever made could *begin* to be as good as Mrs. Smith's, although of course if she had as much time to spend doing embroidery as Mrs. Smith she might be able to do even *half* as well. That woman is identified for the reader permanently. If the reader comes to a conversation later, and he reads the remark: "Oh, it's not really anything good at *all*; anyone could have done better, really; I just get embarrassed if anyone even *looks* at my poor work" — he knows at once who is talking. It is not necessary to describe the woman any further; everyone has heard people who talk like that, and any reader will know at once exactly what she is like. Any minor character may be spotlighted in the background in this manner, and major characters will of course take on new depths of personality by being so clearly identified; suppose the minister in our story has a nervous or tired gesture that he makes over and over without thinking — suppose he covers his eyes wearily with his hand when he is worried — a small gesture like that will do more to describe him than a biography.

Further, let me stop briefly to quarrel with the statement that this event cannot be improved upon because that is the way it really happened. The only way to turn something that really happened into something that happens on paper is to attack it in the beginning the way a puppy attacks an old shoe. Shake it, snarl at it, sneak up on it from various angles. Perhaps the simple little incident you are dying to turn into fiction may carry a wholly new punch if you wrote it upside down or inside out or starting at the end; many stories that just won't work out as straightforward accounts go smoothly and neatly if you start from the end; I mean, tell the ending first and then let the story unfold, giving the explanations which make the story plausible. In our quilt story, of course, the entire setup would fall apart if we tried writing it from the end — unless the end is really the girl who wrote the story in the first place, and would not put in real people because she was one of them. See what happens to the story then; it becomes a story about conflicting loyalties, the story of a girl who loves her home town and yet, having left it behind, finds also in herself a certain sympathy with the outsider, the wistful woman who does not belong anywhere. If we do what I call turning the story inside out, we can abandon the church fair and the raffle temporarily, give the summer visitor two small children, put the two small children on the outskirts of the crowd — say down by the brook, playing with some of the village children, and let their amiable play stand in the foreground against the raffle in the background, contrasting the children playing with the suspicion and hatred building up among the grownups. Or suppose we want to turn the story outside in — how about making the summer visitor a fairly stupid woman, who is determined to win the quilt, and puts through some highhanded maneuvering to make sure she wins it? By changing the emphasis and angle on this little plot we can make it say almost anything we like. There is certainly no need to worry about whether any of this is true, or actually happened; it is as true as you make it. The important thing is that it be true in the story, and actually happen *there*.

* * *

I can, in the last analysis, talk only about my own work; it is not that I am so entirely vain, but because there is really one writer I know well enough to say these things about; I would not dare discuss intimately anyone else. So I would like to show you a little of how my own fiction comes directly from experience.

I have recently finished a novel about a haunted house. I was [working] on a novel about a haunted house because I happened by chance, to read a book about a group of people, nineteenth-century psychic researchers, who rented a haunted house and recorded their impressions of the things they saw and heard and felt in order to contribute a learned paper to the Society for Psychic Research. They thought that they were being terribly scientific and proving all kinds of things, and yet the story that kept coming through their dry reports was not at all the story of a haunted house, it was the story of several earnest, I believe misguided, certainly determined people, with their differing motivations and backgrounds. I found it so exciting that I wanted more than anything else to set up my own haunted house, and put my own people in it, and see what *I* could make happen. As so often happens, the minute I started thinking about ghosts and haunted houses, all kinds of things turned up to enforce my intentions, or perhaps I was thinking so entirely about my new book that everything I saw turned to it; I can’t say, although I *can* say that I could do without some of the manifestations I have met. The first thing that happened was in New York City; we — my husband and I — were on the train which stops briefly at the *125*th Street station, and just outside the station, dim and horrible in the dusk, I saw a building so disagreeable that I could not stop looking at it; it was tall and black and as I looked at it when the train began to move again it faded away and disappeared. That night in our hotel room I woke up with nightmares, the kind where you have to get up and turn on the light and walk around for a few minutes just to make sure that there is a real world and this one is it, not the one you have been dreaming about; my nightmares had somehow settled around the building I had seen from the train. From that time on I completely ruined my whole vacation in New York City by dreading the moment when we would have to take the train back and pass that building again. Let me just point out right here and now that my unconscious mind has *been* unconscious for a number of years now and it is my firm intention to keep it that way. When I have nightmares about a horrid building it is the horrid building I am having nightmares about, and no one is going to talk me out of it; that is final. Anyway, my nervousness was so extreme, finally, that we changed our plans and took a night train home, so that I would not be able to see the building when we went past, but even after we were home it bothered me still, coloring all my recollections of a pleasant visit to the city, and at last I wrote to a friend at Columbia University and asked him to locate the building and find out, if he could, why it looked so terrifying. When we got his answer I had one important item for my book. He wrote that he had had trouble finding the building, since it only existed from that one particular point of the *125*th Street station; from any other angle it was not recognizable as a building at all. Some seven months before it had been almost entirely burned in a disastrous fire which killed nine people. What was left of the building, from the other three sides, was a shell. The children in the neighborhood knew that it was haunted.

I do not think that the Society for Psychic Research would accept me as a qualified observer; I think, in fact, that they would bounce me right out the door, but it seemed clear to me that what I had felt about that horrid building was an excellent beginning for learning how people feel when they encounter the supernatural. I have always been interested in witchcraft and superstition, but have never had much traffic with ghosts, so I began asking people everywhere what they thought about such things, and I began to find out that there was one common factor — most people have never seen a ghost, and never want or expect to, but almost everyone will admit that sometimes they have a sneaking feeling that they just possibly *could* meet a ghost if they weren't careful — if they were to turn a corner too suddenly, perhaps, or open their eyes too soon when they wake up at night, or go into a dark room without hesitating first....

Well, as I say, fiction comes from experience. I had not the remotest desire to see a ghost. I was absolutely willing to go on the rest of my life without ever seeing even the slightest supernatural manifestation. I wanted to write a book about ghosts, but I was perfectly prepared — I cannot emphasize this too strongly — I was perfectly prepared to keep those ghosts wholly imaginary. I was already doing a lot of splendid research reading all the books about ghosts I could get hold of, and particularly true ghost stories — so much so that it became necessary for me to read a chapter of *Little Women* every night before I turned out the light — and at the same time I was collecting pictures of houses, particularly odd houses, to see what I could find to make into a suitable haunted house. I read books of architecture and clipped pictures out of magazines and newspapers and learned about cornices and secret stairways and valances and turrets and flying buttresses and gargoyles and all kinds of things that people have done to inoffensive houses, and then I came across a picture in a magazine which really looked right. It was the picture of a house which reminded me vividly of the hideous building in New York; it had the same air of disease and decay, and if ever a house looked like a candidate for a ghost, it was this one. All that I had to identify it was the name of a California town, so I wrote to my mother, who has lived in California all her life, and sent her the picture, asking if she had any idea where I could get information about this ugly house. She wrote back in some surprise. Yes, she knew about the house, although she had not supposed that there were any pictures of it still around. My great-grandfather built it. It had stood empty and deserted for some years before it finally caught fire, and it was generally believed that that was because the people of the town got together one night and burned it down.

By then it was abundantly clear to me that I had no choice; the ghosts were after me. In case I had any doubts, however, I came downstairs a few mornings later and found a sheet of copy paper moved to the center of my desk, set neatly away from the general clutter. On the sheet of paper was written DEAD DEAD in my own handwriting. I am accustomed to making notes for books, but not in my sleep; I decided that I had better write the book awake, which I got to work and did.

It is much easier, I find, to write a story than to cope competently with the millions of daily trials and irritations that turn up in an ordinary house, and it helps a good deal — particularly with children around — if you can see them through a flattering veil of fiction. It has always been a comfort to me to make stories out of things that happen, things like moving, and kittens, and Christmas concerts at the grade school, and broken bicycles; it is easier, as Sally said, to magic the refrigerator than it is to wrench at the door. And it is certainly easier to sit there taking notes while everyone else is running around packing the suitcases and giving last-minute instructions to the moving men. I remember that once the income-tax people were making one of their spot checks in our locality, and, to our intense dismay, one of the spots they decided to check was us. Nothing can protect you at a time like that; no matter how conscientious you have been about your income tax, guilt overwhelms you when that man walks in. He was only at our house for about an hour, and all the time he was in the study with my husband, studying canceled checks and mortgage receipts, and I could hear my husband yelling "Depreciation, depreciation," I was in the dining room with my typewriter, defending myself. I had started to compose an impassioned letter to the United States Government about unjustifiable tyranny over honest law-abiding citizens, but I could not resist a few words of description of the way our family had received the news that the man was coming, and by the time the conference in the study was over I was well along in a story about a quietly lunatic tax investigation — and guess who was going to be the villain. When the income-tax man was ready to leave he came through the dining room with my husband and stopped to say, oh yes; he gathered that I was a writer. Say, he went on, he had often wondered — where did writing people get the ideas for the stuff they wrote? Huh? He picked up one page of my manuscript and I barely got it away from him in time. I really don't know what would have happened to our tax returns if he had read it.

I would like, if I may, to finish with a story which is the most direct translation of experience into fiction that I have ever done. For one thing, I had a high fever the whole time I was writing it. For another thing, I was interrupted constantly with requests to take upstairs trays of orange juice or chicken soup or aspirin or ginger ale or dry sheets or boxes of crayons. For another thing, while I was writing it, my husband was lying on the couch with a hot-water bottle saying that writing stories was all very well, but suppose he died right then and there — was there anyone to care? I may even have whined a little myself, carrying trays and getting hotter hot-water bottles and telling everyone that they were just pretty lucky that they had me at least, to wait on them and take care of them in spite of the fact that I was every bit as sick as they were, and only the purest spirit of self-sacrifice kept me going at all, and they should be grateful. Actually, my husband and two of our children had the grippe, and I was only just catching it; only the fact that I had to finish the story kept me from abandoning them and going someplace quiet to lie down. We had only three children then, by the way — we didn't know when we were well off — and the one referred to variously as Sally, or Baby, is now of an age to read, and repudiate, an accurate accounting of her own behavior. The story was published as "The Night We All Had Grippe," and I got a letter about it from a lady in Indiana. I would like to make a little extra money writing, she wrote to me in this letter. Tell me, where do you get ideas for stories? I can never make up anything good.

THE NIGHT WE ALL HAD GRIPPE

WE ARE ALL of us, in our family, very fond of puzzles. I do Double-Crostics and read mystery stories, my husband does baseball box scores and figures out batting averages, our son Laurie is addicted to the kind of puzzle which begins, “There are fifty-four items in this picture beginning with the letter C,” our older daughter Jannie does children’s jigsaws, and Sally, the baby, can put together an intricate little arrangement of rings and bars which has had the rest of us stopped for two months. We are none of us, however, capable of solving the puzzles we work up for ourselves in the oddly diffuse patterns of our several lives (who is, now I think of it?); and along with such family brain-teasers as, “Why is there a pair of roller skates in Mommy’s desk?” and, “What is *really* in the back of Laurie’s closet?” and, “Why doesn’t Daddy wear the nice shirts Jannie picked out for Father’s Day?” we are all of us still wondering nervously about what might be called The Great Grippe Mystery. As a matter of fact, I should be extremely grateful if anyone could solve it for us, because we are certainly very short of blankets, and it’s annoying not to have *any* kind of answer. Here, in rough outline, is our puzzle:

* * *

Our house is large, and the second floor has four bedrooms and a bathroom, all opening out onto a long narrow hall which we have made even narrower by lining it with bookcases so that every inch of hall which is not doorway is books. As is the case with most houses, both the front door and the back door are downstairs on the first floor. The front bedroom, which is my husband’s and mine, is the largest and lightest, and has a double bed. The room next down the hall belongs to the girls, and contains a crib and a single, short bed. Laurie’s room, across the hall, has a double-decker bed and he sleeps on the top half. The guest room, at the end of the hall, has a double bed. The double bed in our room is made up with white sheets and cases, the baby’s crib has pink linen, and Jannie’s bed has yellow. Laurie’s bed has green linen and the guest room has blue. The bottom half of Laurie’s bed is never made up, unless company is going to use it immediately, because the dog, whose name is Toby, traditionally spends a large part of his time there and regards it as his bed. There is no bed table on the distaff side of the double bed in our room. One side of the bed in the guest room is pushed against the wall. No one can fit into the baby’s crib except the baby; the ladder to the top half of Laurie’s double-decker is very shaky and stands in a corner of the room; the children reach the top half of the bed by climbing up over the footboard. All three of the children are accustomed to having a glass of apple juice, to which they are addicted, by their bedsides at night. My husband invariably keeps a glass of water by *his* bedside. Laurie uses a green glass, Jannie uses a red glass, the baby uses one of those little flowered cheese glasses, and my husband uses a tin glass because he has broken so many ordinary glasses trying to find them in the dark.

I do not take cough drops or cough medicine in any form.

The baby customarily sleeps with half a dozen cloth books, an armless doll, and a small cardboard suitcase which holds the remnants of half a dozen decks of cards. Jannie is very partial to a pink baby blanket, which has shrunk from many washings. The girls’ room is very warm, the guest room moderately so; our room is chilly, and Laurie’s room is quite cold. We are all of us, including the dog, notoriously easy and heavy sleepers; my husband never eats coffeecake.

* * *

My husband caught the grippe first, on a Friday, and snarled and shivered and complained until I prevailed upon him to go to bed. By Friday night both Laurie and the baby were feverish, and on Saturday Jannie and I began to cough and sniffle. In our family we take ill in different manners; my husband is extremely annoyed at the whole procedure, and is convinced that his being sick is somebody else's fault, Laurie tends to become a little lightheaded and strew handkerchiefs around his room, Jannie coughs and coughs and coughs, the baby turns bright red, and I suffer in stoical silence, so long as everyone knows clearly that I am sick. We are each of us privately convinced that our own ailment is far more severe than anyone else's. At any rate, on Saturday night I put all the children into their beds, gave each of them half an aspirin and the usual fruit juice, covered them warmly, and then settled my husband down for the night with his glass of water and his cigarettes and matches and ash tray; he had decided to sleep in the guest room because it was warmer. At about ten o'clock I checked to see that all the children were covered and asleep and that Toby was in his place on the bottom half of the double-decker. I then took two sleeping pills and went to sleep in my own bed in my own room. Because my husband was in the guest room I slept on his side of the bed, next to the bed table. I put my cigarettes and matches on the end table next to the ash tray, along with a small glass of brandy, which I find more efficacious than cough medicine.

I woke up some time later to find Jannie standing beside the bed. "Can't sleep," she said. "Want to come in *your* bed."

“Come along,” I said. “Bring your own pillow.”

She went and got her pillow and her small pink blanket and her glass of fruit juice, which she put on the floor next to the bed, since she had gotten the side without any end table. She put her pillow down, rolled herself in her pink blanket, and fell asleep. I went back to sleep, but some time later the baby came in, asking sleepily, “Where’s Jannie?”

“She’s here,” I said. “Are you coming in bed with us?”

“Yes,” said the baby.

“Go and get your pillow, then,” I said. She returned with her pillow, her books, her doll, her suitcase, and her fruit juice, which she put on the floor next to Jannie’s. Then she crowded in comfortably next to Jannie and fell asleep. Eventually the pressure of the two of them began to force me uneasily toward the edge of the bed, so I rolled out wearily, took my pillow and my small glass of brandy and my cigarettes and matches and my ash tray and went into the guest room, where my husband was asleep. I pushed at him and he snarled, but finally moved over to the side next to the wall, and I put my cigarettes and matches and my brandy and my ash tray on the end table next to *his* cigarettes and matches and ash tray and tin glass of water and put my pillow on the bed and fell asleep. Shortly after this he woke me and asked me to let him get out of the bed, since it was too hot in that room to sleep and he was going back to his own bed.

He took his pillow and his cigarettes and matches and his ash tray and his tin glass of water and went padding off down the hall. In a few minutes Laurie came into the guest room where I had just fallen asleep again; he was carrying his pillow and his glass of fruit juice. “Too cold in my room,” he said, and I moved out of the way and let him get into the bed on the side next to the wall. After a few minutes the dog came in, whining nervously, and came up onto the bed and curled himself up around Laurie, and I had to get out or be smothered. I gathered together what of my possessions I could, and made my way into my own room, where my husband was asleep with Jannie on one side and the baby on the other. Jannie woke up when I came in and said, “Own bed,” so I helped her carry her pillow and her fruit juice and her pink blanket back to her own bed.

The minute Jannie got out of our bed the baby rolled over and turned sideways, so there was no room for me. I could not get into the crib and I could not climb into the top half of the double-decker so since the dog was in the guest room I went and took the blanket off the crib and got into the bottom half of the double-decker, setting my brandy and my cigarettes and matches and my ash tray on the floor next to the bed. Shortly after that Jannie, who apparently felt left out, came in with her pillow and her pink blanket and her fruit juice and got up into the top half of the double-decker, leaving her fruit juice on the floor next to my brandy.

* * *

At about six in the morning the dog wanted to get out, or else he wanted his bed back, because he came and stood next to me and howled. I got up and went downstairs, sneezing, and let him out, and then decided that since it had been so cold anyway in the bottom half of the double-decker I might as well stay downstairs and heat up some coffee and have that much warmth, at least. While I was waiting for the coffee to heat, Jannie came to the top of the stairs and asked if I would bring *her* something hot, and I heard Laurie stirring in the guest room, so I heated some milk and put it into a jug and decided that while I was at it I might just as well give everybody something hot, so I set out enough cups for everyone and brought out a coffeecake and put it on the tray and added some onion rolls for my husband, who does not eat coffeecake. When I brought the tray upstairs Laurie and Jannie were both in the guest room, giggling, so I put the tray down in there and heard Baby waking from our room in the front. I went to get her and she was sitting up in the bed talking to her father, who was only very slightly awake. “Play card?” she was asking brightly, and she opened her suitcase and dealt him onto the pillow next to his nose four diamonds to the ace jack and the seven of clubs.

I asked my husband if he would like some coffee and he said it was terribly cold. I suggested that he come down into the guest room, where it was warmer. He and the baby followed me down to the guest room and my husband and Laurie got into the bed and the rest of us sat on the foot of the bed and I poured the coffee and the hot milk and gave the children coffeecake and my husband the onion rolls. Jannie decided to take her milk and coffeecake back into her own bed and since she had mislaid her pillow she took one from the guest room bed. Baby of course followed her, going first back into our room to pick up *her* pillow. My husband fell asleep again while I was pouring his coffee, and Laurie set his hot milk precariously on the headboard of the bed and asked me to get his pillow from wherever it was, so I went into the double-decker and got him the pillow from the top, which turned out to be Jannie’s, and her pink blanket was with it.

I took my coffeecake and my coffee into my own bed and had just settled down when Laurie came in to say cloudily that Daddy had kicked him out of bed and could he stay in here? I said of course and he said he would get a pillow and he came back in a minute with the one from the bottom half of the double-decker, which was mine. He went to sleep right away, and then the baby came in to get her books and her suitcase and decided to stay with her milk and her coffeecake so I left and went into the guest room and made my husband move over and sat *there* and had my coffee. Meanwhile Jannie had moved into the top half of the double-decker, looking for her pillow, and had taken instead the pillow from baby’s bed and my glass of brandy and had settled down there to listen to Laurie’s radio. I went downstairs to let the dog in and he came upstairs and got into his bed on the bottom half of the double-decker and while I was gone my husband had moved back over onto the accessible side of the guest-room bed so I went into Jannie’s bed, which is rather too short, and I brought a pillow from the guest room, and my coffee.

At about nine o’clock the Sunday papers came and I went down to get them, and at about nine-thirty everyone woke up. My husband had moved back into his own bed when Laurie and Baby vacated it for their own beds, Laurie driving Jannie into the guest room when he took back the top half of the double-decker, and my husband woke up at nine-thirty and found himself wrapped in Jannie’s pink blanket, sleeping on Laurie’s green pillow and with a piece of coffeecake and Baby’s fruit-juice glass, not to mention the four diamonds to the ace jack and the seven of clubs. Laurie in the top half of the double-decker had my glass of brandy and my cigarettes and matches and the baby’s pink pillow. The dog had my white pillow and my ash tray. Jannie in the guest room had one white pillow and one blue pillow and two glasses of fruit juice and my husband’s cigarettes and matches and ash tray and Laurie’s hot milk, besides her own hot milk and coffeecake and her father’s onion rolls. The baby in her crib had her father’s tin glass of water and her suitcase and books and doll and a blue pillow from the guest room, but no blanket.

The puzzle, is, of course, what became of the blanket from Baby’s bed? I took it off her crib and put it on the bottom half of the double-decker, but the dog did not have it when he woke up, and neither did any of the other beds. It was a blue-patterned patchwork blanket, and has not been seen since, and I would most particularly like to know where it got to. As I say, we are very short of blankets.

BIOGRAPHY OF A STORY

ON THE MORNING of June 28, 1948, I walked down to the post office in our little Vermont town to pick up the mail. I was quite casual about it, as I recall — I opened the box, took out a couple of bills and a letter or two, talked to the postmaster for a few minutes, and left, never supposing that it was the last time for months that I was to pick up the mail without an active feeling of panic. By the next week I had had to change my mailbox to the largest one in the post office, and casual conversation with the postmaster was out of the question, because he wasn't speaking to me. June *28*, *1948* was the day *The New Yorker* came out with a story of mine in it. It was not my first published story, nor my last, but I have been assured over and over that if it had been the only story I ever wrote or published, there would be people who would not forget my name.

I had written the story three weeks before, on a bright June morning when summer seemed to have come at last, with blue skies and warm sun and no heavenly signs to warn me that my morning's work was anything but just another story. The idea had come to me while I was pushing my daughter up the hill in her stroller — it was, as I say, a warm morning, and the hill was steep, and beside my daughter the stroller held the day's groceries — and perhaps the effort of that last fifty yards up the hill put an edge to the story; at any rate, I had the idea fairly clearly in my mind when I put my daughter in her playpen and the frozen vegetables in the refrigerator, and, writing the story, I found that it went quickly and easily, moving from beginning to end without pause. As a matter of fact, when I read it over later I decided that except for one or two minor corrections, it needed no changes, and the story I finally typed up and sent off to my agent the next day was almost word for word the original draft. This, as any writer of stories can tell you, is not a usual thing. All I know is that when I came to read the story over I felt strongly that I didn't want to fuss with it. I didn't think it was perfect, but I didn't want to fuss with it. It was, I thought, a serious, straightforward story, and I was pleased and a little surprised at the ease with which it had been written; I was reasonably proud of it, and hoped that my agent would sell it to some magazine and I would have the gratification of seeing it in print.

My agent did not care for the story, but — as she said in her note at the time — her job was to sell it, not to like it. She sent it at once to *The New Yorker*, and about a week after the story had been written I received a telephone call from the fiction editor of *The New Yorker*; it was quite clear that he did not really care for the story, either, but *The New Yorker* was going to buy it. He asked for one change — that the date mentioned in the story be changed to coincide with the date of the issue of the magazine in which the story would appear, and I said of course. He then asked, hesitantly, if I had any particular interpretation of my own for the story; Mr. Harold Ross, then the editor of *The New Yorker*, was not altogether sure that he understood the story, and wondered if I cared to enlarge upon its meaning. I said no. Mr. Ross, he said, thought that the story might be puzzling to some people, and in case anyone telephoned the magazine, as sometimes happened, or wrote in asking about the story, was there anything in particular I wanted them to say? No, I said, nothing in particular; it was just a story I wrote.

I had no more preparation than that. I went on picking up the mail every morning, pushing my daughter up and down the hill in her stroller, anticipating pleasurably the check from *The New Yorker*, and shopping for groceries. The weather stayed nice and it looked as though it was going to be a good summer. Then, on June *28*, *The New Yorker* came out with my story.

Things began mildly enough with a note from a friend at *The New Yorker*: “Your story has kicked up quite a fuss around the office,” he wrote. I was flattered; it’s nice to think that your friends notice what you write. Later that day there was a call from one of the magazine’s editors; they had had a couple of people phone in about my story, he said, and was there anything I particularly wanted him to say if there were any more calls? No, I said, nothing particular; anything he chose to say was perfectly all right with me; it was just a story.

I was further puzzled by a cryptic note from another friend: “Heard a man talking about a story of yours on the bus this morning,” she wrote. “Very exciting. I wanted to tell him I knew the author, but after I heard what he was saying I decided I’d better not.”

One of the most terrifying aspects of publishing stories and books is the realization that they are going to be read, and read by strangers. I had never fully realized this before, although I had of course in my imagination dwelt lovingly upon the thought of the millions and millions of people who were going to be uplifted and enriched and delighted by the stories I wrote. It had simply never occurred to me that these millions and millions of people might be so far from being uplifted that they would sit down and write me letters I was downright scared to open; of the three-hundred-odd letters that I received that summer I can count only thirteen that spoke kindly to me, and they were mostly from friends. Even my mother scolded me: “Dad and I did not care at all for your story in *The New Yorker*,” she wrote sternly; “it does seem, dear, that this gloomy kind of story is what all you young people think about these days. Why don't you write something to cheer people up?"

By mid-July I had begun to perceive that I was very lucky indeed to be safely in Vermont, where no one in our small town had ever heard of *The New Yorker*, much less read my story. Millions of people, and my mother, had taken a pronounced dislike to me.

The magazine kept no track of telephone calls, but all letters addressed to me care of the magazine were forwarded directly to me for answering, and all letters addressed to the magazine — some of them addressed to Harold Ross personally; these were the most vehement — were answered at the magazine and then the letters were sent me in great batches, along with carbons of the answers written at the magazine. I have all the letters still, and if they could be considered to give any accurate cross section of the reading public, or the reading public of *The New Yorker*, or even the reading public of one issue of *The New Yorker*, I would stop writing now.

Judging from these letters, people who read stories are gullible, rude, frequently illiterate, and horribly afraid of being laughed at. Many of the writers were positive that The New Yorker was going to ridicule them in print, and the most cautious letters were headed, in capital letters: NOT FOR PUBLICATION or PLEASE DO NOT PRINT THIS LETTER, or, at best, THIS LETTER MAY BE PUBLISHED AT YOUR USUAL RATES OF PAYMENT. Anonymous letters, of which there were a few, were destroyed. The New Yorker never published any comment of any kind about the story in the magazine, but did issue one publicity release saying that the story had received more mail than any piece of fiction they had ever published; this was after the newspapers had gotten into the act, in midsummer, with a front-page story in the San Francisco Chronicle begging to know what the story meant, and a series of columns in New York and

Chicago papers pointing out that New Yorker subscriptions were being canceled right and left.

Curiously, there are three main themes which dominate the letters of that first summer — three themes which might be identified as bewilderment, speculation, and plain old-fashioned abuse. In the years since then, during which the story has been anthologized, dramatized, televised, and even — in one completely mystifying transformation — made into a ballet, the tenor of letters I receive has changed. I am addressed more politely, as a rule, and the letters largely confine themselves to questions like what does this story mean? The general tone of the early letters, however, was a kind of wide-eyed, shocked innocence. People at first were not so much concerned with what the story meant; what they wanted to know was where these lotteries were held, and whether they could go there and watch. Listen to these quotations:

(Kansas) Will you please tell me the locale and the year of the custom?

(Oregon) Where in heaven's name does there exist such barbarity as described in the story?

(New York) Do such tribunal rituals still exist and if so where?

(New York) To a reader who has only a fleeting knowledge of traditional rites in various parts of the country (I presume the plot was laid in the United States) I found the cruelty of the ceremony outrageous, if not unbelievable. It may be just a custom or ritual which I am not familiar with.

(New York) Would you please explain whether such improbable rituals occur in our Middle Western states, and what their origin and purpose are?

(Nevada) Although we recognize the story to be fiction is it possible that it is based on fact?

(Maryland) Please let me know if the custom of which you wrote actually exists.

(New York) To satisfy my curiousity would you please tell me if such rites are still practiced and if so where?

(California) If it is based on fact would you please tell me the date and place of its origin?

(Texas) What I would like to know, if you don't mind enlightening me, is in what part of the United States this organized, apparently legal lynching is practiced? Could it be that in New England or in equally enlightened regions, mass sadism is still part and parcel of the ordinary citizen's life?

(Georgia) I'm hoping you'll find time to give me further details about the bizarre custom the story describes, where it occurs, who practices it, and why.

(Brooklyn, N.Y.) I am interested in learning if there is any particular source or group of sources of fact or legend on which and from which the story is based? This story has caused me to be particularly disturbed by my lack of knowledge of such rites or lotteries in the United States.

(California) If it actually occurred, it should be documented.

(New York) We have not read about it in *In Fact*.

(New York) Is it based on reality? Do these practices still continue in back-country England, the human sacrifice for the rich harvest? It's a frightening thought.

(Ohio) I think your story is based on fact. Am I right? As a psychiatrist I am fascinated by the psychodynamic possibilities suggested by this anachronistic ritual.

(Mississippi) You seem to describe a custom of which I am totally ignorant.

(California) It seems like I remember reading somewhere a long time ago that that was the custom in a certain part of France some time ago. However I have never heard of it being practiced here in the United States.

However would you please inform me where you got your information and whether or not anything of this nature has been perpetrated in modern times?

(Pennsylvania) Are you describing a current custom?

(New York) Is there some timeless community existing in New England where human sacrifices are made for the fertility of the crops?

(Boston) Apparently this tale involves an English custom or tradition of which we in this country know nothing.

(Canada) Can the lottery be some barbaric event, a hangover from the Middle Ages perhaps, which is still carried on in the States? In what part of the country does it take place?

(Los Angeles) I have read of some queer cults in my time, but this one bothers me.

(Texas) Was this group of people perhaps a settlement descended from early English colonists? And were they continuing a Druid rite to assure good crops?

(Quebec) Is this a custom which is carried on somewhere in America?

(A London psychologist) I have received requests for elucidation from English friends and patients. They would like to know if the barbarity of stoning still exists in the U.S.A. and in general what the tale is all about and where does the action take place.

(Oregon) Is there a witchcraft hangover somewhere in these United States that we Far Westerners have missed?

(Madras, India) We have been wondering whether the story was based on fact and if so whether the custom described therein of selecting one family by lot jointly to be stoned by the remainder of the villagers still persists anywhere in the United States. *The New Yorker* is read here in our United States information library and while we have had no inquiries about this particular article as yet, it is possible we shall have and I would be glad to be in a position to answer them.

(England) I am sorry that I cannot find out the state in which this piece of annual propitiatory sacrifice takes place. Now I just frankly don't believe that even in the United States such things happen — at least not without being sponsored by Lynching Inc. or the All-American Morticians Group or some such high-powered organization. I was once offered a baby by a primitive tribe in the center of Laos (Indochina) which my interpreter (Chinese) informed me I had to kill so that my blood lust was satiated and I would leave the rest of the tribe alone. But NOT in the United States, PLEASE.

(Connecticut) Other strange old things happen in the Appalachian mountain villages, I'm told.

As I say, if I thought this was a valid cross section of the reading public, I would give up writing. During this time, when I was carrying home some ten or twelve letters a day, and receiving a weekly package from *The New Yorker*, I got one letter which troubled me a good deal. It was from California, short, pleasant, and very informal. The man who wrote it clearly expected that I would recognize his name and his reputation, which I didn't. I puzzled over this letter for a day or two before I answered it, because of course it is always irritating to be on the edge of recognizing a name and have it escape you. I was pretty sure that it was someone who had written a book I had read or a book whose review I had read or a story in a recent magazine or possibly even — since I come originally from California — someone with whom I had gone to high school. Finally, since I had to answer the letter, I decided that something carefully complimentary and noncommittal would be best. One day, after I had mailed him my letter, some friends also from California stopped in and asked — as everyone was asking then — what new letters had come. I showed them the letter from my mysterious not-quite-remembered correspondent. Good heavens, they said, was this really a letter from *him*? Tell me who he is, I said desperately, just tell me who he is. Why, how could anyone forget? It had been all over the California papers for weeks, and in the New York papers, too; he had just been barely acquitted of murdering his wife with an ax. With a kind of awful realization creeping over me I went and looked up the carbon of the letter I had written him, my noncommittal letter. “Thank you very much for your kind letter about my story,” I had written. “I admire *your* work, too.”

The second major theme which dominates the letters is what I call speculation. These letters were from the people who sat down and figured out a meaning for the story, or a reason for writing it, and wrote in proudly to explain, or else wrote in to explain why they could not possibly believe the story had any meaning at all.

(New Jersey) Surely it is only a bad dream the author had?

(New York) Was it meant to be taken seriously?

(New York) Was the sole purpose just to give the reader a nasty impact?

(California) The main idea which has been evolved is that the author has tried to challenge the logic of our society’s releasing its aggressions through the channel of minority prejudice by presenting an equally logical (or possibility more logical) method of selecting a scapegoat. The complete horror of the cold-blooded method of choosing a victim parallels our own culture’s devices for handling deep-seated hostilities.

(Virginia) I would list my questions about the story but it would be like trying to talk in an unknown language so far as I am concerned. The only thing that occurs to me is that perhaps the author meant we should not be too hard on our presidential nominees.

(Connecticut) Is *The New Yorker* only maintaining further its policy of intellectual leg-pulling?

(New York) Is it a publicity stunt?

(New Orleans) I wish Mrs. Hutchinson had been queen for a day or something nice like that before they stoned the poor frightened creature.

(New York) Anyone who seeks to communicate with the public should be at least lucid.

(New Jersey) Please tell me if the feeling I have of having dreamed it once is just part of the hypnotic effect of the story.

(Massachusetts) I earnestly grabbed my young nephew's encyclopedia and searched under "stoning" or "punishment" for some key to the mystery; to no avail.

(California) Is it just a story? Why was it published? Is it a parable? Have you received other letters asking for some explanation?

(Illinois) If it is simply a fictitious example of man's innate cruelty, it isn't a very good one. Man, stupid and cruel as he is, has always had sense enough to imagine or invent a charge against the objects of his persecution: the Christian martyrs, the New England witches, the Jews and Negroes. But nobody had anything against Mrs. Hutchinson, and they only wanted to get through quickly so they could go home for lunch.

(California) Is it an allegory?

(California) Please tell us it was all in fun.

(Los Angeles *Daily News*) Was Tessie a witch? No, witches weren't selected by lottery. Anyway, these are present-day people. Is it the post-atomic age, in which there is insufficient food to sustain the population and one person is eliminated each year? Hardly. Is it just an old custom, difficult to break? Probably. But there is also the uncomfortable feeling that maybe the story wasn't supposed to make sense. The magazines have been straining in this direction for some time and *The New Yorker*, which we like very much, seems to have made it.

(Missouri) In this story you show the perversion of democracy.

(California) It seems obscure.

(California) I caught myself dreaming about what I would do if my wife and I were in such a predicament. I think I would back out.

(Illinois) A symbol of how village gossip destroys a victim?

(Puerto Rico) You people print any story you get, just throwing the last paragraph into the wastebasket before it appears in the magazine.

(New York) Were you saying that people will accept any evil as long as it doesn't touch them personally?

(Massachusetts) I am approaching middle age; has senility set in at this rather early age, or is it that I am not so acute mentally as I have had reason to assume?

(Canada) My only comment is what the hell?

(Maine) I suppose that about once every so often a magazine may decide to print something that hasn't any point just to get people talking.

(California) I don't know how there could be any confusion in anyone's mind as to what you were saying; nothing could possibly be clearer.

(Switzerland) What does it mean? Does it hide some subtle allegory?

(Indiana) What happened to the paragraph that tells what the devil is going on?

(California) I missed something here. Perhaps there was some facet of the victim's character which made her unpopular with the other villagers. I expected the people to evince a feeling of dread and terror, or else sadistic pleasure, but perhaps they were laconic, unemotional New Englanders.

(Ohio) A friend darkly suspects you people of having turned a bright editorial red, and that is how he construed the story. Please give me something to go on when I next try to placate my friend, who is now certain that you are tools of Stalin. If you *are* subversive, for goodness sake I don’t blame you for not wanting to discuss the matter and of course you have every constitutional right in back of you. But at least please explain that damned story.

(Venezuela) I have read the story twice and from what I can gather all a man gets for his winnings are rocks in his head, which seems rather futile.

(Virginia) The printers left out three lines of type somewhere.

(Missouri) You printed it. Now give with the explanations.

(New York) To several of us there seemed to be a rather sinister symbolism in the cruelty of the people.

(Indiana) When I first read the story in my issue, I felt that there was no moral significance present, that the story was just terrifying, and that was all. However, there has to be a reason why it is so alarming to so many people. I feel that the only solution, the only reason it bothered so many people is that it shows the power of society over the individual. We saw the ease with which society can crush any single one of us. At the same time, we saw that society need have no rational reason for crushing the one, or the few, or sometimes the many.

(Connecticut) I thought that it might have been a small-scale representation of the sort of thing involved in the lottery which started the functioning of the selective-service system at the start of the last war.

Far and away the most emphatic letter writers were those who took this opportunity of indulging themselves in good old-fashioned name-calling. Since I am making no attempt whatsoever to interpret the motives of my correspondents, and would not if I could, I will not try now to say what I think of people who write nasty letters to other people who just write stories. I will only read some of their comments.

(Canada) Tell Miss Jackson to stay out of Canada.

(New York) I expect a personal apology from the author.

(Massachusetts) I think I had better switch to the *Saturday Evening Post*.

(Massachusetts) I will never buy *The New Yorker* again. I resent being tricked into reading perverted stories like "The Lottery."

(Connecticut) Who is Shirley Jackson? Cannot decide whether she is a genius or a female and more subtle version of Orson Welles.

(New York) We are fairly well educated and sophisticated people, but we feel that we have lost all faith in the truth of literature.

(Minnesota) Never in the world did I think I'd protest a story in *The New Yorker*, but really, gentlemen, "The Lottery" seems to me to be in incredibly bad taste. I read it while soaking in the tub and was tempted to put my head under water and end it all.

(California; this from a world-famous anthropologist) If the author's intent was to symbolize into complete mystification and at the same time be gratuitously disagreeable, she certainly succeeded.

(Georgia) Couldn't the story have been a trifle esoteric, even for *The New Yorker* circulation?

(California) "The Lottery" interested some of us and made the rest plain mad.

(Michigan) It certainly is modern.

(California) I am glad that your magazine does not have the popular and foreign-language circulation of the *Reader's Digest*. Such a story might make German, Russian, and Japanese realists feel lily-white in comparison with the American. The old saying about washing dirty linen in public has gone out of fashion with us. At any rate this story has reconciled me to not receiving your magazine next year.

(Illinois) Even to be polite I can't say that I liked "The Lottery."

(Missouri) When the author sent in this story, she undoubtedly included some explanation of place or some evidence that such a situation could exist. Then isn't the reader entitled to some such evidence? Otherwise the reader has a right to indict you as editor of willfully misrepresenting the human race. Perhaps you as editor are proud of publishing a story that reached a new low in human viciousness. The burden of proof is up to you when your own preoccupation with evil leads you into such evil ways. A few more such stories and you will alienate your most devoted readers, in which class I — until now — have been included.

(New Hampshire) It was with great disappointment that I read the story "The Lottery." Stories such as this belong to *Esquire*, etc. but most assuredly not to *The New Yorker*.

(Massachusetts) The ending of this story came as quite a jolt to my wife and, as a matter of fact, she was very upset by the whole thing for a day or two after.

(New York) I read the story quite thoroughly and confess that I could make neither head nor tail out of it. The story was so horrible and gruesome in its effect that I could hardly see the point of your publishing it.

Now, a complete letter, from Illinois.

EDITOR:

Never has it been my lot to read so cunningly vicious a story as that published in your last issue for June. I tremble to think of the fate of American letters if that piece indicated the taste of the editors of a magazine I had considered distinguished. It has made me wonder what you had in mind when accepting it for publication. Certainly not the entertainment of the reader and if not entertainment, what? The strokes of genius were of course apparent in the story mentioned, but of a perverted genius whose efforts achieved a terrible malformation. You have betrayed a trust with your readers by giving them such a bestial selection. Unaware, the reader was led into a casual tale of the village folk, becoming conscious only gradually of the rising tension, till the shock of the unwholesome conclusion, skillful though it was wrought, left him with total disgust for the story and with disillusionment in the magazine publishing it.

I speak of my own reaction. If that is not the reaction of the majority of your readers I miss my guess. Ethics and uplift are apparently not in your repertoire, nor are they expected, but as editors it is your responsibility to have a sounder and saner criterion for stories than the one which passed on "The Lottery."

Heretofore mine has been almost a stockholder's pride in *The New Yorker*. I shared my copy with my friends as I do the other possessions which I most enjoy. When your latest issue arrived, my new distaste kept me from removing the brown paper wrapping, and into the wastebasket it went. Since I can't conceive that I'll develop interest in it again, save the results of your efforts that indignity every week and cancel my subscription immediately.

Another letter, this one from Indiana.

SIR:

Thanks for letting us take a look at the nauseating and fiction-less bit of print which appeared in a recent issue. I gather that we read the literal translation.

The process of moving set us back a few weeks, but unfortunately your magazine and Miss Jackson's consistently correct spelling and punctuation caught up with us.

We are pleased to think that perhaps her story recalled happier days for you; days when you were able to hurl flat skipping stones at your aged grandmother. Not for any particular reason, of course, but because the village postmaster good-naturedly placed them in your hands, or because your chubby fingers felt good as they gripped the stone.

Our quarrel is not with Miss Jackson's amazingly clear style or reportorial observation. It is not with the strong motives exhibited by the native stone-throwers, or with the undertones and overtones which apparently we missed along the way.

It is simply that we read the piece before and not after supper. We are hammering together a few paragraphs on running the head of our kindly neighbor through the electric eggbeater, and will mail same when we have untangled her top-piece. This should give your many readers a low chuckle or at least provide the sophisticates with an inner glow. Also it might interest you to know that my wife and I are gathering up the smoothest, roundest stones in our yard and piling them up on the corner in small, neat pyramids. We're sentimentalists that way.

I have frequently wondered if this last letter is a practical joke; it is certainly not impossible, although I hope not, because it is quite my favorite letter of all "Lottery" correspondence. It was mailed to *The New Yorker*, from Los Angeles, of course, and written in pencil, on a sheet of lined paper torn from a pad; the spelling is atrocious.

DEAR SIR:

The June *26* copy of your magazine fell into my hands in the Los Angeles railroad station yesterday. Although I donnot read your magazine very often I took this copy home to my folks and they had to agree with me that you speak straitforward to your readers.

My Aunt Ellise before she became priestess of the Exalted Rollers used to tell us a story just like "The Lottery" by Shirley Jackson. I don't know if Miss Jackson is a member of the Exhalted Rollers but with her round stones sure ought to be. There is a few points in her prophecy on which Aunt Ellise and me don't agree.

The Exalted Rollers donnot believe in the ballot box but believe that the true gospel of the redeeming light will become accepted by all when the prophecy comes true. It does seem likely to me that our sins will bring us punishment though a great scouraging war with the devil's toy (the atomic bomb). I don't think we will have to sacrifice humin beings fore atonement.

Our brothers feel that Miss Jackson is a true prophet and disciple of the true gospel of the redeeming light. When will the next revelations be published?

Yours in the spirit.

Of all the questions ever asked me about "Lottery," I feel that there is only one which I can answer fearlessly and honestly, and that is the question which closes this gentleman's letter. When will the next revelations be published, he wants to know, and I answer roundly, never. I am out of the lottery business for good.

THE LOTTERY (VERSION 2)

THE MORNING OF June *27*th was clear and sunny, with the fresh warmth of a full-summer day; the flowers were blossoming profusely and the grass was richly green. The people of the village began to gather in the square, between the post office and the bank, around ten o’clock; in some towns there were so many people that the lottery took two days and had to be started on June *26*th, but in this village, where there were only about three hundred people, the whole lottery took less than two hours, so it could begin at ten o’clock in the morning and still be through in time to allow the villagers to get home for noon dinner.

The children assembled first, of course. School was recently over for the summer, and the feeling of liberty sat uneasily on most of them; they tended to gather together quietly for a while before they broke into boisterous play, and their talk was still of the classroom and the teacher, of books and reprimands. Bobby Martin had already stuffed his pockets full of stones, and the other boys soon followed his example, selecting the smoothest and roundest stones; Bobby and Harry Jones and Dickie Delacroix — the villagers pronounced this name “Dellacroy” — eventually made a great pile of stones in one corner of the square and guarded it against the raids of the other boys. The girls stood aside, talking among themselves, looking over their shoulders at the boys, and the very small children rolled in the dust or clung to the hands of their older brothers or sisters.

Soon the men began to gather, surveying their own children, speaking of planting and rain, tractors and taxes. They stood together, away from the pile of stones in the corner, and their jokes were quiet and they smiled rather than laughed. The women, wearing faded house dresses and sweaters, came shortly after their menfolk. They greeted one another and exchanged bits of gossip as they went to join their husbands. Soon the women, standing by their husbands, began to call to their children, and the children came reluctantly, having to be called four or five times. Bobby Martin ducked under his mother's grasping hand and ran, laughing, back to the pile of stones. His father spoke up sharply, and Bobby came quickly and took his place between his father and his oldest brother.

The lottery was conducted — as were the square dances, the teen-age club, the Halloween program — by Mr. Summers, who had time and energy to devote to civic activities. He was a round-faced, jovial man and he ran the coal business, and people were sorry for him, because he had no children and his wife was a scold. When he arrived in the square, carrying the black wooden box, there was a murmur of conversation among the villagers, and he waved and called, "Little late today, folks." The postmaster, Mr. Graves, followed him, carrying a three-legged stool, and the stool was put in the center of the square and Mr. Summers set the black box down on it. The villagers kept their distance, leaving a space between themselves and the stool, and when Mr. Summers said, "Some of you fellows want to give me a hand?" there was a hesitation before two men, Mr. Martin and his oldest son, Baxter, came forward to hold the box steady on the stool while Mr. Summers stirred up the papers inside it.

The original paraphernalia for the lottery had been lost long ago, and the black box now resting on the stool had been put into use even before Old Man Warner, the oldest man in town, was born. Mr. Summers spoke frequently to the villagers about making a new box, but no one liked to upset even as much tradition as was represented by the black box. There was a story that the present box had been made with some pieces of the box that had preceded it, the one that had been constructed when the first people settled down to make a village here. Every year, after the lottery, Mr. Summers began talking again about a new box, but every year the subject was allowed to fade off without anything's being done. The black box grew shabbier each year; by now it was no longer completely black but splintered badly along one side to show the original wood color, and in some places faded or stained.

Mr. Martin and his oldest son, Baxter, held the black box securely on the stool until Mr. Summers had stirred the papers thoroughly with his hand. Because so much of the ritual had been forgotten or discarded, Mr. Summers had been successful in having slips of paper substituted for the chips of wood that had been used for generations. Chips of wood, Mr. Summers had argued, had been all very well when the village was tiny, but now that the population was more than three hundred and likely to keep on growing, it was necessary to use something that would fit more easily into the black box. The night before the lottery, Mr. Summers and Mr. Graves made up the slips of paper and put them in the box, and it was then taken to the safe of Mr. Summers's coal company and locked up until Mr. Summers was ready to take it to the square next morning. The rest of the year, the box was put away, sometimes one place, sometimes another; it had spent one year in Mr. Graves's barn and another year underfoot in the post office, and sometimes it was set on a shelf in the Martin grocery and left there.

There was a great deal of fussing to be done before Mr. Summers declared the lottery open. There were the lists to make up — of heads of families, heads of households in each family, members of each household in each family. There was the proper swearing-in of Mr. Summers by the postmaster, as the official of the lottery; at one time, some people remembered, there had been a recital of some sort, performed by the official of the lottery, a perfunctory, tuneless chant that had been rattled off duly each year; some people believed that the official of the lottery used to stand just so when he said or sang it, others believed that he was supposed to walk among the people, but years and years ago this part of the ritual had been allowed to lapse. There had been, also, a ritual salute, which the official of the lottery had had to use in addressing each person who came up to draw from the box, but this also had changed with time, until now it was felt necessary only for the official to speak to each person approaching. Mr. Summers was very good at all this; in his clean white shirt and blue jeans, with one hand resting carelessly on the black box, he seemed very proper and important as he talked interminably to Mr. Graves and the Martins.

Just as Mr. Summers finally left off talking and turned to the assembled villagers, Mrs. Hutchinson came hurriedly along the path to the square, her sweater thrown over her shoulders, and slid into place in the back of the crowd. “Clean forgot what day it was,” she said to Mrs. Delacroix, who stood next to her, and they both laughed softly. “Thought my old man was out back stacking wood,” Mrs. Hutchinson went on, “and then I looked out the window and the kids was gone, and then I remembered it was the twenty-seventh and came a-running.” She dried her hands on her apron, and Mrs. Delacroix said “You’re in time, though. They’re still talking away up there.”

Mrs. Hutchinson craned her neck to see through the crowd and found her husband and children standing near the front. She tapped Mrs. Delacroix on the arm as a farewell and began to make her way through the crowd. The people separated good-humoredly to let her through; two or three people said, in voices just loud enough to be heard across the crowd, “Here comes your Missus, Hutchinson,” and “Bill, she made it after all.” Mrs.

Hutchinson reached her husband, and Mr. Summers, who had been waiting, said cheerfully, “Thought we were going to have to get on without you, Tessie.” Mrs. Hutchinson said, grinning, “Wouldn’t have me leave m’dishes in the sink, now, would you, Joe?” and soft laughter ran through the crowd as the people stirred back into position after Mrs. Hutchinson’s arrival.

“Well, now,” Mr. Summers said soberly, “guess we better get started, get this over with, so’s we can go back to work. Anybody ain’t here?”

“Dunbar,” several people said. “Dunbar, Dunbar.”

Mr. Summers consulted his list. “Clyde Dunbar,” he said. “That’s right. He’s broke his leg, hasn’t he? Who’s drawing for him?”

“Me, I guess,” a woman said, and Mr. Summers turned to look at her. “Wife draws for her husband,” Mr. Summers said. “Don’t you have a grown boy to do it for you, Janey?” Although Mr. Summers and everyone else in the village knew the answer perfectly well, it was the business of the official of the lottery to ask such questions formally. Mr. Summers waited with an expression of polite interest while Mrs. Dunbar answered.

“Horace’s not but sixteen yet,” Mrs. Dunbar said regretfully. “Guess I gotta fill in for the old man this year.”

“Right,” Mr. Summers said. He made a note on the list he was holding. Then he asked, “Watson boy drawing this year?”

A tall boy in the crowd raised his hand. “Here,” he said. “I’m drawing for m’mother and me.” He blinked his eyes nervously and ducked his head as several voices in the crowd said things like “Good fellow, Jack,” and “Glad to see your mother’s got a man to do it.”

“Well,” Mr. Summers said, “guess that’s everyone. Old Man Warner make it?”

“Here,” a voice said, and Mr. Summers nodded.

* * *

A sudden hush fell on the crowd as Mr. Summers cleared his throat and looked at the list. “All ready?” he called. “Now, I’ll read the names — heads of families first — and the men come up and take a paper out of the box. Keep the paper folded in your hand without looking at it until everyone has had a turn. Everything clear?”

The people had done it so many times that they only half listened to the directions; most of them were quiet, wetting their lips, not looking around. Then Mr. Summers raised one hand high and said, “Adams.” A man disengaged himself from the crowd and came forward. “Hi, Steve,” Mr. Summers said, and Mr. Adams said, “Hi, Joe.” They grinned at one another humorlessly and nervously. Then Mr. Adams reached into the black box and took out a folded paper. He held it firmly by one corner as he turned and went hastily back to his place in the crowd, where he stood a little apart from his family, not looking down at his hand.

“Allen,” Mr. Summers said. “Anderson.... Bentham.”

“Seems like there’s no time at all between lotteries any more,” Mrs. Delacroix said to Mrs. Graves in the back row. “Seems like we got through with the last one only last week.”

“Time sure goes fast,” Mrs. Graves said.

“Clark.... Delacroix.”

“There goes my old man,” Mrs. Delacroix said. She held her breath while her husband went forward.

“Dunbar,” Mr. Summers said, and Mrs. Dunbar went steadily to the box while one of the women said, “Go on, Janey,” and another said, “There she goes.”

“We’re next,” Mrs. Graves said. She watched while Mr. Graves came around from the side of the box, greeted Mr. Summers gravely, and selected a slip of paper from the box. By now, all through the crowd there were men holding the small folded papers in their large hands, turning them over and over nervously. Mrs. Dunbar and her two sons stood together, Mrs. Dunbar holding the slip of paper.

"Harburt.... Hutchinson."

"Get up there, Bill," Mrs. Hutchinson said, and the people near her laughed.

"Jones."

"They do say," Mr. Adams said to Old Man Warner, who stood next to him, "that over in the north village they're talking of giving up the lottery."

Old Man Warner snorted. "Pack of crazy fools," he said. "Listening to the young folks, nothing's good enough for *them*. Next thing you know, they'll be wanting to go back to living in caves, nobody work any more, live *that* way for a while. Used to be a saying about 'Lottery in June, corn be heavy soon.' First thing you know, we'd all be eating stewed chickweed and acorns. There's *always* been a lottery," he added petulantly. "Bad enough to see young Joe Summers up there joking with everybody."

"Some places have already quit lotteries," Mrs. Adams said.

"Nothing but trouble in *that*," Old Man Warner said stoutly. "Pack of young fools."

"Martin." And Bobby Martin watched his father go forward. "Overdyke.... Percy."

"I wish they'd hurry," Mrs. Dunbar said to her older son. "I wish they'd hurry."

"They're almost through," her son said.

"You get ready to run tell Dad," Mrs. Dunbar said.

Mr. Summers called his own name and then stepped forward precisely and selected a slip from the box. Then he called, "Warner."

"Seventy-seventh year I been in the lottery," Old Man Warner said as he went through the crowd. "Seventy-seventh time."

"Watson." The tall boy came awkwardly through the crowd. Someone said, "Don't be nervous, Jack," and Mr. Summers said, "Take your time, son."

"Zanini."

* * *

After that, there was a long pause, a breathless pause, until Mr. Summers, holding his slip of paper in the air, said, "All right, fellows." For a minute, no one moved, and then all the slips of paper were opened. Suddenly, all the women began to speak at once, saying, "Who is it?" "Who's got it?" "Is it the Dunbars?" "Is it the Watsons?" Then the voices began to say, "It's Hutchinson. It's Bill," "Bill Hutchinson's got it."

"Go tell your father," Mrs. Dunbar said to her older son.

People began to look around to see the Hutchinsons. Bill Hutchinson was standing quiet, staring down at the paper in his hand. Suddenly, Tessie Hutchinson shouted to Mr. Summers, "You didn't give him time enough to take any paper he wanted. I saw you. It wasn't fair!"

"Be a good sport, Tessie," Mrs. Delacroix called, and Mrs. Graves said, "All of us took the same chance."

"Shut up, Tessie," Bill Hutchinson said.

"Well, everyone," Mr. Summers said, "that was done pretty fast, and now we've got to be hurrying a little more to get done in time." He consulted his next list. "Bill," he said, "you draw for the Hutchinson family. You got any other households in the Hutchinsons?"

"There's Don and Eva," Mrs. Hutchinson yelled. "Make *them* take their chance!"

“Daughters draw with their husbands’ families, Tessie,” Mr. Summers said gently. “You know that as well as anyone else.”

“It wasn’t *fair*,” Tessie said.

“I guess not, Joe,” Bill Hutchinson said regretfully. “My daughter draws with her husband’s family, that’s only fair. And I’ve got no other family except the kids.”

“Then, as far as drawing for families is concerned, it’s you,” Mr. Summers said in explanation, “and as far as drawing for households is concerned, that’s you, too. Right?”

“Right,” Bill Hutchinson said.

“How many kids, Bill?” Mr. Summers asked formally.

“Three,” Bill Hutchinson said. “There’s Bill, Jr. and Nancy, and little Dave. And Tessie and me.”

“All right, then,” Mr. Summers said. “Harry, you got their tickets back?”

Mr. Graves nodded and held up the slips of paper. “Put them in the box, then,” Mr. Summers directed. “Take Bill’s and put it in.”

“I think we ought to start over,” Mrs. Hutchinson said, as quietly as she could. “I tell you it wasn’t *fair*. You didn’t give him time enough to choose. *Every*body saw that.”

Mr. Graves had selected the five slips and put them in the box, and he dropped all the papers but those onto the ground, where the breeze caught them and lifted them off.

“Listen, everybody,” Mrs. Hutchinson was saying to the people around her.

“Ready, Bill?” Mr. Summers asked, and Bill Hutchinson, with one quick glance around at his wife and children, nodded.

“Remember,” Mr. Summers said, “take the slips and keep them folded until each person has taken one. Harry, you help little Dave.” Mr. Graves took the hand of the little boy, who came willingly with him up to the box. "Take a paper out of the box, Davy," Mr. Summers said. Davy put his hand into the box and laughed. "Take just *one* paper," Mr. Summers said. "Harry, you hold it for him." Mr. Graves took the child's hand and removed the folded paper from the tight fist and held it while little Dave stood next to him and looked up at him wonderingly.

"Nancy next," Mr. Summers said. Nancy was twelve, and her school friends breathed heavily as she went forward, switching her skirt, and took a slip daintily from the box. "Bill, Jr." Mr. Summers said, and Billy, his face red and his feet overlarge, nearly knocked the box over as he got a paper out. "Tessie," Mr. Summers said. She hesitated for a minute, looking around defiantly, and then set her lips and went up to the box. She snatched a paper out and held it behind her.

"Bill," Mr. Summers said, and Bill Hutchinson reached into the box and felt around, bringing his hand out at last with the slip of paper in it.

The crowd was quiet. A girl whispered, "I hope it's not Nancy," and the sound of the whisper reached the edges of the crowd.

"It's not the way it used to be," Old Man Warner said clearly. "People ain't the way they used to be."

"All right," Mr. Summers said. "Open the papers. Harry, you open little Dave's."

Mr. Graves opened the slip of paper and there was a general sigh through the crowd as he held it up and everyone could see that it was blank. Nancy and Bill, Jr. opened theirs at the same time, and both beamed and laughed, turning around to the crowd and holding their slips of paper above their heads.

"Tessie," Mr. Summers said. There was a pause, and then Mr. Summers looked at Bill Hutchinson, and Bill unfolded his paper and showed it. It was blank.

“It’s Tessie,” Mr. Summers said, and his voiced was hushed. “Show us her paper, Bill.”

Bill Hutchinson went over to his wife and forced the slip of paper out of her hand. It had a black spot on it, the black spot Mr. Summers had made the night before with the heavy pencil in the coal-company office. Bill Hutchinson held it up, and there was a stir in the crowd.

“All right, folks,” Mr. Summers said. “Let’s finish quickly.”

Although the villagers had forgotten the ritual and lost the original black box, they still remembered to use stones. The pile of stones the boys had made earlier was ready; there were stones on the ground with the blowing scraps of paper that had come out of the box. Mrs. Delacroix selected a stone so large she had to pick it up with both hands and turned to Mrs. Dunbar. “Come on,” she said. “Hurry up.”

Mrs. Dunbar had small stones in both hands, and she said, gasping for breath, “I can’t run at all. You’ll have to go ahead and I’ll catch up with you.”

The children had stones already, and someone gave little Davy Hutchinson a few pebbles.

Tessie Hutchinson was in the center of a cleared space by now, and she held her hands out desperately as the villagers moved in on her. “It isn’t fair,” she said. A stone hit her on the side of the head.

Old Man Warner was saying, “Come on, come on, everyone.” Steve Adams was in the front of the crowd of villagers, with Mrs. Graves beside him.

“It isn’t fair, it isn’t right,” Mrs. Hutchinson screamed, and then they were upon her.

NOTES FOR A YOUNG WRITER

THESE ARE SOME notes, not necessarily complete, on the writing of short stories; they were originally written as a stimulus to my daughter Sally, who wants to be a writer.

In the country of the story the writer is king. He makes all the rules, with only the reservation that he must not ask more than a reader can reasonably grant. Remember, the reader is a very tough customer indeed, stubborn, dragging his feet, easily irritated. He will willingly agree to suspend disbelief for a time: he will go along with you if it is necessary for your story that you both assume temporarily that there really is a Land of Oz, but he will not suspend reason, he will not agree, for any story ever written, that he can see the Land of Oz from his window. As a matter of fact, you would do well to picture your typical reader as someone lying in a hammock on a soft summer day, with children playing loudly near by, a television set and a radio both going at once, a sound truck blaring past in the street, birds singing and dogs barking; this fellow has a cool drink and a pillow for his head, and all you have to do with your story is catch his attention and hold it. Remember, your story is an uneasy bargain with your reader. Your end of the bargain is to play fair, and keep him interested, his end of the bargain is to keep reading. It is just terribly terribly easy to put a story down half-read and go off and do something else. Nevertheless, for as long as the story does go on you are the boss. You have the right to assume that the reader will accept the story on your own terms. You have the right to assume that the reader, however lazy, will exert some small intelligence while he is reading. Suppose you are writing a story about a castle. You do not need to describe every tower, every man at arms, every stone; your reader must bring his own complement of men at arms and towers; you need only describe one gardener to imply that the castle is well stocked with servants. In your stories, then, set your own landscape with its own horizons, put your characters in where you think they belong, and move them as you please.

Your story must have a surface tension, which can be considerably stretched but not shattered; you cannot break your story into pieces with jagged odds and ends that do not belong. You cannot begin a story in one time and place, say, and then intrude a major flashback or a little sermon or a shift in emphasis to another scene or another character, without seriously marring the story, and turning the reader dizzy with trying to keep up. Consider simple movement from one place to another; if some movement is necessary and inevitable — as of course it is in most stories — then let the reader come along with you; do not jolt him abruptly from one place to another; in other words, let your story move as naturally and easily as possible, without side trips into unnecessary spots of beauty. Suppose you are writing a story about a boy and a girl meeting on a corner; your reader wants to go to that very corner and listen in; if, instead, you start your boy and girl toward the corner and then go off into a long description of the streetcar tracks and a little discussion of the background of these two characters and perhaps a paragraph or so about the town improvement which is going to remove the streetcar tracks they are crossing, and the girl's father's long-time aversion to any form of wheeled traffic — you will lose your reader and your story will fall apart. Always, always, make the duller parts of your story work *for* you; the necessary passage of time, the necessary movement must not stop the story dead, but must push it forward.

Avoid small graceless movements. As much as possible free yourself from useless and clumsy statements about action. “They got in the car and drove home” is surely too much ground to cover in one short simple sentence; assuming that your characters did get into the car and did have to drive home, you have just the same wasted a point where your action might work for your story; let the process of their getting home be an unobtrusive factor in another, more important action: “On their way home in the car they saw that the boy and the girl were still standing talking earnestly on the corner.” Let each such potentially awkward spot contribute to your total action. In almost every story you will face some unwanted element, something your characters *have* to do to keep the story going at all; people have to get from one place to another, or get dressed, or eat their dinners, before the story can continue; try always to make these actions positive. For instance: “She dealt the cards; her fingers clung to each card as though unwilling to let go of anything they had once touched,” or, “During all of dinner the singing went on upstairs, and no one said a word.” (I would like to see someone write that story.) Or, “It was only one block to walk, so she counted her footsteps anxiously.” Does your unfortunate heroine have to do the dishes before she can go out and meet her hero in the rose garden? “She washed and dried the dishes with extreme care, wondering all the time if she dared to smash a cup against the wall.”

All of this has applied to necessary but essentially uninteresting action. The same thing is true of description and some conversation; certainly in every story there comes a time when you have to give in and let your reader know what something looks like, or that your hero and heroine said good-morning-how-are-you-today-isn’t-the-weather-lovely-how’s-your-mother before they got on to the most important business of the story, or to the rose garden. Try to remember with description that you must never just let it lie there; nothing in your story should ever be static unless you have a very good reason indeed for keeping your reader still; the essence of the story is motion. Do not let your chair be “a straight chair, with no arms and a hard wooden seat.” Let your heroine go over and take a firm hold of the back of a straight wooden chair, because at the moment it is stronger than she. Naturally it is assumed that you are not going to try to describe anything you don’t need to describe. If it is a sunny day let the sun make a pattern through the fence rail; if you don’t care what the weather is don’t bother your reader with it. Inanimate objects are best described in use or motion: “Because his cigarette lighter was platinum he had taken to smoking far too much.” “The battered chimney seemed eager to hurl down bricks on anyone passing.” Also, if your heroine’s hair is golden, call it yellow.

Conversation is clearly one of the most difficult parts of the story. It is not enough to let your characters talk as people usually talk because the way people usually talk is extremely dull. Your characters are not going to stammer, or fumble for words, or forget what they are saying, or stop to clear their throats, at least not unless you want them to. Your problem is to make your characters sound as though they were real people talking (or, more accurately, that this is “real” conversation being read by a reader; look at some written conversation that seems perfectly smooth and plausible and natural on the page, and then try reading it aloud; what looks right on the page frequently sounds very literary indeed when read aloud; remember that you are writing to be read silently). Now the sounds and cadences of spoken speech are perfectly familiar to you; you have been talking and listening all your life. You know, for instance that most people speak in short sentences, tending to overuse certain words. You know that whenever anyone gets the floor and a chance to tell a story or describe an incident he will almost always speak in a series of short sentences joined by “and”; this is of course a device to insure that his audience will have no chance to break in before he has finished his story. You know that in a conversation people do say the same things over and over; there is very little economy in spoken speech. There is a great deal of economy in written speech. Your characters will use short sentences, and will tell long stories only under exceptional circumstances, and even then only in the most carefully stylized and rhythmic language; nothing can dissolve a short story quite so effectively as some bore who takes up the middle of it with a long account of something that amuses him and no one else. A bore is a bore, on the page or off it.

Listen always to people talking. Listen to patterns of talking. Listen to patterns of thinking displayed in talking. Think about this: if a husband comes home at night and says to his wife, "What do you think happened to me? When I got onto the bus tonight I sat down next to a girl and when the conductor came along he had a live penguin riding on his head, a live penguin, can you imagine? And when I looked at it, it turned out it was a talking penguin and it said 'Tickets, please,' and there was this guy across the aisle and you really won't believe this but it turned out *he* had a parrot in his pocket and the parrot put out his head and he and the penguin got to talking and I never heard anything like it in my life," don't you know that after the husband has said all this his wife is going to say, "What did the girl look like?" Your characters will make their remarks only once unless there is a good reason for repeating them; people hear better in stories than in real life. Your characters will start all their conversations in the middle unless you have a very good reason for their telling each other good morning and how are you. Remember the importance of the pattern, as important on paper as in real life; a character who says habitually, with one of those silly little laughs, "Well, that's the story of my life," is not ever going to turn around and say, with a silly little laugh, "Well, that's my life story."

Now look at this device: "'I hate fresh asparagus,' she said to her kitchen clock, and found herself saying it again ten minutes later to Mrs. Butler in the grocery; 'I hate fresh asparagus,' she said, 'it always takes so long to cook.'" You are, at this moment, well into a conversation with Mrs. Butler; your reader, being a common-sense type, no doubt assumes that before the remark about asparagus your heroine and Mrs. Butler said good morning my aren't you out early and isn't that a charming hat. Your reader may also assume, if he is perceptive, that your heroine in some fashion turned away from her kitchen clock, got her hat and coat on, picked up her pocketbook, forgot her shopping list, and in some fashion either walked or drove or bicycled to the store. She is there, she is in the middle of a conversation with Mrs. Butler; not ten words ago she was at home talking to the clock. The transition has been relatively painless; your reader has been required to read only one sentence and get around one semicolon, and the asparagus remark has been repeated simply to tie together the two halves of the sentence.

Your characters in the story, surely, are going to be separate and widely differing people, even though they are not necessarily described to the reader. You yourself have some idea of what they are like and how they differ; there is, for instance, in almost everyone's mind, an essential difference between the hero and the heroine. They don't look alike, even if you are the only one who knows it; your reader will assume it; after all, he has seen people before. They don't dress alike, they don't sound alike. They have small individualities of speech, arising naturally out of their actions and their personalities and their work in the story. Suppose you are using three little girls talking together; you *could* distinguish them by saying that one wore a blue dress, the second had curly hair, and the third was on roller skates, but wouldn't it be simply better writing to identify them by their positions in the group of three; that is, making their actions and their conversations more meaningful because the girls are related to one another at once? They form a hierarchy: first there is a leader who does most of the talking, makes the plans, and provokes the action. The second must be subordinate, but not too much so; she does not initiate, but by following the leader encourages the leader into further action; she will disagree and perhaps even rebel up to a point. The third is of course the tag-along, the one left out when three is a crowd, and her actions and conversation are echoing and imitative of the other two, particularly the leader. The third character will throw her support to whichever of the other two seems stronger at the moment, and can thus, although a very minor character indeed, bring force to bear and influence action. Once three such characters are determined, the entire course of their conversation, no matter how trivial it might be in the story, is predetermined and strong. Once again: people in stories tend to talk in patterns. If your heroine is prepared to be so violent about fresh asparagus it would be reasonable to suppose that her conversation and opinions would generally be a little more emphatic than another character's. She would "adore that silly hat," for instance, or "die if that noise doesn't stop." She will carry out this positive manner in her actions; she will put out a cigarette, for instance, with forceful little poundings, she will set the table carelessly and noisily, but quickly, there will be no nonsense about her likes and dislikes. You might oppose to her a character who is uncertain, who lets cigarettes burn out in the ash tray, who rarely finishes a sentence or who will substitute a phrase like "*you* know" for a finished thought: "I usually carry an umbrella but sometimes... *you* know." "I guess it's time I left. I guess you're pretty busy?" Your character, remember, must not talk one way and act another, and can only outrage this consistency for a reason; a character who breaks out of a pattern is shocking and generally insane.

Use all your seasoning sparingly. Do not worry about making your characters shout, intone, exclaim, remark, shriek, reason, holler, or any such thing, unless they are doing it for a reason. All remarks can be *said*. Every time you use a fancy word your reader is going to turn his head to look at it going by and sometimes he may not turn his head back again. My own name for this kind of overexcited talking is the-other-responded. As in this example: "'Then I'm for a swim,'" cried Jack, a gallant flush mantling his cheek. "'And I am with you!' the other responded."

Your coloring words, particularly adjectives and adverbs, must be used where they will do the most good. Not every action needs a qualifying adverb, not every object needs a qualifying adjective. Your reader probably has a perfectly serviceable mental picture of a lion; when a lion comes into your story you need not burden him with adjectives unless it is necessary, for instance, to point out that he is a green lion, something of which your reader might not have a very vivid mental picture.

Use all the tools at your disposal. The language is infinitely flexible, and your use of it should be completely deliberate. Never forget the grotesque effect of the absolutely wrong words: "He swept her into his arms; 'I will always love you,' he giggled." "Top the finished cake with a smear of whipped cream." "'I am not afraid of anything in the world,' he said thinly."

Remember, too, that words on a page have several dimensions: they are seen, they are partially heard, particularly if they seem to suggest a sound, and they have a kind of tangible quality — think of the depressing sight of a whole great paragraph ahead of you, solidly black with huge heavy-sounding words. Moreover, some words seem soft and some hard, some liquid, some warm, some cold; your reader will respond to "soft laughter" but not to “striped laughter”; he will respond more readily to “soft laughter” than to “sweet laughter,” because he can hear it more easily. There are also words like “itchy” and “greasy” and “smelly” and “scratchy” that evoke an almost physical response in the reader; use these only if you need them. Exclamation points, italics, capitals, and, most particularly, dialect, should all be used with extreme caution. Consider them as like garlic, and use them accordingly.

Do not try to puzzle your reader unnecessarily; a puzzled reader is an antagonistic reader. Do not expect him to guess why a character does something or how it happens that some remark is made; it may be that you want him to stop and wonder for a minute; if so, make it perfectly clear that everything is going to be all right later on. If you want the reader to be troubled by a nagging question, and go through a part of your story with a kind of expectancy, let one of your characters do something outrageous — turn, perhaps, and throw an apple core through an open window. But then be sure that before your story is finished you explain in some manner that inside the open window lives the character’s great-uncle, who keeps a monkey who devours apple cores and catches them on the fly as they come through the window. The reader brings with him a great body of knowledge which you may assume, but he must rely on you for all information necessary to the understanding of this story which, after all, you have written.

Someone — I forget who — once referred to the easier sections of his work as “benches for the reader to sit down upon,” meaning, of course, that the poor reader who had struggled through the complex maze of ideas for several pages could rest gratefully at last on a simple clear paragraph. Provide *your* reader with such assistance. If you would like him to rest for a minute so you can sneak up behind him and sandbag him, let him have a little peaceful description, or perhaps a little something funny to smile over, or a little moment of superiority. If you want him to stop dead and think, do something that will make him stop dead; use a wholly inappropriate word, or a startling phrase— "pretty as a skunk" — or an odd juxtaposition: "Her hair was curly and red and she had great big feet," or something that will make him think back: "Fresh asparagus is most significant symbolically." Give him something to worry about: "Although the bank had stood on that corner for fifty years it had never been robbed." Or something to figure out: "If John had not had all that tooth trouble there would never have been any question about the rabbits." In all this, though, don't let the reader stop for more than a second or he might get away. Catch him fast with your next sentence and send him reeling along.

And if you want your reader to go faster and faster make your writing go faster and faster. "The room was dark. The windows were shaded, the furniture invisible. The door was shut and yet from somewhere, some small hidden precious casket of light buried deep in the darkness of the room, a spark came, moving in mad colored circles up and down, around and in and out and over and under and lighting everything it saw." (Those adjectives are unspeakable in every sense of the word, and wholly unnecessary; this is an example, not a model.) If you want your reader to go slower and slower make your writing go slower and slower: "After a wild rush of water and noise the fountain was at last turned off and the water was gone. Only one drop hung poised and then fell, and fell with a small musical touch. Now, it rang. Now."

Now I want to say something about words artificially weighted; you can, and frequently must, make a word carry several meanings or messages in your story if you use the word right. This is a kind of shorthand. I once had occasion to send a heroine on a long journey during which she expressed her loneliness and lack of a home by imagining dream lives in various places she passed; this daydream is climaxed when at lunch she hears a little girl at a near by table ask for her milk in a cup of stars; the lonely girl thinks that what she too is asking for is a cup of stars, and when she finally finds her home she will drink from a cup of stars. Later, when other characters are talking of their own comfort and security the lonely girl announces proudly that *she* has a cup of stars; this is by then not only recognizable as an outright lie, but a pathetic attempt to pretend that she is neither lonely nor defenseless. “Cup of stars” has become a shorthand phrase for all her daydreams. Notice, however, that once such a word or phrase has been given a weighting you cannot afford to use the word or phrase *without* the weighting; my lonely girl cannot refer idly to cups of stars anywhere else, because those words are carrying an extra meaning which must not be dissipated.

If you announce early in your story that your lady with the aversion to asparagus is wearing a diamond-and-ruby wrist watch your reader will be intrigued: here is a detail apparently not essential to the story and yet you thought it worthwhile to put it in; the reader will be watching to see what you are going to do with it. If you then turn up another character who is wearing a solid-gold wrist watch your reader will begin to wonder whether you are just queer for watches or whether this is going to amount to something in the story. You must satisfy his curiosity. If you then remark that the diamond-and-ruby wrist watch was a gift from an old boy friend of the lady’s, the watch is then carrying something extra, and when at the end of the story she throws the watch at her husband’s head she is throwing her old boy friend too. The reader is also going to have to know who gave the other fellow the solid-gold wrist watch and whose head *that* one is going to hit; nothing can be left suspended in mid-air, abandoned. If you start your story on a small boy going home to pick up his football so he can get into the game in the corner lot, and then let him fall into one adventure after another until the end of the story, your reader is going to come out of that story fighting mad unless he is told whether or not the boy got his football and whether he ever got back to the game.

Now about this business of the beginning implying the ending, something which all the textbooks insist upon. You will actually find that if you keep your story tight, with no swerving from the proper path, it will curl up quite naturally at the end, provided you stop when you have finished what you have to say. One device, of course, is beginning and ending on what is essentially the same image, so that a story beginning, say, “It was a beautiful sunny day,” might end, “The sun continued to beat down on the empty street.” This is not a bad policy, although it can be limiting. There is no question but that the taut stretched quality of the good short story is pulled even tighter by such a construction. You can tie your story together, however, with similar devices — how about a story which opens on a lady feeding her cat, and ends on a family sitting down to dinner? Or a story which opens on your heroine crying and closes on her laughing? The beginning and ending should of course belong together; the ending must be implicit in the beginning, although there have been stories which were defeated because the author thought of a wonderful last line and then tried to write a story to go with it; this is not wrong, just almost impossible. I am not going to try to tell you how to set up a plot. Just remember that primarily, in the story and out of it, you are living in a world of people. A story must have characters in it; work with concrete rather than abstract nouns, and always dress your ideas immediately. Suppose you want to write a story about what you might vaguely think of as “magic.” You will be hopelessly lost, wandering around formlessly in notions of magic and incantations; you will never make any forward progress at all until you turn your idea, “magic,” into a person, someone who wants to do or make or change or act in some way. Once you have your first character you will of course need another to put into opposition, a person in some sense “anti-magic”; when both are working at their separate intentions, dragging in other characters as needed, you are well into your story. All you have to do then is write it, paying attention, please, to grammar and punctuation.

Miscellaneous Stories

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ON THE HOUSE

First published in The New Yorker, October 30, 1943

* * *

ARTIE WATSON SAT ON a folding chair behind the counter of the liquor store and read his paper. Business was slow these rainy nights, and Steve, his partner, had run down to the all-night delicatessen to get some sandwiches and milk. Artie sighed and reached under the counter for his pencil to do the crossword puzzle. Might as well close up, he thought. If no one comes in by the time Steve comes back I'll tell him we ought to close up early and go home.

A customer came in before Steve came back, a man who came slowly in through the door, not quickly from the rain, but slowly. It took Artie a minute to realize that he was blind and another minute to see the woman following him.

"Evening," Artie said.

"Good evening," the blind man said, and the woman echoed, "Good evening." She walked over to the rows of bottles against the wall and walked along, reading the labels. "How about brandy?" she asked. "That's supposed to be good, isn't it?"

"I want to get bourbon," the blind man said. He turned in Artie's direction. "Do you have any bourbon?" he asked.

Artie nodded, and then said, "Some. Not as much as we used to have, of course. Pretty hard to get good liquor these days."

"Really?" the blind man said. "Can you pick me out a nice kind of bourbon, not too expensive?"

The woman came over to the counter. “I think we ought to get brandy,” she said, “but he says bourbon.”

“If it’s for a party or something,” Artie said, “you’d do better with bourbon.”

The woman giggled. “We just got married,” she said. “That’s what it’s for.”

“Congratulations,” Artie said warmly. “Going to have a celebration, then?”

“Man doesn’t get married every day,” the blind man said. He laughed and reached out for the woman’s hand, which she immediately put into his. “I guess I did pretty well, too,” he said.

Artie looked at the woman. She was small and dark and wearing a corsage of gardenias. She looked about ten years older than the blind man. “You sure did all right,” Artie said. “Looks like she’s a good cook, too.”

“She’s a fine cook,” the blind man said. “Aren’t you, Rosalie?”

“I’m a pretty good cook,” the woman said, “but what about this brandy?” When she spoke to the blind man, her voice was low and lovely, but Artie, looking at her again, figured that she could raise her voice if she wanted. And plenty high, too, he thought.

“You’d do better with the bourbon,” Artie said again.

“How do they compare in price?” the blind man asked.

“The brandy’s a little more,” Artie said. “I can give you a pretty good bourbon for four sixty-two. And the brandy” — he squinted at the bottles across the store— “I guess the cheapest brandy I can give you is four ninety-seven.”

“Four sixty-two?” the blind man said.

“Tell you, folks,” Artie said. “You’re just married and all, I’ll let you have either one for, say, four. Sort of a wedding present.”

"That's very nice of you," the woman said.

"We may as well get the brandy, then," the blind man said. "Being as this gentleman is giving it to us for the same price."

"Sure," Artie said. He was sorry already that he had offered to lower the price, that he would have to tell Steve when Steve came back, that the blind man had taken the brandy because it was more of a bargain.

"Then we'll take the brandy," the blind man said, "and thanks."

"All right," Artie said. "Many happy returns."

He took the bottle of brandy the woman brought over to him and began to roll it in brown paper. "You'll like this brandy," he said.

"You said four dollars?" the blind man asked. He had taken his wallet out of his pocket and was thumbing over his money. "Four dollars," he said, and held out four bills.

Artie looked down at the bills, and then at the woman, who had gone back across the store and was looking at the bottles on the shelf. "Missus," Artie said.

"What's the matter?" the blind man said. "Here's the money."

The woman came back over and stood next to the blind man and looked at Artie, shaking her head no. Artie looked down at the five-dollar bill and the three one-dollar bills the man was holding out and said, "But, mister, look, you've—"

"What's the matter?" the woman said. "You think he can't tell a one-dollar bill? He knows one bill from another." She shook her head again at Artie.

The blind man laughed. "Don't try any jokes with me," he said. "It doesn't work anymore. I know what money I've got here."

"Right," Artie said. He took the five and the three ones and went to the cash register and rang up four dollars. He put in the five and took out one dollar and brought it back with the three ones. Before he could say anything, the woman held out her hand insistently. The blind man had found the wrapped bottle on the counter and was turning toward the door. Artie put the money in the woman’s hand, nodded reassuringly, and said, “Well, folks, hope you’ll be very happy. And have a nice celebration.”

“Thanks,” the blind man said as the woman took his arm and led him to the door. “Good night.”

“Good night,” Artie said. He was still sore about giving them the brandy at that price.

“Blind man like that has no business drinking liquor,” Steve said when Artie told him. “First thing you know he has one too many and loses control of himself and gets in real trouble.”

“He probably had to work a long time for that money he tried to give me,” Artie said. “A guy like that couldn’t earn much, could he?”

“Hard to tell,” Steve said. “Might be one of these precision workers who doesn’t need to see what he’s doing.”

“Wonder how come a woman would marry a blind man? I’d hate to be…” Artie’s voice trailed off as he saw the door open and the blind man come slowly in, followed, after a minute, by the woman.

“Hello again,” Artie said. “You back for more brandy?”

The Wind man walked up to the counter without assistance, felt for the surface with his free hand, and then put the bottle of brandy, still wrapped, down in front of Artie. “I came for my money,” he said.

Artie stared. “Something wrong?” he asked finally. Steve came over and stood next to him.

“Yeah,” Steve said, “something wrong?”

“There’s plenty wrong,” the blind man said. “When people steal from a guy that doesn’t know what’s going on, there’s plenty wrong.”

Artie looked at the woman, who was standing in the doorway. “What’s the matter with him?”

“Look,” the blind man said, “you took plenty advantage because I didn’t know, that’s all. I thought I was giving you four ones, and you wouldn’t say a word, just stood there and took advantage.”

“You think you’re so smart,” the woman said. “A blind man.”

“I can get along without your help,” the blind man said, turning in the woman’s direction. “This guy steals my money, I can take care of him.” He turned back to Artie. “You better give me back that money,” he said, “or I’ll really make you some trouble.”

“I gave it to your wife,” Artie said, knowing already it was no use.

The woman laughed. “Now he’s taking advantage of me,” she said.

Artie looked at Steve. He knew Steve was thinking the same thing: a blind man telling the cops he had been robbed. Steve shrugged.

Artie went to the cash register and opened it. “O.K.” he said, “so I robbed you. You gave me three ones and a five and I thought it was four ones.”

“That’s a little better,” the woman said.

Artie took four one-dollar bills out of the cash register and walked over and put them in the blind man’s hand. “These four ones?” the blind man asked.

“Four ones,” Artie said.

“These four ones?” the blind man asked, turning to the woman. She came forward, peering.

“Yes, they are,” she said.

“See,” the blind man said, “I got down to the corner and I remembered I had a five and three ones instead of four ones. I guess next time you won’t try anything with a guy like me.”

“That’s right,” Artie said, watching the woman come forward and take the blind man’s arm. The blind man felt around on the counter for the bottle of brandy and put it under his other arm.

Artie and Steve stood watching them go out, and when the door had closed behind them Artie went over and closed the drawer of the cash register.

LITTLE OLD LADY IN GREAT NEED

Mademoiselle, September 1944

IT WAS LATE IN the afternoon, but even though she was tired from shopping all day, Kitty forced herself to alternate a grave skip with her hurried walk after Great-Grandmother. Great-Grandmother liked to see little girls active, and she herself was as spry now as she had been in the morning when they started out to buy Kitty a new coat. If Kitty lagged behind, Great-Grandmother was apt to stop and, tapping severely with her cane, say to Kitty: “A laggard step, a faltering mind.” With so many people on the street, someone was sure to turn and smile when Great-Grandmother said something like that, so Kitty rushed her steps along, sometimes clinging to Great-Grandmother’s arm and sometimes getting a little ahead, so that she could slow down a minute until Great-Grandmother caught up.

“I think the plaid coat was very nice on you, Katharine,” Great-Grandmother was saying for the thousandth time. “I think you were wise to choose that one instead of the brown.”

“Everyone else has a brown coat, though,” Kitty said.

“Never try to look like everyone else, my dear,” Great-Grandmother said placidly. “It doesn’t pay to be like everyone else. Did I ever tell you that I was the first woman — lady, that is — to smoke a cigarette in San Francisco?”

“Grandma! What a cute little dog!” Kitty ran ahead, and stopped to pet the dog while the lady who held it on a leash stood patiently, smiling as Great-Grandmother came slowly toward them. “Grandma,” Kitty said. “I wish I had a dog like this, Grandma.”

"Never intrude yourself upon a stranger," Great-Grandmother said, bowing slightly to the lady with the dog. "Never intrude yourself on any pretext whatever, Katharine."

Kitty blew a kiss to the dog behind Great-Grandmother's back, and ran to catch up. Great-Grandmother was saying: "A very fine animal, my dear, pedigreed, no doubt. Perhaps we should have a dog, Katharine."

"I would like a white one, like that one," Kitty said. "Did you ever have a dog?"

"We used to have a mastiff when I was a girl in England," Great-Grandmother said. She laughed. "Your great-grandfather bought me a lap dog when we married."

"What happened to those dogs?"

Great-Grandmother laughed again. "I believe the lapdog was given away," she said. "Perhaps the mastiff died. It was long before we came to the United States. Then we were in San Francisco, and I was the first real lady to smoke a cigarette there in public."

"Can I wear my plaid coat to school next week, Grandma?"

"If the weather accommodates, my dear."

"I think it will be cold. If I had a dog like that one I would make him a little red coat and he could wear it when he came to school with me. Can we have dinner in a restaurant tonight, Grandma?"

Great-Grandmother looked at Kitty and hesitated. Then she turned aside and into a doorway, gesturing for Kitty to follow. She handed her packages to Kitty and took out her pocketbook, saying: "A lady never examines her pocketbook nor inquires into the state of her finances in public, Katharine." Great-Grandmother counted the change in her hand, her weak old eyes squinting. "One dollar and thirty-one cents, Katharine. When is our pension check due?"

“It comes on Saturday, Grandma.”

“I was afraid so.” Great-Grandmother sighed. “We had better plan to stay at home until then, my dear. We will stop and buy something for dinner on our way home, Katharine. What would you like?”

“If I had that dog I would have to get him a bone,” Kitty said. “I would like to have a great big roast turkey for dinner.”

“We will stop at the butcher’s,” Great-Grandmother said. “I hope he has something tender. Young meat for old teeth.”

The butcher had turkeys and chickens in his window, and ham and frankfurters. Kitty pressed her nose against the glass, saying: “Grandma, he has more things in his window than any other butcher had today.”

“Come inside, my dear,” Great-Grandmother said. “A lady makes no display of herself on the street.”

Inside, the butcher’s counter was empty. The butcher, a thin, red-faced man in a bloodied white apron, stood watching Kitty and Great-Grandmother as they entered.

“Not much to offer today, ladies,” he said.

“Turkeys?” Kitty said eagerly.

“Well, I got one or two turkeys, fine ones,” the butcher said.

“Let me see.” Great-Grandmother stood, her fingers at her lips, regarding the empty counter. “How about a steak?”

“No steak,” the butcher said.

“Sirloin?” Great-Grandmother asked amiably.

“No steak, lady.”

Great-Grandmother looked at him. “Something tender,” she said.

“I have some nice franks,” the butcher said. “Nice little frying chickens. A few hams.”

“Let me see,” Great-Grandmother said. “I think I prefer steak.”

"No, lady," the butcher said desperately.

Great-Grandmother smiled. "Why do you refuse to sell me meat?" she asked. "Must I take my patronage elsewhere?"

"Lady," the butcher said, "we got shortages. We don't get no meat, we can't sell any. Earlier, you came in, I coulda sold you a fine sirloin. Now — I got nothing left."

"Sir." Great-Grandmother stepped up closer to the counter and gestured the butcher to her. "I am an old lady. My great-granddaughter here could, I have no doubt, tell you exactly how old. I was not bred, sir, for dealing with tradespeople. Until my great-granddaughter and I were left alone in the world, there were always others to take care of business dealings for us. I am not able, therefore, to discuss your business with you, and, equally, I am unable to go from store to store to make purchases."

"Lady," the butcher said unhappily, "would you take one and a half pounds of sirloin?"

Great-Grandmother considered. "I would," she said gravely.

The butcher held up his finger, and turned to go into the ice room. "Wait," he said. He returned after a minute or two with a piece of sirloin steak, which he put on the counter in front of Great-Grandmother. "It's my own piece of meat, and you couldn't ask for a better. My wife told me I should bring home a little meat, and I saved this."

Great-Grandmother drew herself up. "I would not take your food, young man."

"Take it," the butcher said. "I don't want to see you and the kid here without anything for your supper tonight. My wife — she can fix something outta nothing."

"I cannot accept this as a gift, you understand," Great-Grandmother said. "You must let me give you something, at any rate, in exchange for this kindness.”

The butcher looked surprised. “But I’ll sell—” he began.

“No,” Great-Grandmother said. “I cannot permit it. I was brought up a lady, sir, and a lady does not permit herself to accept favors from tradesmen. You must let me give you something, in addition to my ration stamps, even if it is only a few pennies.” She took out her pocketbook and searched in it. “Fifty cents,” she said, putting the coin with the stamp book on the counter. “You must accept it. It is what I intended to pay for our dinner tonight.”

The butcher counted and tore off the stamps, slid the steak into a brown paper bag and handed it silently to Great-Grandmother. “Thank you,” she said. “You are a fine man, sir. A gentleman.” She moved to the doorway. “Come, Katharine,” she said.

“I love steak,” Kitty said excitedly.

“One and a half pounds is hardly enough for two,” Great-Grandmother said. “Still, he did the best he could.”

“He was a nice man,” Kitty said.

Great-Grandmother smiled. “It was in the Mark Hopkins Hotel, Katharine, I believe. Did I ever tell you? Perhaps it was another hotel. Perhaps it was a restaurant. At any rate, I had become accustomed to smoking in England, where all ladies had taken it up. And the manager, such a polite man, and so elegant, came to me and said: ‘Madam, I must request that you retire to the smoking room if you intend to indulge.’ Of course your great-grandfather would never permit that; it was a men’s smoking room. Then, of course, American ladies took up smoking. But I was the first in San Francisco.”

“I bet that man’s wife’s going to be mad,” Kitty said, “not bringing home any meat.”

“Nonsense,” Great-Grandmother said. “He’ll tell her, that’s all. He’ll say that a child and a little old lady with a cane came in and he’ll tell her he had to give it to us.”

“I bet his wife’ll be mad anyway.”

“A lady does not permit herself to show anger in public,” Great-Grandmother said.

WHEN THINGS GET DARK

First published in The New Yorker, December 30, 1944

* * *

MRS. GARDEN WAS SITTING in the overstuffed chair in her furnished room, smoking. She was a young woman, not more than twenty-three or four. She was small and thin and she was wearing a light blue corduroy housecoat and had her hair in curlers. It was eleven in the morning. She was finishing her third cup of coffee from the pot on the electric plate. Beside her on the small table was a letter. When she put her cup down, she took up the single sheet of ruled letter paper and read it again. “Dear Mrs. Garden,” it said, “I can’t help feeling that right now you are in need of a friend. You seemed to be so strong and courageous when I met you, in spite of your great trouble, that I am sure your young heart will be equal to any burden. When things get dark, remember there are always friends thinking of you and wishing you well.” The letter was signed “A.H.” After a minute Mrs. Garden put it down on the table and went over to the dresser. She took her pocketbook out of it and, rummaging through it, found a match folder. On the inside of the folder was written “Mrs. Amelia Hope, 111 Mortimer Street, Brooklyn Hgts.”

Mrs. Garden stood in front of the dresser for a minute, looking at herself in the glass. I won’t show at all for a while, she thought. No one would know unless I told them. She turned, holding her arms high, to look at herself in profile. After a minute she walked across the room and got the letter and put it and the match folder in her pocketbook. She went to the closet and took down a dark blue suit and a white blouse, thinking, My clothes still fit me — all the nice things I bought and won’t be able to wear.

She dressed carefully, pinning the tiny infantry insignia to her lapel, and took a dark blue hat out of the closet. When she was dressed she glanced around the room before she locked the door. She looked quiet and decent and worried. Out in the hall, she put the key in her pocketbook and went down the stairs.

All the way in the subway, Mrs. Garden held the pocketbook quietly in her lap, looking out the windows into the darkness. When she reached the station where the subway guard had told her to get off, she got up and went out into the street, where she went to a newsstand and asked the way to the address. Then, still holding her pocketbook close to her, she walked to 111 Mortimer Street. It was an old house, clearly a rooming house, and it looked ugly and decayed. Mrs. Garden went up the steps and rang the bell. When the landlady opened the door, Mrs. Garden said, “I want to see Mrs. Amelia Hope, please.”

The landlady stood back and said, “Second floor, in the back.”

Mrs. Garden went up the wide staircase, the sort of staircase you would find in an old, beautiful house, to a second floor with a high-ceilinged hall and white plaster ornamental molding. There was one door toward the back, at the end of the long hall, and Mrs. Garden knocked on it.

“Come in, please,” an old lady’s voice said. Mrs. Garden opened the door and stood just inside. For a minute it was hard for her to see, because she was facing a high, narrow window with long brown drapes down each side of it. Then she saw a small, old-fashioned desk with carved spindle legs in front of the window, and Mrs. Hope sitting at it.

“I’m Mrs. Garden. Do you remember me?”

Mrs. Hope rose and came a step or two forward. “Mrs. Garden?” she said.

Mrs. Garden opened her pocketbook and took out the letter. She held it out to Mrs. Hope and said, “I wanted to ask you about this.”

Mrs. Hope looked at the letter and then at Mrs. Garden. “Won’t you sit down?” she said. She gestured at a little gilt chair near the desk. “You find me in a good deal of confusion,” she said. “It seems that they clean my room later each day. You know,” she said, leaning forward to touch Mrs. Garden on the knee, “I pay a small sum extra each week to have my room cleaned *well* — really well, you know — and I think I’m going to have to speak to them about it. They don’t do it at all as they should.”

Mrs. Garden looked around. The narrow bed in one corner looked, at first, hardly disturbed, and then she saw that it had not been made up yet that morning. A cup with a tea bag in the saucer sat on the desk, and beside it a pad of ruled writing paper, like the paper Mrs. Garden’s letter was written on.

“I hope I didn’t interrupt you at anything,” Mrs. Garden said.

“Indeed not,” Mrs. Hope said. She stood up and Mrs. Garden realized that she was incredibly small. She was wearing a plain black dress with a red belt, and around her neck was a long rope of aromatic cedar beads. “Will you have some candy?” she asked. She went over to the table by her bed and brought back a small glass dish of candy corn, which she set on the desk where Mrs. Garden could reach it. “I was just writing my letters,” she said.

“It’s funny,” Mrs. Garden said. “I never expected to meet you again.”

“I’m sure I know you,” Mrs. Hope said, “but I can’t quite remember where we met.” She was leaning forward, pleased and attentive.

Mrs. Garden looked up, surprised. “Why, on the bus. You were so nice to me.”

Mrs. Hope glanced down at the letter on the desk. “Certainly I remember now,” she said. “You’re the young lady with the child.”

“No,” Mrs. Garden said. “My husband had just left to be sent overseas. Mrs. Hope, I need advice very badly.”

“It wasn’t a child, come to think of it,” Mrs. Hope said. “It was a sick mother. We women are terrible when we’re sick.”

“I thought maybe when I got your letter,” Mrs. Garden said awkwardly, “I thought I might come in and talk to you. We haven’t been married very long, Jim and I, and now when he comes back we’re going to be saddled with a baby, and instead of starting out again together and going dancing and having a good time together, we’re going to have responsibilities and everything. And I thought maybe you could tell me something to do.”

“Of course you did,” Mrs. Hope said. “I meet so many people,” she added, looking down at the desk. “I don’t think anyone has ever come to see me before, though.”

“They say, ‘Gain one, lose one,’” Mrs. Garden said. “I don’t know what I’d do if anything happened to Jim.”

“Love is a very important thing,” Mrs. Hope said.

“I haven’t even told him yet,” Mrs. Garden went on. “Every time I write him I mean to put it in, about the baby, and then I think how awful he’ll feel.”

Mrs. Hope leaned back in her chair and picked up the string of beads. “My dear,” she said, “you would really be surprised how much trouble there is in the world. If I can do anything to make the skies brighter for any of the poor people I meet, I have served my purpose in life.”

“I thought you might just give me some advice,” Mrs. Garden said. “You were so kind that day, and I’m afraid I don’t know anyone else. Not in New York, anyway, and I wanted to talk to someone.”

“And my little note comforted you?” Mrs. Hope said. She smiled wistfully. “This is the first time I have been allowed to see that I am doing some good. I talk to people everywhere and ask them for their names and addresses, and then when I feel that they need a friendly word, I send them a little note telling them to be of good heart.”

“I know,” Mrs. Garden said. “You told me, that day on the bus.”

“On buses and everywhere,” Mrs. Hope said. “I meet people wherever I go.”

“But you can help me,” Mrs. Garden said, “can’t you?”

Mrs. Hope smiled and put her hand on Mrs. Garden’s. “Let me show you,” she said. She got up again and went over to the table by the bed. From a drawer in it she took a big scrapbook. “I make copies of all my letters,” she said, “so I can send more to the same people if I think they need it.” She handed the big book to Mrs. Garden. Then she took the desk chair and brought it over. “Wait till you see,” she said, taking half of the book in her lap. On the first page a slip of paper was pasted with “A word to the wise is sufficient” written on it in Mrs. Hope’s careful hand. “Here is my first letter — to a boy who wanted to change his job,” she said. “See, here, I tell him to be careful in his decision.”

“Don’t think I’m the type of person who’s always complaining,” Mrs. Garden said, turning to look at Mrs. Hope. “But we had so many plans for our life together.”

“This is odd,” Mrs. Hope said, turning the page. “You ought to look at this one. Here was a girl with your same situation. Let me see, what did I say to her?” She leaned forward to read the letter.

“I write to him every other day,” Mrs. Garden said, “and I have to write today. I want to have my mind made up.”

“Of course you do,” Mrs. Hope said. “This is one I wrote to Mr. Adolf Hitler. When he first started killing and rampaging, that was. I said for him to look into his heart and find love.” She touched the letter pasted on the page. “I don’t very often write like that, but some people are so much in need of a thoughtful word.”

Mrs. Garden’s lips trembled and she put her hand up to her mouth. “I suppose everyone gets desperate sometimes,” she said.

“Everyone does, my dear.” Mrs. Hope waited a minute, then closed the scrapbook and went over and put it carefully away in the drawer. “You haven’t eaten any candy,” she said. She took the plate and passed it to Mrs. Garden, who shook her head. “I wish I could ask you to stay for lunch,” Mrs. Hope said, “but I only have a sandwich and a cup of tea here in my room.”

“I just had breakfast,” Mrs. Garden said. She stood up and picked up her pocketbook. “It’s been very nice,” she said.

“I’ve enjoyed seeing you again,” Mrs. Hope said. “Maybe we’ll meet again on a bus sometime.”

“I hope so,” Mrs. Garden said. She went toward the door.

Mrs. Hope followed her. “I can’t tell you how comforting it’s been,” she said, “knowing how much good my little letters bring.”

Mrs. Garden opened the door. “I’m sure they do,” she said. “Well, goodbye.”

“Wait a minute,” Mrs. Hope said. She ran over, picked up Mrs. Garden’s letter from the desk, and brought it to her. “You don’t want to forget this,” she said. “Keep it near you, to read when things get dark. Goodbye, my dear.” She stood courteously by the door until Mrs. Garden closed it behind her.

Outside the door, Mrs. Garden waited a minute, fumbling in her pocketbook for her gloves. She heard Mrs. Hope cross the room, humming softly. Then there was the movement of a chair across the floor. Straightening the room, Mrs. Garden thought, pulling on a glove absentmindedly. She heard the click of the cedar beads brushing against something; probably the desk. There was silence for a minute; then Mrs. Garden heard the faint scratching of Mrs. Hope’s pen. With only one glove on and her pocketbook flying wildly behind her, Mrs. Garden turned and ran down the stairs and out into the warm noon sun.

WHISTLER'S GRANDMOTHER

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* * *

THE LITTLE OLD LADY on the train obviously wanted to talk. She had got on at Albany and she was sitting in the seat next to the aisle. She looked rather charming, in a neat black coat and an old lady's hat, and she watched the woman next to her, who was reading a mystery, smiled at the children who constantly hurried up and down the aisle of the crowded car, and looked affectionately at the two sailors in the seat across the aisle.

At last she turned to the woman beside her and said, "I'm sorry to interrupt you, but how soon do we get to New York?"

The younger woman smiled politely. "At six o'clock, I think."

"Thank you," the old lady said. "I can hardly wait. I haven't been to New York in nearly fifteen years."

"It must be exciting."

"I'm going to see my grandson," the old lady said. "He's home on leave."

The younger woman hesitated, then closed her book and leaned back. "Really?" she said. "Where has he been?"

The old lady waved her hand vaguely. "In the Pacific."

"How wonderful," the younger woman said. "You'll certainly be glad to see him."

"I'm all the family he has left."

"I guess he'll be glad to see you, too," the younger woman said.

"Let me show you his picture." The old lady opened her pocketbook and took out a folding cardboard picture frame, with spaces for two pictures facing one another. One side had the picture of a soldier standing in front of a barracks; he looked very young. On the other side was the same soldier in front of the same barracks, but he had his arm around a pretty girl in a flowered dress. “He’s very handsome,” the younger woman said. “Is this his wife?”

The man in the seat in front of them, who looked as if he might be a prosperous businessman, was half listening. He had on a light gray suit. The paper he had been reading sagged in his hands. The old lady leaned forward and touched his shoulder. The man turned around. “Let me show you a picture of my grandson,” she said. “He’s coming home on furlough.”

The man took the picture and nodded solemnly. “Fine-looking young man.”

“It’s the first time he’s been near home in two years,” the old lady said. “He couldn’t come upstate to me, so I’m going to New York to him.”

“I’ve got two sons in the army,” the man said. “Sure glad to see those rascals when they come home.”

“Are they in the Pacific?” the old lady asked.

“In Mississippi. Both together, so far. They enlisted together.”

“How proud you must have been,” she said.

The old lady turned to the two sailors across the aisle. “I haven’t been to New York in fifteen years,” she said, leaning forward and raising her voice. “And now I’m going to meet my grandson. He’s on a furlough.”

When she held out the picture the two sailors rose and came across the aisle to look at it. “Are you on *your* way home?” the old lady asked them.

“No, ma’am,” one of the sailors said, “we’re on our way back.”

“Pretty lively time the last few days?” the man in the gray suit asked.

The sailors laughed, and the old lady said quickly, “I hope my grandson is cheerful like you boys. It’s been pretty hard for him.”

There was a silence, and then the man said reverently, “Guess they’ve all had a tough time, those boys.”

“This your grandson’s wife?” one of the sailors asked, passing the picture back to the old lady. “Mighty pretty girl.”

“Depend on a sailor to notice a thing like that,” the man said, and he and the sailors laughed again.

“That’s his wife, all right,” the old lady said with a trace of bitterness in her voice.

“She looks like a very nice girl” the younger woman said.

“Very nice girl,” the old lady repeated scornfully. She leaned over and tapped the younger woman’s arm. “The way that girl’s been acting!” Her voice trembled slightly. “She hasn’t been fair to my grandson when he was fighting overseas.”

“That’s not very nice of her,” one of the sailors said.

“Coming up to visit me,” the old lady said, “with her fur coat and her indecent shoes. Talking all the time about how dead it was up where I live.”

“Where does she live?” the man in the gray suit asked.

“She lives in New York. My grandson, now, he has to stay in New York when he comes back.”

“Maybe you’re mistaken about her,” the younger woman said. “It’s so easy to make a mistake about people.”

“True is true,” the old lady said. “My grandson’s wife, she stayed with me awhile upstate. She used to get letters from men.”

The younger woman started to say something and then stopped, and the man said, “How do you know?”

“Don’t you think I can tell a man’s handwriting when I see it?” the old lady asked. “I know when a woman like that, with her clothes and the way she talked, when she gets letters every day they're from men. It's time my grandson heard."

"You mean you're going to tell him?" the man said. The sailors looked at the old lady, and the younger woman stared at her book.

"You wouldn't want to do a thing like that," one of the sailors said.

The old lady nodded emphatically. "All the way to New York," she said, "to see she gets what's coming to her."

"Maybe you're being too hard on her," the man said. "Maybe she can explain everything."

"True is true," the old lady repeated. "I don't have to listen to anything *she* has to say."

"Is your grandson's wife meeting you at the train?" the younger woman asked.

"She didn't even ask me down to see my grandson," the old lady replied. "She doesn't know I'm coming, anyway."

"Listen," the younger woman said, "why don't you sit down with her and have a long talk about the whole thing? Maybe you could clear it all up without saying anything to your grandson."

"I'm not making a long trip like this to listen to her stories," the old woman said.

"You ought to give that girl a chance to speak up for herself," the man said.

"It's not that we don't think you're doing right," one of the sailors said. "It's just that it seems sort of hard on everybody, him coming home after so long."

"I'll thank none of you to interfere," the old lady said. "I can take care of my own affairs."

After a minute the sailors slipped quietly back to their seat and the man returned to his paper. The younger woman said softly to the old lady, “You know, you’re not being very charitable.”

“I asked her to stay on and live with me in my own house,” the old lady said, “and she told me no, right to my face.”

The younger woman waited for a minute and then went back to her book.

When the train plunged into the tunnel to Grand Central, the old lady gathered her packages together, ready to get off. The younger woman stepped out into the aisle to put on her coat and found herself standing between the sailors and the man in the gray suit. When the old lady rose, she dropped one of her bundles and the man picked it up and handed it to her. She took it carefully and slipped her hand through the string around it. “It’s homemade doughnuts,” she said, smiling at them amiably, “for my grandson.”

“I hope you have a pleasant visit,” the younger woman said when the train came to a stop.

“Thank you,” the old lady said. “Will you excuse me, please?”

As the younger woman stepped back, she realized that for a moment she and the sailors and the man had been standing in front of the old lady, as though trying to block her way.

She followed the old lady out of the car, and had a brief picture of the sweet, grandmotherly old face as it turned to look at the people on the platform. Then the fragile black figure disappeared into the crowd.

FAMILY MAGICIAN

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NATURALLY I REMEMBER the summer Mallie was with us. That was the time I got to be captain of the Crocodile team and we beat the Nine-Man Wonders from Acacia Street. It was only three summers ago and we had moved to town the first of that year, so we were still pretty new. Mother was working herself nearly crazy trying to make the house and everything go smoothly for us kids. While Dad was alive she'd had a maid, but doing her own housework again was too much for her, I guess. And Dottie didn't help much. She'd left forty or fifty boyfriends back in the town we moved away from, and when she wasn't writing them letters she was upstairs bawling over their pictures, and worrying Mother about how they didn't write. And I hadn't got my pitching arm limbered up and the fellows around weren't sure they'd even let me on the team. So there we were.

Anyway, one Saturday morning about the middle of May — it was a month or so before summer vacation started, too early for swimming and the fishing not much good — I came in from the backyard and there was a little old woman sitting in the kitchen. She was round and she had a pink face and she smiled up at me when I came in.

I said, "Hi," just to be polite.

There was a row of what looked like cherry pies on the table, something smelled good on the stove, and the table was set, so I sort of smiled back at her and said, "When's lunch?"

I found out later that the smile I thought she had on just for me was permanent — she never stopped smiling, far as I knew. She said, "Sit right down, son. You're Jerry, aren't you?"

"Yes," I said. I sat down in my place and she got up and took my plate and brought it back from the stove filled with a kind of stew that tasted fine.

"This is good," I said. "Is that pie?"

"Cherry pie," she said. "How many can you eat?"

"Two," I said. Just then Mother and Dottie came into the kitchen. Mother looked even more worried than usual and Dottie looked as though she had been crying again.

"What's the matter?" I asked Dottie, still being polite. "No letter from Dickie again today?"

"How *can* you?" Dottie said. All the time in those days when she talked to me she would raise her eyes and sigh, as though I were getting to be too much for her to bear.

Mother looked at me and at the strange little woman and said, "Dorothy, sit down and eat your lunch."

"It's pretty good," I said. When the little woman brought Mother's plate she said, "Now, Mrs. Livingston, I got everything for today figured out. You run along downtown this afternoon and go to a movie, maybe, or do some shopping. I do like to see a boy eat," and she pulled my hair when she went around to get Dottie's plate.

"I can't eat a thing, thank you very much," Dottie said. She sighed and looked out the window. "I'm really not hungry at all, thank you very much."

"Nonsense," the little woman said, which is just what I was thinking. She filled Dottie's plate and after a minute, when no one seemed to be looking, Dottie took a tiny taste. Pretty soon she was eating as well as I was.

"How about some pie, pal?" I said to the little woman, and Mother said, "Really, Jerry!" like she always does, but the little woman said, "You call me Mallie, son, and keep a civil tongue in your head, you hear?" and she laughed and I laughed and the pie was swell.

"Reason I want you to run along early this afternoon," Mallie said to Mother, "Jerry here has a practice game on."

"Baseball team," I explained.

"And Missy here," Mallie said, waving at Dottie, "she's going to have company."

"Me?" Dottie said. She looked up with a forkful of stew halfway to her mouth. "Really, I can't imagine…"

Mallie winked at me. "You think I give away secrets?" she said. "If I told you who he is, you wouldn't be surprised."

"He?" Dottie said. She put her fork down.

"He?" I said in a squeaky voice. "You don't want to see any boys, Dottie. You run along to the movies and Mallie can send him home again when he comes."

Dottie started to fold her napkin but Mallie said, "You have plenty of time, Missy. He can't get here before three. You run upstairs and get your blue linen dress and I'll iron it for you. And *you* get along," she said to me, and gave me a swift spank as I reached over to pick up my mitt. She was pretty fresh, all this spanking and hair pulling and stuff, but I figured that was mighty good pie and I gave her a poke in the ribs as I went by and all the way out of the yard I could hear her laughing and Mother saying, "Jerry, really!"

Anyway, I got home about five. A couple of the fellows on the team were walking along with me and when we got to my house Mallie stuck her head out of the kitchen window and called us. She told us to be ready to catch, and started throwing fresh hot doughnuts out of the window. I made a neat high catch on the first one, and while we sat on the fence eating, they said they thought I ought to be on the team, a substitute at first, of course, but on the team anyway.

After a while I went inside. Mother had just come home and Dottie was following her upstairs saying, “And it’s the biggest dance of the year and I *can’t* wear that old white…”

“Listen to her,” I told Mallie.

“You keep your mouth still,” she said to me. “All I want *you* to do is run right out in the yard and catch me a ladybug.”

“What?” I said, gawking at her.

“A ladybug,” Mallie said. “You just lift your big feet and march out in that yard and catch me a ladybug.”

“A ladybug?” I said, and she aimed a wallop at me that would have knocked me through the wall if she hadn’t pulled it short. I ran but I put my head through the back door and said, “A ladybug?” and she said, “And some dandelions, if you can find any.”

I figured she was crazy but I hunted around until I found a couple of dandelions. One of them had a ladybug on it so I took them both in to Mallie and she said, “Fine. Now get me the box of starch in the pantry and if you see any wax bring it along.”

By this time I knew she was crazy. When I came back with the starch and a bottle of floor wax, Dottie and my mother were standing in the kitchen and Mallie was saying, “So we can fix up a party dress in no time.”

“But how?” Mother asked. Dottie was still all dressed up from the afternoon and every time anyone looked at her she giggled.

“I’m going to the spring dance,” she told me with a sweet smile. “Robert Dennison came by this afternoon and asked me to go.”

“He must be crazy,” I said.

I sat on the kitchen table and watched while Mallie sent Dottie upstairs for a bed sheet and Mother into the attic to dig out the blue taffeta curtains we had in the living room of our other house. While they were gone I asked Mallie, “Are you going to make a dress for Dottie?”

“That’s right,” she said. She had the starch and the wax and the dandelions and the ladybug on the table next to me and she was looking at them, figuring them out.

“Out of this stuff?” I said. “How?”

“Like making a pie,” she explained. “You just get all the things it’s made of and then you stir them together right.”

Dottie came back with the bed sheet as Mother came in with the curtains.

“Now then,” Mallie said. She made Dottie take off her dress and stand there in her slip. Then she took the bed sheet and draped it around Dottie’s waist, so that it made a sort of skirt down to the floor in all directions. Not *much* like a skirt, though — it looked a lot like a sheet. Dottie stood there looking at Mother as though she didn’t know what to do. Mother was worried, too, and finally she said, “Really, Mallie, it’s not necessary — we can probably afford a new dress for Dorothy.”

“You just stop worrying,” Mallie said. “We can’t buy Dottie a dress and still have new slipcovers in the living room and that furniture looks pretty shabby. You leave things to me.” She took the curtains and fastened them around Dottie, so that soon all of them except one made an overskirt over the sheet, and the one left she pulled around Dottie’s shoulders to make a top for the dress. “There now,” she said. She stood back and stared at Dottie and poor Dottie certainly looked silly. She looked as if she were dressed up for Halloween. But she stood there, being a good sport the way she can, sometimes, and Mother and I just watched.

Mallie took the dandelions and fastened them on the neck of the dress. She sprinkled some of the floor wax on the skirt and a little starch on the bed sheet underneath that was like a petticoat. Finally she set the ladybug carefully on the bed sheet. Then she stood back and smiled and said, “You’ll look real nice in that.”

Mother couldn’t stand it any longer. She said, “Oh, *Mallie,”* and almost cried. And I thought it was pretty mean to take a girl who wanted a new dress and pin her up in curtains and then say she looked nice.

“My chicken in the oven!” Mallie said suddenly, and opened the oven door. “Thank goodness,” she said, lifting it out. “Missy, you take off all that stuff and get ready for dinner.”

Well, Mother just looked at Dottie and me hard, meaning we weren’t to say anything more, and Dottie got out of the curtains and sheets as fast as she could and we sat down to dinner. Even though the chicken was fine, we didn’t eat very much — we were all watching Mallie, who went along with her affairs singing to herself as though she had forgotten all about Dottie’s dress.

Mallie went home after dinner without saying any more about the dress. When we were sitting in the living room Mother said to Dottie, “Dear, please don’t worry about the dress. I think Mallie really thought she was helping, making a joke, perhaps.”

“Where did she come from?” I asked. “I just walked in at lunch-time and there she was.”

“That’s about the way she came,” Mother said. “I was waxing the living room floor this morning and I turned around and saw Mallie standing there in the doorway watching me. I was scared for a minute, but she *does* look harmless.”

I thought of Mallie’s round pink face and laughed.

"Anyway," Mother said, "she wouldn't answer any questions, but just said she had come to help. And she took the mop away from me. Have you noticed," Mother asked, "that when Mallie says to do something you *do* it, without asking any questions?"

"Golly," I said, thinking about the ladybug.

"Honestly" Dottie said, "I couldn't even *move* to take off that stuff she kept putting on me. *Honestly*, I was *shading."*

"She's a good cook, though," I put in.

"She seems to be a very kind and generous person," Mother said. "It's so hard to get anyone to help around a house these days that even if she is a bit eccentric…"

"It seems to me," I said very thoughtfully, "that if Mallie has decided to keep on coming to help us, we can't stop her. Not if she's made up her mind, that is."

"Stop her?" Dottie said. "Not likely."

"What troubles me," Mother said slowly, "is how she made those pies we had for lunch. When she came in and took the mop away from me I went upstairs to tell Dottie about her and it was only about fifteen minutes later that she called us down for lunch."

"And there were the pies," Dottie said.

"I'm not worrying about where they came from," I said, "just as long as there are some more."

Well, that was the situation when we went to bed that night. The next day was Sunday. About eight o'clock in the morning the doorbell rang and I answered it. It was a big box, special delivery, for Dottie, so I left it outside her door and went back to bed. Dottie woke me up about an hour later. I could hear Mother saying, "Good heavens," over and over again. Dottie had opened the box and found a dress. It gave me a jolt when I saw it — it was a dress with a blue taffeta skirt and top, and around the neck were little gold buttons like dandelions, and under the skirt was a stiff white ruffled petticoat. And what really took my breath away was that all over the white petticoat were printed thousands of little red ladybugs.

Well, Dottie put it on and it looked pretty good, for a dress, and we all went tearing down to the kitchen. Dottie ran up and kissed Mallie. While Dottie and Mother were both talking at once and poking and pulling at the dress I asked Mallie, “How’d you do it?”

“Magic,” she said, and winked at me.

That was the only answer she’d give, no matter what we asked her about the dress. That was the only answer we *ever* got. There was no question about Mallie herself, though. She came back every day and about twice a week she made doughnuts and at least once a week she made pies — sometimes cherry, sometimes lemon meringue, sometimes apple. Dottie went off to her dance in her new dress and woke everybody up trying to tiptoe upstairs when she came in. And then she kept me awake all night, sitting on the foot of Mother’s bed in the next room, the two of them giggling like dopes.

I got on the team that week, first as a substitute, and then the Hammond boy moved away and I got a chance at being regular pitcher. After a while Mallie started making Mother have breakfast in bed, and the house began filling up weekends with Dottie’s boyfriends, and twice they finished all the pie.

Somehow Mallie did everything so fast that it seemed as though she could straighten a room just by standing in the doorway and looking around hard. She used to get the dishes done so fast, Dottie and I never had time to get in and help her. I used to ask her how she did it, even after Mother and

Dottie got tired of asking questions that were never answered, but Mallie only laughed at me and said, “Magic.”

I think it *was* magic, too. Sometimes I’d bring the team home with me — there were about fifteen of us, counting substitutes — and we’d sneak over the fence as quietly as we could and tiptoe up to the back porch and by the time we got there Mallie would have lemonade and cookies ready for us, even if she’d been somewhere in the front of the house all the time and couldn’t have seen us.

Once Dottie, who had turned sweet-tempered and polite all of a sudden, came out into the kitchen and said, “I wish you’d teach *me* some of that magic, Mallie.”

Mallie was making a salad but she looked at Dottie and said, “What do you need magic for, Missy? You’re doing all right without any.”

“You know,” Dottie said. She sat down at the table next to me and Mallie just went on making the salad around us. “Look at all you can do — making dresses and doing housework without lifting a finger, and all that.”

“I only do work fast so’s I’ll have more time to do other things,” Mallie said. “Like trying to get dinner with two good-for-nothing lazy kids sitting smack in the middle of my salad. I’m real busy and busy people don’t have time for everything they want to do. So I make time.”

“That’s it,” Dottie said. “I’m real busy, too. I want to learn some magic.”

Mallie laughed. “Tell you what I’ll do, honey. I’ll teach you how to make a pie. That’s all the magic *you’ll* ever need.”

And golly if she didn’t teach Dottie right then and there how to make a pie; just pushed the salad off to one side and went to work. I could have laughed myself silly watching Dottie. It was the first time she had cooked anything in her life, I guess, and Mallie stood over her and really made her learn. It was a pretty good pie, too — apple. And after that Mallie taught

Dottie a lot of other things — and she told Dottie over and over again, “That’s all the magic *you’ll1* ever need.”

Then again, about a month later, when it was only a couple of days to the end of school and the weather was already hot, I came home from swimming with the fellows to find Mother out in the kitchen with a telegram. She was saying anxiously to Mallie, “It’s just *got* to be nice, that’s all. If we’d only known in time…”

It seems that the telegram had been misdirected and had reached Mother at five in the afternoon instead of in the morning as it should. It wouldn’t have done much good to know earlier anyway, because it was Sunday and we still wouldn’t have been prepared. The telegram said that Uncle Ralph and Aunt Gertrude were coming that evening on the six o’clock train and would stay over till Monday. They were an aunt and uncle of my dad’s and everyone tried to be nice to them because they were always nice to everybody in spite of being sort of fussy. Mother wanted to have a fancy dinner for them but all the stores were closed for Sunday. Mallie was thinking hard and Mother went on. “It means dinner tonight and fixing up the guest room and I don’t know *what* else.”

“Things will be all right,” Mallie said. “No use worrying.”

“Isn’t there some grocery open?” Mother said. “Jerry could run out and get *something.”*

“There’s Spencer’s,” I said. “I could get there and back in time but he doesn’t have much.”

“Just let me think,” Mallie said. Mother and I were both quiet while Mallie sat and figured. “I’ll tell you,” she said at last. “You just give me a little time. It ought to take you a good fifteen minutes to get to the station and another fifteen back. There’s a half hour. Then you sit your aunt and uncle down in the living room and give them a glass of that sherry we have in the pantry. That ought to make it about seven. If I can't do anything by then we might's well give up."

"I'll go to Spencer's—" I suggested again, but she waved her hand at me.

"I can manage, thanks, son," she said. "I just remembered that hat of yours, Mrs. Livingston, the one with the birds. I don't like hats trimmed with birds but I guess I can stand it for once. You bring that right downstairs and, Jerry, you run and get me a handful of down out of a pillow and swipe your sister's cotton dress with the pattern of cherries on it. Now, hurry."

Well, I sneaked the dress out of Dottie's closet and ripped open a pillow and got a handful of the stuffing, and tore down to the kitchen with it. Mother had brought in her hat with the two birds on it. It looked funny there on the kitchen table with the pillow down and Dottie's dress.

"Get me some gravel," Mallie said, and I brought her a handful from the driveway. So there they were — dress, hat, down, and gravel. I looked at her sort of cross-eyed and she said, "You march upstairs and change to some decent clothes. Thank goodness you've been swimming today — at least you're clean."

Dottie came in just as Mother and I were ready to go to the station, so we all three piled into a taxi and went to meet Uncle Ralph and Aunt Gertrude. And I was glad I had changed my shirt because they brought me a football and they brought some fancy girl's stuff for Dottie, and Aunt Gertrude had embroidered an apron for Mother.

We sat in the living room and they had sherry until Mallie said dinner was ready. Mother sat at the head of the table and tried to look serious while we were eating, but she kept starting to laugh and so did I and it made everything cheerful. Because we had broiled squab with a cherry sauce, and once when Mother meant to tell me I was listening too much instead of eating, she slipped and said, “Jerry, eat your hat.” That made me choke and then all I could do was pass her the dish of wild rice and say very solemnly, “Have some gravel, Mother?”

We also had lettuce and tomato salad. When Mallie passed it I whispered to her, “Where did you get *this?”* and she said, “I picked it in the garden,” which shut *me* up.

And when Mallie brought the dessert I thought for a minute it was the down from the pillow but it turned out to be baked Alaska. Uncle Ralph stood up and bowed to Mallie at the end of dinner and said it was the finest meal he had ever tasted.

After dinner we sat around and talked for a while and then we all took Uncle Ralph and Aunt Gertrude up to the guest room. Mallie had done one of her fastest jobs on the room, and it was as neat and clean as anything you ever saw. There were fresh curtains, which looked suspiciously like the veil from Mother’s hat, and a big bunch of flowers in a bowl. I was the only one who noticed how much they looked like the flowers on the wallpaper in my room, although Aunt Gertrude asked what kind they were and no one knew. I said something to Mallie about it the next day and she laughed and took a swing at me, which I ducked, as usual.

Things went on like that all summer. Dottie started wearing a college fraternity pin but she gave it back before high school opened. Mother had something done to her hair and bought a lot of new clothes. And, as I said, I got to be captain of the team and a pretty good pitcher after all. And then one day while we were all having lunch together in the kitchen Mallie said, “Mrs. Livingston, I’ve got to be thinking about leaving one of these days.”

We all tried to argue with her but no one could convince her. All I could say, finally, was “Will you come back and see us sometime?” and she said, "Not unless you need me for something." Then she winked the way she always did and said, "But you'll be hearing from me sooner or later."

She wouldn't say where she was going, or why, but she did say that she was getting old. She looked about sixty then, but she said she was really old.

"I find these days," she said to Mother, "that instead of going upstairs to make the beds, I'd rather just sit in the kitchen and *wish* them done. And that's not good." She shook her head. "I've got to get off by myself and think myself younger."

"You can make yourself *younger?"* Mother said real fast, but Mallie just laughed and said, "Only by thinking so, Mrs. Livingston. *You* wouldn't be happy any younger than you are, not with two grown children. And you'd be surprised what's coming along for you."

Mallie added that she would go in a week and then Dottie, who was, as I say, getting politer but not any smarter, said, "Listen, Dopey, before Mallie goes, why don't you ask her to do something for that football team of yours?"

"Baseball, fathead," I said.

"Get her to fix it for you," Dottie said, "so you'll win all the time."

Well, *there* was a silly idea. Trust a girl to think of it. "Listen," I told her very slowly and clearly so she could understand, "with me pitching, magic is *not* necessary."

Mallie winked at me and pulled my hair. "Can't use magic on boys, anyway," she said. "Just wears away on their tough hides."

Well, she left the next week and then school started again and summer ended. After a while we sort of stopped talking about Mallie, because so much was happening all the time. I used to think about her sometimes during baseball season or when I was eating a cherry pie that didn't have much taste, and once in a while Mother would say how much she missed Mallie's being so cheerful around the house. Then when Dottie was packing to go away to college she took out the blue dress with the dandelions on it and tried it on once more before she put it in her trunk.

"This was always one of my favorite dresses," she said, looking dreamy. "I wore it to the spring dance with that boy — remember him?" she asked Mother and Mother nodded.

"You know," Mother said slowly, looking at Dottie, "that dress is just as fresh now as it was when it came. I don't believe it's ever going to wear out."

"It's magic," Dottie said. "I wore it to the spring dance and to the country club dance last summer and then the senior ball and I guess dozens of other times."

"Remember dinner with Uncle Ralph and Aunt Gertrude?" I said. "Remember the gravel?"

"And my hat!" Mother said. We all laughed.

"I'll never forget Dottie standing there all hung with curtains," I said.

"Or your face when you saw the dress," Dottie said. "Everyone asks me where I got it."

"I guess Mallie ought to be a family secret," Mother said. "Imagine trying to tell people that your dress — and that dinner — and the housework — and—"

"Dottie's cooking," I said.

"And Jerry's ball team," Dottie said.

"No!" I put in, but Mother went on quickly, "Anyway, imagine trying to tell anyone all of that was *magic"*

"Well," I said, "magic or no magic, she was sure some cook."

Mother and I saw Dottie off on the train. Mother got sort of tearful and it was strange even to me to have Dottie gone. But then the time kept going on and Dottie came home for Christmas and she and Mother made the blue dress over so Dottie could wear it to some fancy party. I was sorry when they took the dandelions off; somehow they reminded me of Mallie as much as anything else I knew.

Then in the spring Mother pulled her big surprise, getting married again. Dottie came home from college specially, and things were pretty exciting for a while. We heard from Mallie at last on the morning of the day Mother was getting married. Mother was all dressed and ready for the wedding to start, and she and Dottie and I were sitting there together sort of having one last family talk, when someone brought up a package that had just arrived. I think we all guessed who it was from right away, just from the sudden way it arrived. Mother took out the card and read: "With love, from Mallie." Then she looked at Dottie and me and said, "Imagine her remembering us after all this time!"

"I figured she would," I said.

"So did I," said Dottie, and that surprised me a little.

Inside the package was a mirror with blue flowers painted around the edge and funny old-fashioned cupid faces on the corners. Mother liked it the minute she saw it, and set it up on her dresser. And when she looked in it, she looked sort of surprised, and then she smiled and began to touch her hair, the way women do. She called Dottie and Dottie looked in the mirror and *she* began to smile and fiddle with her hair, and the two of them were laughing and fooling around with the mirror and I sat there and got more and more nervous because I had to walk down the aisle with Mother and I was sure I'd trip.

Someone finally called them from downstairs and they went down together, looking all excited and pretty. Before I followed them I sneaked a look in the mirror for myself. It was funny; I looked different. My face was thinner, somehow, without that awful pink look you have when you're what they call a healthy boy. And there was a shadow across the mirror that made it look almost as though I had a mustache, like a big-league pitcher, maybe, or an explorer. I looked really grown up, so I went downstairs, all set for the wedding.

All day they kept going upstairs, Mother and Dottie and all the other women who were there, and they'd all take a look in the mirror and come downstairs again all smiles. I even took another couple of looks myself, when there was no one else around.

After the wedding Mother put the mirror in the hall downstairs so that everyone coming in or going out of the house could look in it. You'd be surprised at how it seems to make people feel pleased with themselves. I keep thinking what Mallie would have said if I asked her why the mirror made people feel so much handsomer and smarter. She'd wink at me, as always, and say, "Magic."

I guess it *was* magic, all of it — though I wouldn't like to say for sure. All of it, that is, except that game when my team beat the Nine-Man Wonders. I pitched that game and I *know*.

THE WISHING DIME

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MR. HOWARD J. KENNEY, trudging disconsolately, noticed the bright shine of a coin in the gutter and for a minute regarded it cynically, without attempting to pick it up. It was a dime, and Mr. Howard J. Kenney felt with some justice that one dime more or less would make very little difference in his life at present; this was the end of his second week of job-hunting. The two weeks' salary with which he had been discharged had dwindled to an alarmingly small sum; his wife no longer tried to cover her worry with a brave smile; the whole world — or so it seemed to Mr. Kenney — saw them with a suspicious, no-credit eye. And so fate offered Mr. Kenney a dime, glittering brightly in the late afternoon sunlight. After a minute, Mr. Kenney shrugged, leaned over, and took up the dime. It felt light in his hand, and solid, but very small indeed. Mr. Kenney started to drop it into his pocket and then he thought suddenly: Always give away found money; brings luck. I could use some luck. He held the dime in his hand as he walked toward his home.

There were two little girls ahead of him, about half a block away. They were the only people on the street, and they were playing together solemnly. They were about eight years old, Mr. Kenney decided as he came nearer to them, and he thought drearily what a pleasant age eight must be — no responsibilities, no thought for the future, nothing but sunlight and games. When he came close to the little girls, they both looked up at him, watching him approach with grave, unselfconscious interest. One of them was wearing a pink dress, the other, a blue blouse and yellow skirt. They looked like pleasant, agreeable little girls, and Mr. Kenney smiled tentatively at them.

“Hello,” he said.

“Hello,” said the little girl in pink.

“Here,” Mr. Kenney said. He held out the hand with the dime in it and took the hand of the little girl in pink. He put the dime into her hand, closed her fingers over it, and smiled again. “For luck,” he said, and walked on quickly.

For a minute, the girls were silent with surprise; Mr. Kenney felt them watching him walk away. Then, after a minute, one of them — probably the one in pink — called, “Thank you. Thank you very much for the dime.”

Mr. Kenney waved without looking around and walked on toward his home.

Behind him, the two little girls bent their heads over the dime, shining in the hand of the little girl in pink.

“Why’d he give it to us, do you think?” the little girl in pink, whose name was Nancy, asked the little girl in blue and yellow, whose name was Jill.

“I don’t know,” Jill said. “He just gave it to us.”

“He said it was for luck, though.”

“I wonder why he didn’t keep it if it was so lucky,” Jill said. She turned all the way around to stare down the street at Mr. Kenney, now far distant. “Ten cents,” she said. “That’s a lot of money.”

“What’ll we do with it?” Nancy asked.

“We could get two Popsicles for ten cents,” Jill said.

“Or two chocolate bars.”

“Or ice cream.”

Nancy was looking intently at the dime. "It doesn't look like a regular dime, somehow," she said. "Somehow it doesn't look like a regular dime at *all"*

Jill leaned over and looked at it. "It's different, all right," she said. "I don't know *how*, but it's most certainly different from a regular dime."

"A regular dime's thinner, maybe," Nancy said. She bent her head far down, next to Jill's, and the two of them looked wonderingly at the dime.

"Or maybe this is more silvery," Jill said. "Anyway, it's most certainly not a *regular* dime."

They lifted their heads suddenly and stared at each other for a minute with lovely, credulous speculation. Then Jill said softly, "Nancy, do you suppose—"

"I'm almost *sure* of it," Nancy said firmly. "It's a *magic* dime."

"A wishing dime," Jill added. "For wishes."

"That's why he said, 'For luck,'" Nancy said.

"Three wishes," Jill said.

Nancy closed her fingers tight around the dime. "Jill," she said, "we've got to be very, very careful with this wishing dime. We've got to be *very* careful."

"It's not like ordinary wishing," Jill agreed, "where you go on wishing and wishing and you know nothing's going to happen because you don't have something like a wishing dime." She stopped for breath and then added, "This is very, very different."

"We can't just go around wishing for anything," Nancy said.

Jill sat down abruptly on the sidewalk, putting her chin into her hands and setting her small mouth; she was thinking. "We could wish for a million dollars," she said finally.

“We don’t need any more money,” Nancy pointed out. “We have a dime already.”

“A pony?”

“Where would we keep it?” Nancy objected. “There’s not room in your house, and I asked Mother to get us a baby brother and I’m pretty sure she wouldn’t let me have a pony, *too.”*

“We could wish for all the candy in the world,” Jill said, “but then we’d be sick.”

They both thought soberly for a few minutes, sitting together on the sidewalk, Nancy with her fingers carefully closed over the dime.

“Christmas?” Jill suggested, but Nancy only shook her head. “Coming anyway,” she said briefly.

“Listen,” Jill said suddenly. “What we’ve got to do is let someone *else* make the first wish. Then we’ll find out how to do it.”

“We’ve got three wishes, after all,” Nancy said in agreement, “and we wouldn’t need more than one for ourselves. If we could even think of anything for one wish.”

“Besides,” Jill said, “there might be someone around who’s been looking and *looking* for a wishing dime because they had a terribly important wish to make.”

“We ought to go home, then,” Nancy said. “Maybe there’s someone in your family or someone in my family with a wish to make.”

They stood up and carefully brushed off their skirts. Then, moving busily along side by side, they went to the house where Jill lived with her mother and father and two older brothers.

“I don’t know who would be best to ask at my house,” Jill said uncertainly. “My brother George is out back painting the steps, but he’s so mean these days.”

Nancy looked at the house next door, where she lived with her mother and father and sister. “Sally’s on the porch,” she said. “You think we could ask *her?”*

“Will she do it?” Jill asked.

“Sometimes she’s sort of funny,” Nancy said. “But we can ask her.”

They went up the walk to Nancy’s front gate and then to the porch steps. Nancy’s older sister Sally was swinging in the porch swing, holding a book; but when Nancy and Jill arrived, Sally was staring at Jill’s house next door.

“Sally,” Nancy said, and Sally jumped.

“You scare a person to death,” she said. She glanced once, nervously, at Jill’s house, and then said hastily, “I was just wondering when Mother was coming home.”

“She’s not at my house,” Jill said.

“I wasn’t looking at *your* house,” Sally said. “I was looking to see if I could see Mother coming down the street.”

Both Jill and Nancy had agreed that Sally was the prettiest girl they had ever seen. She was seventeen, and in high school, and she had curly hair that fell to her shoulders in pretty waves. Sally had brown eyes, and she crinkled up her nose whenever she smiled. Right now, however, she was frowning, and her nice mouth was twisted in discontent.

“I wonder when Mother’s coming home,” she said aimlessly. “Nothing to do around here.”

“Why don’t you go talk to my brother George?” Jill asked. “He’s out back, painting the steps.”

“I don’t really care to talk to George, thank you,” Sally said. She lifted her chin a little higher and shrugged her shoulders. “I’m not really interested in anything George has to say.”

"Mother said he had to paint the steps because he was so grouchy all day."

"I'm not surprised," Sally said. "I'm not at *all* surprised that your mother thinks George is grouchy. George is one of the grouchiest—"

"Listen, Sally," Nancy said. "Will you make a wish for us on our magic dime?"

"He is *really* unbearable," Sally said. "What's a magic dime?"

Nancy showed Sally the magic dime, and she and Jill explained to Sally that there were three wishes attached to it, and it had been given them for luck, and Sally was to try the first wish.

"Heavens," Sally said. "What on earth would I wish for?" Because she was really a very kind and charming girl, she smiled at Jill and Nancy and said with interest, "I couldn't think of a thing to wish for."

"That was our trouble, too," Nancy said sadly.

"Well, let me see," said Sally. She stared into space and tapped her fingers thoughtfully on the edge of the book.

"You could wish for George to finish painting and come over to see you," Jill suggested.

"Well, *really"* Sally said. Her smile disappeared and again she looked very haughty indeed. "If you think I'd waste a wish on something like *that* —"

"Maybe we better ask someone else," Nancy said.

"Well," Sally said hesitantly, "if you really want me to wish for something. How do I do it?"

"I suppose," Nancy said, "I *suppose* you just hold it in your hand."

"And count to ten," Jill said.

"And make my wish," said Sally. She smiled again. "Do I have to tell what I wish?"

Jill and Nancy consulted each other with their eyes. “I think you can say it to yourself if you want to,” Nancy said.

“All right, then,” Sally said. She held out her hand, and Nancy put the dime into it.

“One, two, three, four,” Sally counted while Jill and Nancy watched her breathlessly. “Five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten.” Then, eyes shut and a half smile on her face, she made her wish to herself. “There,” she said. She handed the dime to Nancy.

“Has anything happened?” Jill asked curiously.

“It hasn’t come true yet, if that’s what you mean,” Sally said. She glanced again, as if involuntarily, at Jill’s house next door. “We ought to give it a while, anyway.”

“You going to tell us what you wished?” Nancy asked.

Sally leaned against the pillows and sighed deeply. “Someday,” she said. “If it comes true.”

“It’ll come true,” Nancy said confidently. “It’s a wishing dime, isn’t it?”

“We ought to find someone else,” Jill said. “There are two more wishes left, and we’ve got to be careful with them.”

As the little girls started down the steps, Sally sighed again deeply. “Who you going to ask next?” she said.

“I don’t know,” Nancy said. “George, I guess.”

“Of all the people in the world!” Sally said. “Heaven only knows what *George* might wish for.” She sighed again and leaned her head on her hand.

“We’ll ask him anyway,” Jill said to Nancy as they went down the walk. “He might *want* to make a wish.”

George was at the back of Jill’s house. The can of paint he had been using stood on the top step, only half of which was painted. George sat on the unpainted bottom step, his fingers holding the brush idly and his handsome mouth set in a grim line.

“Hi,” he said gloomily as the little girls came around the corner of the house.

“He looks worse than Sally,” Jill said critically. “Doesn’t he, Nancy?”

“Sally looks pretty bad,” Nancy said. “But George looks pretty bad, too.”

“You’re a great pair to brighten a dreary afternoon,” George said. “Did you just come to cheer me up?”

“We want you to make a wish,” Jill said. “Sally did.”

“I don’t care what Sally—” George began, but Jill interrupted him.

“We got a wishing dime from a man going down the street,” she said. “He just gave it to us for luck, and Sally made a wish and we want you to make a wish, too.”

George asked, as if not able to stop himself in time, “What did Sally wish?”

“She wished you would come over and see her,” Jill said promptly.

“Right away this afternoon,” Nancy added.

“So we want you to make a wish, too,” Jill said.

“Wish?” George said. He stared at them vaguely. Then he stood up and put down the paintbrush. “Wish?” he said.

“Yes,” Jill said patiently. “Like Sally did. We want you to make a wish.”

“You wish for me,” George said. Suddenly, without warning, he began to run. With one leap he cleared the low hedge between Jill’s backyard and Nancy’s backyard, and Jill and Nancy could see him racing for the front porch, where Sally was sitting.

“They sure act funny, those two,” Jill said.

“Now we’ve got to find someone else,” Nancy said.

They went through Jill's house, but no one was around. Then, outside again, they sat down to wait for someone to come along.

"It's wonderful to have a wishing dime," Jill said.

"And to be able to wish for anything you want," Nancy said. "Suppose we wanted a fire engine all our own, we could wish for it."

"It's lucky we *don't* want a fire engine," Jill pointed out. "We couldn't drive it."

"Same with something like a doll as big as we are," Nancy said. "We couldn't play with it. It would be too big and too heavy for us to carry."

"Or going to the movies every night," Jill said.

They were quiet, sitting comfortably side by side with the dime still in Nancy's hand. Then Nancy's mother came around the corner from the bus stop and started toward them. She was carrying packages and walking slowly.

Both Jill and Nancy got up and ran. Nancy reached her mother and hugged her enthusiastically. Mrs. Waite drew back, saying irritably, "Nancy dear, *please* watch what you're doing. You'll knock everything out of my hands."

Nancy and Jill began telling her about the magic dime, about the man who had given it to them for luck, about Sally's wishing and George's not wishing.

"How do you children *think* of such things?" Mrs. Waite said.

When they came to Nancy's porch there was no sign of Sally on the swing, except for the book lying where it had fallen on the porch floor. Mrs. Waite went inside, closely followed by Nancy and Jill, still talking, and she put her packages on the table in the hall. "There," she said. "I'm glad to get rid of *those.*" She stretched her arms wearily.

Before she had taken off her hat, Nancy pressed the dime into her hand. “Please,” Nancy said. “Wish right away.” She held her breath, and so did Jill. “It’s the second wish,” Nancy said.

“Oh, dear,” Mrs. Waite frowned. “Really,” she said, “I wish you girls would save your games for some time when I’m not so busy, and so tired.” She tried to make her voice gentle, but it was sharp in spite of her. “I’ve been shopping all day,” she said. “I’m really *very* tired, girls, and I’ve got a lot to do. Can’t it wait?”

When she saw Nancy’s and Jill’s disappointment, she sighed impatiently and said in a resigned voice, “All right, then. What do you want me to wish for?”

“Anything,” Nancy said eagerly. “That’s what it does — it gives you anything you wish for.”

“I could wish dinner was all made,” Mrs. Waite said.

“Dinner couldn’t be all made,” Jill said reasonably. “The dime wouldn’t know what to cook, for one thing. And anyway, it’s too early.”

“I suppose,” Mrs. Waite said. She stood frowning while her hands absently busied themselves with the packages on the table. “I know,” she said. “How do I do it?”

“Take the dime in your hand,” Nancy told her carefully. “Count to ten, and then make your wish.”

“All right,” Mrs. Waite said. She held out her hand, and Nancy put the dime into it. Slowly Mrs. Waite counted to ten, and then she said, “I wish the dishes I left in the sink when I went out this afternoon were all washed and put away.”

“Do you think that’s all right, for a real wish?” Nancy asked Jill anxiously.

“It’s too late, anyway,” Jill pointed out. “She’s already wished it.”

"It's the best I can do," Mrs. Waite said. She turned back to her packages. "I hope your magic dime works, because I'd like nothing better than to be saved doing those dishes." She had taken off her hat and coat, and now, selecting the packages that went to the kitchen, she went down the hall and opened the kitchen's swinging door, while Nancy and Jill, who felt a certain justifiable anxiety about the powers of their wishing dime, followed her.

A burst of laughter met them when Mrs. Waite pushed open the door. Sally and George, each wearing an apron, were racing around the kitchen table, George flicking at Sally's feet with the dish towel. The dishes were washed, and most of them were dried and stacked on the table.

"Be fresh to me, will you," George was shouting.

The kitchen table, with its load of dishes, trembled perilously as George and Sally frolicked around it. Sally saw her mother and, with a wild scream, fled behind Mrs. Waite for protection. George, unable to stop in time, crashed against Mrs. Waite and sent her, with Sally, Nancy, and Jill behind her, sprawling into the hall, while the door swung after them and then gently back into George's face.

For a minute Mrs. Waite sat where she had fallen. "A magic dime," she said to herself. "Me still in my best shoes." She looked up at Nancy and Jill, who, with Sally, were hovering over her solicitously. "I see your dime got my dishes washed," Mrs. Waite said ironically.

"I *told* you," Nancy said. "It's a real wishing dime."

"Mrs. Waite," George said weakly, peering red-faced around the edge of the swinging door, "Mrs. Waite, I'm *terribly* sorry—"

"Never mind, George," Mrs. Waite said, accepting Sally's hand to help herself up. "I wished for it."

"He was chasing me, Mother," Sally said helpfully.

"Don't those two act funny, though?" Nancy said to Jill.

"Chasing each other," Jill said disgustedly.

"Mrs. Waite," George said, "I can't tell you how sorry—"

"We were doing the dishes for you," Sally said eagerly. She and George had been carefully not looking at each other, but now Sally looked at him accidentally, and they both began to giggle.

"We thought we'd wash the dishes for you," George explained, and then he and Sally began to laugh again. "We were sort of washing the dishes," he went on feebly, "and I got to chasing — we got to fooling around — I guess I ran into you."

Mrs. Waite looked at Nancy solemnly clutching the dime in her hand, at Jill standing close to her, at Sally and George with their red faces; and she began to laugh helplessly.

"She wished the dishes would get washed," Nancy said to Sally.

"My wish came true," Sally said, surprised. "I hadn't thought of it till now."

"We figured it came true," Jill said. "Didn't we, Nancy?"

Nancy nodded. "There's one left," she said. She pulled Jill to one side and whispered in her ear.

Jill, nodding, said, "That's right. I think so, too."

Sally and Mrs. Waite began to put the dishes away, and George backed carefully into a corner, apologizing violently whenever he got in Mrs. Waite's way.

Finally Nancy went over to her mother and said, "This is very, very important, everybody. We're going to make our last wish."

Mrs. Waite paused, both hands full of silverware, to look with suspicion on her younger daughter. Sally and George watched, full of curiosity, as

Nancy and Jill, with great ceremony, put their hands together with the dime between.

"This is the last wish on this dime," Nancy said, turning to explain to her mother more fully. "Because this is our very own wishing dime, Jill and I are going to make the last wish. You all had a chance to wish on it, and now it's our turn."

"And we're going to wish now," Jill said.

"One, two, three, four, five," Nancy said with great dramatic emphasis.

"Six, seven, eight, nine, ten," Jill said.

"With this magic dime, we wish for two Popsicles."

Later, when they were working on their Popsicles — Jill had orange, and Nancy's was cherry — Nancy said, "The nicest thing about wishing dimes is that they're about something special."

"Suppose we had one every day," Jill suggested. "They wouldn't be *half* so much fun."

"There aren't that many things to wish for," Nancy said wisely.

"The nicest thing about wishing dimes," Jill said, "is that after you're all through wishing with them, you can use them to spend."

And what about Mr. Howard J. Kenney, who had given the dime away for luck? Mr. Kenney arrived home about fifteen minutes after he had given away the dime, and he was met at the doorway by a hysterical wife and a group of chattering neighbors. Mr. Kenney's wife, with great presence of mind, had remembered the correct name of a song she had heard when the man from the radio station called her; she was expecting immediate delivery on a new car, a new refrigerator, an astronomical sum of money, a new fur coat, and a complete wardrobe of new clothes.

ABOUT TWO NICE PEOPLE

Ladies' Home Journal, July 1951

A PROBLEM OF SOME importance, certainly, these days, is that of anger. When one half of the world is angry at the other half, or one half of a nation is angry at the rest, or one side of town feuds with the other side, it is hardly surprising, when you stop to think about it, that so many people lose their tempers with so many other people. Even if, as in this case, they are two people not usually angry, two people whose lives are obscure and whose emotions are gentle, whose smiles are amiable and whose voices are more apt to be cheerful than raised in fury. Two people, in other words, who would much rather be friends than not and who yet, for some reason, perhaps chemical or sociological or environmental, enter upon a mutual feeling of dislike so intense that only a very drastic means can bring them out of it.

Take two such people:

Ellen Webster was what was referred to among her friends as a "sweet" girl. She had pretty, soft hair and dark, soft eyes, and she dressed in soft colors and wore frequently a lovely old-fashioned brooch that had belonged to her grandmother. Ellen thought of herself as a very happy and very lucky person because she had a good job, and was able to buy herself a fair number of soft-colored dresses and skirts and sweaters and coats and hats; she had, by working hard at it evenings, transformed her one-room apartment from a bare, neat place into a charming little refuge with her sewing basket on the table and a canary at the window; she had a reasonable conviction that someday, perhaps soon, she would fall in love with a nice young man and they would be married and Ellen would devote herself wholeheartedly to children and baking cakes and mending socks. This not-very-unusual situation, with its perfectly ordinary state of mind, was a source of great happiness to Ellen. She was, in a word, not one of those who rail against their fate, who live in sullen hatred of the world. She was — her friends were right — a sweet girl.

On the other hand, even if you would not have called Walter Nesmith sweet, you would very readily have thought of him as a “nice” fellow, or an “agreeable” person, or even — if you happened to be a little old white-haired lady — a “dear boy.” There was a subtle resemblance between Ellen Webster and Walter Nesmith. Both of them were the first resort of their friends in trouble, for instance. Walter’s ambitions, which included the rest of his life, were refreshingly similar to Ellen’s: Walter thought that someday he might meet some sweet girl, and would then devote himself wholeheartedly to coming home of an evening to read his paper, and perhaps work in the garden on Sundays.

Walter thought that he would like to have two children, a boy and a girl. Ellen thought that she would like to have three children, a boy and two girls. Walter was very fond of cherry pie, Ellen preferred Boston cream. Ellen enjoyed romantic movies. Walter preferred westerns. They read almost exactly the same books.

In the ordinary course of events, the friction between Ellen and Walter would have been very slight. But — and what could cause a thing like this? — the ordinary course of events was shattered by a trifle like a telephone call.

Ellen’s telephone number was 3-4126. Walter’s telephone number was 3-4216. Ellen lived in apartment 3-A and Walter lived in apartment 3-B; these apartments were across the hall from each other, and very often Ellen, opening her door at precisely quarter of nine in the morning and going toward the elevator, met Walter, who opened *his* door at precisely quarter of nine in the morning and went toward the elevator. On these occasions Ellen customarily said, “Good morning,” and looked steadfastly the other way. Walter usually answered, “Good morning,” and avoided looking in her direction. Ellen thought that a girl who allowed herself to be informal with strangers created a bad impression, and Walter thought that a man who took advantage of living in the same building to strike up an acquaintance with a girl was a man of little principle. One particularly fine morning he said to Ellen in the elevator, “Lovely day,” and she replied, “Yes, isn’t it?” and both of them felt secretly that they had been bold. How this mutual respect for each other’s dignity could have degenerated into fury is a mystery not easily understood.

It happened that one evening — and, to do her strict justice, Ellen had had a hard day: she was coming down with a cold, it had rained steadily for a week, her stockings were unwashed, and she had broken a fingernail — the phone which had the number 3-4126 rang. Ellen had been opening a can of chicken soup in the kitchenette, and she had her hands full; she said, “Darn,” and managed to drop and break a cup in her hurry to answer the phone.

“Hello?” she said, thinking, This is going to be something cheerful.

“Hello, is Walter there?”

“Walter?”

“Walter Nesmith. I want to speak to Walter, please.”

“This is the wrong number,” Ellen said, thinking with the self-pity that comes with the first stages of a head cold, that *no* one ever called *her*.

“Is this three-four two one six?”

“This is three-four one two six,” Ellen said, and hung up.

At that time, although she knew that the person in the apartment across the hall was named Walter Nesmith, she could not have told the color of his hair or even of the outside of his apartment door. She went back to her soup and had a match in her hand to light the stove, when the phone rang again.

"Hello?" Ellen said without enthusiasm; this *could* be someone cheerful, she was thinking.

"Hello, is Walter there?"

"This is the wrong number again," Ellen said; if she had not been such a very sweet girl she might have let more irritation show in her voice.

"I *want* to *speak* to Walter Nesmith, *please*."

"This is three-four one two six again," Ellen said patiently. "You want three-four two one six."

"What?" said the voice.

"This," said Ellen, "is number three-four one two six. The number you want is three-four two one six." Like anyone who has tried to say a series of numbers several times, she found her anger growing. Surely anyone of *normal* intelligence, she was thinking, surely anyone *ought* to be able to dial a phone, anyone who can't dial a phone shouldn't be allowed to have a nickel.

She had got all the way back into the kitchenette and was reaching out for the can of soup before the phone rang again. This time when she answered she said, "Hello?" rather sharply for Ellen, and with no illusions about who it was going to be.

"Hello, may I please speak to Walter?"

At that point it started. Ellen had a headache and it was raining and she was tired and she was apparently not going to get any chicken soup until this annoyance was stopped.

"Just a minute," she said into the phone.

She put the phone down with an understandable bang on the table, and marched, without taking time to think, out of her apartment and up to the door across the hall. “Walter Nesmith” said a small card at the doorbell. Ellen rang the doorbell with what was, for her, a vicious poke. When the door opened she said immediately, without looking at him:

“Are you Walter Nesmith?”

Now, Walter had had a hard day, too, and *he* was coming down with a cold, and *he* had been trying ineffectually to make himself a cup of hot tea in which he intended to put a spoonful of honey to ease his throat, that being a remedy his aunt had always recommended for the first onslaught of a cold. If there had been one fraction less irritation in Ellen’s voice, or if Walter had not taken off his shoes when he came home that night, it might very probably have turned out to be a pleasant introduction, with Walter and Ellen dining together on chicken soup and hot tea, and perhaps even sharing a bottle of cough medicine. But when Walter opened the door and heard Ellen’s voice, he was unable to answer her cordially, and so he said briefly:

“I am. Why?”

“Will you please come and answer my phone?” said Ellen, too annoyed to realize that this request might perhaps bewilder Walter.

“Answer your phone?” said Walter stupidly.

“Answer my phone,” said Ellen firmly. She turned and went back across the hall, and Walter stood in his doorway in his stocking feet and watched her numbly. “Come *on*” she said sharply as she went into her own apartment, and Walter, wondering briefly if they allowed harmless lunatics to live alone as though they were just like other people, hesitated for an instant and then followed her, on the theory that it would be wise to do what she said when she seemed so cross, and reassuring himself that he could leave the door open and yell for help if necessary. Ellen stamped into her apartment and pointed at the phone where it lay on the table. "There. Answer it."

Eyeing her sideways, Walter edged over to the phone and picked it up. "Hello," he said nervously. Then, "Hello? Hello?" Looking at her over the top of the phone, he said, "What do you want me to do now?"

"Do you mean to say," said Ellen ominously, "that that terrible terrible person has hung up?"

"I guess so," said Walter, and fled back to his own apartment.

The door had only just closed behind him, when the phone rang again, and Ellen, answering it, heard, "May I speak to Walter, please?"

Not a very serious mischance, surely. But the next morning Walter pointedly avoided going down in the elevator with Ellen, and sometime during that day the deliveryman left a package addressed to Ellen at Walter's door.

When Walter found the package he took it manfully under his arm and went boldly across the hall and rang Ellen's doorbell. When Ellen opened her door she thought at first — and she may have been justified — that Walter had come to apologize for the phone call the evening before, and she even thought that the package under his arm might contain something delightfully unexpected, like a box of candy. They lost another chance then; if Walter had not held out the package and said, "Here," Ellen would not have gone on thinking that he was trying to apologize in his own shy way, and she would certainly not have smiled warmly, and said, "You *shouldn't* have bothered."

Walter, who regarded transporting a misdelivered parcel across the hall as relatively little bother, said blankly, "No bother at all," and Ellen, still deceived, said, "But it really wasn't *that* important."

Walter went back into his own apartment convinced that this was a very odd girl indeed, and Ellen, finding that the package had been mailed to her and contained a wool scarf knitted by a cousin, was as much angry as embarrassed because, once having imagined that an apology is forthcoming, it is very annoying not to have one after all, and particularly to have a wool scarf instead of a box of candy.

How this situation disintegrated into the white-hot fury that rose between these two is a puzzle, except for the basic fact that when once a series of misadventures has begun between two people, everything tends to contribute further to a state of misunderstanding. Thus, Ellen opened a letter of Walter's by mistake, and Walter dropped a bottle of milk — he was still trying to cure his cold, and thought that perhaps milk toast was the thing — directly outside Ellen's door, so that even after his nervous attempts to clean it up, the floor was still littered with fragments of glass, and puddled with milk.

Then Ellen — who believed by now that Walter had thrown the bottle of milk against her door — allowed herself to become so far confused by this succession of small annoyances that she actually wrote and mailed a letter to Walter, asking politely that he try to turn down his radio a little in the late evenings. Walter replied with a frigid letter to the effect that certainly if he had known that she was bothered by his radio, he would surely never have dreamed —

That evening, perhaps by accident, his radio was so loud that Ellen's canary woke up and chirped hysterically, and Ellen, pacing her floor in incoherent fury, might have been heard — if there had been anyone to hear her, and if Walter's radio had not been so loud — to say, "I'll get even with him!" A phrase, it must be said, which Ellen had never used before in her life.

Ellen made her preparations with a sort of loving care that might well have been lavished on some more worthy object. When the alarm went off she turned in her sleep and smiled before quite waking up, and, once awake and the alarm turned off, she almost laughed out loud. In her slippers and gown, the clock in her hand, she went across her small apartment to the phone; the number was one she was not soon apt to forget. The dial tone sounded amazingly loud, and for a minute she was almost frightened out of her resolution. Then, setting her teeth, she dialed the number, her hand steady. After a second's interminable wait, the ringing began. The phone at the other end rang three times, four times, with what seemed interminable waits between, as though even the mechanical phone system hesitated at this act. Then, at last, there was an irritable crash at the other end of the line, and a voice said, "Wah?"

"Good morning," said Ellen brightly. "I'm so terribly sorry to disturb you at this hour."

"Wah?"

"This is Ellen Webster," said Ellen, still brightly. "I called to tell you that my clock has stopped—" "Wah?"

" — and I wonder if you could tell me what time it is?" There was a short pause at the other end of the line. Then, after a minute, his voice came back: "Tenny minna fah."

"I beg your pardon?"

There was another short pause at the other end of the line, as of someone opening his eyes with a shock. "Twenty minutes after four," he said. *"Twenty minutes after four."*

"The reason I thought of asking you," Ellen said sweetly, "was that you were so *very* obliging before. About the radio, I mean."

" — calling a person at—"

“Thanks so much,” said Ellen. “Goodbye.”

She felt fairly certain that he would not call her back, but she sat on her bed and giggled a little before she went back to sleep.

Walter’s response to this was miserably weak: He contacted a neighboring delicatessen a day or so later, and had an assortment of evil-smelling cheeses left in Ellen’s apartment while she was out. This, which required persuading the superintendent to open Ellen’s apartment so that the package might be left inside, was a poor revenge but a monstrous exercise of imagination upon Walter’s part, so that, in one sense, Ellen was already bringing out in him qualities he never knew he had. The cheese, it turned out, more than evened the score: The apartment was small, the day was warm, and Ellen did not get home until late, and long after most of the other tenants on the floor had gone to the superintendent with their complaints about something dead in the woodwork.

Since breaking and entering had thus become one of the rules of their game, Ellen felt privileged to retaliate in kind upon Walter. It was with great joy, some evenings later, that Ellen, sitting in her odorous apartment, heard Walter’s scream of pure terror when he put his feet into his slippers and found a raw *egg* in each.

Walter had another weapon, however, which he had been so far reluctant to use; it was a howitzer of such proportions that Walter felt its use would end warfare utterly. After the raw eggs he felt no compunction whatever in bringing out his heavy artillery.

It seemed to Ellen, at first, as though peace had been declared. For almost a week things went along smoothly; Walter kept his radio turned down almost to inaudibility, so that Ellen got plenty of sleep. She was over her cold, the sun had come out, and on Saturday morning she spent three hours shopping, and found exactly the dress she wanted at less than she expected to pay.

About Saturday noon she stepped out of the elevator, her packages under her arm, and walked briskly down the hall to her apartment, making, as usual, a wide half circle to avoid coming into contact with the area around Walter's door.

Her apartment door, to her surprise, was open, but before she had time to phrase a question in her own mind, she had stepped inside and come face-to-face with a lady who — not to make any more mysteries — was Walter Nesmith's aunt, and a wicked old lady in her own way, possessing none of Walter's timidity and none of his tact.

"Who?" said Ellen weakly, standing in the doorway.

"Come in and close the door," said the old lady darkly. "I don't think you'll want your neighbors to hear what I have to say. I," she continued as Ellen obeyed mechanically, "am Mrs. Harold Vongarten Nesmith. Walter Nesmith, young woman, is my nephew."

"Then you are in the wrong apartment," said Ellen quite politely, considering the reaction which Walter Nesmith's name was beginning by now to arouse in her. "You want Apartment Three-B, across the hall."

"I do not," said the old lady firmly. "I came here to see the designing young woman who has been shamelessly pursuing my nephew, and to warn her" — the old lady shook her gloves menacingly— "to warn her that *not one cent* shall she have from me if she marries Walter Nesmith."

"Marries?" said Ellen, thoughts too great for words in her heart.

"It has long been my opinion that some young woman would be after Walter Nesmith for his money," said Walter's aunt with satisfaction.

"Believe me," said Ellen wholeheartedly, "there is not that much money in the world."

"You deny it?" The old lady leaned back and smiled triumphantly. "I expected something of the sort. Walter," she called suddenly, and then, putting her head back and howling, "Wallllter."

"Shhh," said Ellen fearfully. "They'll hear you all over."

"I expect them to," said the old lady. "Wallll — oh, there you are."

Ellen turned, and saw Walter Nesmith, with triumph in his eyes, peering around the edge of the door. "Did it work?" he asked.

"She denies everything," said his aunt.

"About the eggs?" Walter said, confused. "You mean, she denies about the eggs and the phone call and—"

"Look," Ellen said to Walter, stamping across the floor to look at him straight in the eye, "of all the insufferable, conceited, rude, self-satisfied—"

"What?" said Walter.

"I wouldn't want to marry you," said Ellen, "if — if—" She stopped for a word, helpless.

"If he were the last man on earth," Walter's aunt supplied obligingly. "I think she's really after your *money*, Walter."

Walter stared at his aunt. "I didn't tell you to tell her—" he began. He gasped, and tried again. "I mean," he said, "I never thought—" He appealed to Ellen. "I don't want to marry you, either," he said, and then gasped again, and said, "I mean, I told my aunt to come and tell you—"

"If this is a proposal," Ellen said coldly, "I decline."

"All I wanted her to do was scare you," Walter said finally.

"It's a good way," his aunt said complacently. "Turned out to be the only way with your uncle Charles and a Hungarian adventuress."

"I mean," Walter said desperately to Ellen, "she owns this building. I mean, I wanted her to tell you that if you didn't stop — I mean, I wanted her to scare you—"

"Apartments are too hard to get these days," his aunt said. "That would have been *too* unkind."

"That's how I got my apartment at all, you see," Walter said to Ellen, still under the impression he was explaining something Ellen wanted to understand.

"Since you *have* got an apartment," Ellen said with restraint, "may I suggest that you take your aunt and the both of you—"

The phone rang.

"Excuse me," said Ellen mechanically, moving to answer it. "Hello?" she said.

"Hello, may I speak to Walter, please?"

Ellen smiled rather in the manner that Lady Macbeth might have smiled if she found a run in her stocking.

"It's for you," she said, holding the phone out to Walter.

"For me?" he said, surprised. "Who is it?"

"I really could not say," said Ellen sweetly. "Since you have so many friends that one phone is not adequate to answer all their calls—"

Since Walter made no move to take the phone, she put it gently back on the hook.

"They'll call again," she assured him, still smiling in that terrible fashion.

"I ought to turn you both out," said Walter's aunt. She turned to Ellen. "Young woman," she said, "do you deny that all this nonsense with eggs and telephone calls is an attempt to entangle my nephew into matrimony?"

"Certainly not," Ellen said. "I mean, I *do* deny it."

"Walter Nesmith," said his aunt, "do you admit that all your finagling with cheeses and radios is an attempt to strike up an acquaintance with this young woman?"

"Certainly," said Walter. "I mean, I do *not* admit it."

"Good," said Walter's aunt. "You are precisely the pair of silly fools I would have picked out for each other." She rose with great dignity, motioned Walter away from her, and started for the door. "Remember," she said, shaking her gloves again at Ellen, "not one cent."

She opened the door and started down the hall, her handkerchief over her eyes, and — a surprising thing in such an old lady — laughing until she had to stop and lean against the wall near the elevator.

"I'm sorry," Walter was saying to Ellen, almost babbling. "I'm *really* sorry this time — please believe me, I had *no* idea — I wouldn't for the world — nothing but the most profound respect — a joke, you know — hope you didn't really think—"

"I understand perfectly," Ellen said icily. "It is all perfectly clear. It only goes to show what I have always believed about young men who think that all they have to do is—"

The phone rang.

Ellen waited a minute before she spoke. Then she said, "You might as well answer it."

"I'm *terribly* sorry," Walter said, not moving toward the phone. "I mean, I'm *terribly* sorry." He waved his hands in the air. "About what she said about what she thought about what you wanted me to do—" His voice trailed off miserably.

Suddenly Ellen began to giggle.

Anger is certainly a problem that will bear much analysis. It is hardly surprising that one person may be angry at another, particularly if these are two people who are gentle, usually, and rarely angry, whose emotions tend to be mild and who would rather be friends with everyone than be enemies with anyone. Such an anger argues a situation so acute that only the most drastic readjustment can remedy it.

Either Walter Nesmith or Ellen Webster could have moved, of course. But, as Walter's aunt had pointed out, apartments are not that easy to come by, and their motives and their telephone numbers were by now so inextricably mixed that on the whole it seemed more reasonable not to bother.

Moreover, Walter's aunt, who still snickers when her nephew's name is mentioned, did not keep them long in suspense, after all. She was not lavish, certainly, but she wrote them a letter that both of them found completely confusing, and enclosed a check adequate for a down payment on the extremely modest house in the country they decided upon without disagreement. They even compromised and had four children — two boys and two girls.

MRS. MELVILLE MAKES A PURCHASE

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MRS. RANDOLPH HENRY MELVILLE was not accustomed to being kept waiting by a salesgirl. Mrs. Melville believed that salesgirls who were not at the moment waiting upon herself were standing at the other end of the counter gossiping with other salesgirls about the private life of the floorwalker, or engaged in secret transactions with other customers, no doubt involving special and unusually unobtainable merchandise. Now, ordinarily, it was adequate for Mrs. Melville to rap sharply upon the counter and say "Miss!" Sometimes it was necessary, however, for Mrs. Melville to go up to the salesgirl and interrupt her private conversation with some cutting remark such as "How long do I have to wait for service here?," emphasizing the *service* so that the salesgirl understood clearly, if she had not before, that she was there to serve Mrs. Melville, to obey her, to follow abjectly her orders, and not to stand around and gossip.

This time — and it is to Mrs. Melville's everlasting glory that she was not angrier, even, than she was — Mrs. Melville had rapped and said "Miss!," had marched down the counter and said with heavy accent, "How long do I have to wait for *service* here?," had stood first on one foot and then on the other, had sighed, tapped her fingers, looked around irritably, had made, for no one's benefit, a great display of impatience, fingering and tossing away blouses, and finally, and with great emphasis, had said aloud to the store in general, "Well, *really*!" And all the while, all the blessed while that Mrs. Melville waited, the salesgirl stood at the other end of the counter, gossiping and smiling and presumably not selling a blouse at all to the timid woman in the gray coat who could not make up her mind.

When Mrs. Melville had said “Miss!” the salesgirl had turned and smiled at her, and nodded; when Mrs. Melville had asked how long she had to wait, the salesgirl had said politely that she would be with Mrs. Melville in a minute; when Mrs. Melville had said “Well, *really*!” the salesgirl had said in a voice almost as sharp as Mrs. Melville’s now, “Madam, I cannot help you until I am finished with my customer.” Mrs. Melville had reported employees, and probably had had them discharged, for less than this. She would at least have gone to the floorwalker to describe the salesgirl’s insolence if she had not wanted this blouse so very much. It was precisely the style for her black faille suit, for one thing. It had the rare, the almost-despaired-of, neckline, the half sleeve, the buttoned back, the curved collar. No other store in town — and Mrs. Melville was positive that she had tried them all — had this blouse. It was Mrs. Melville’s blouse, if — and she tried not to think of this — they had it in her size.

She could see the blouses stacked neatly on the shelves behind the counter. One precious stack contained *her* blouse. She could not see the sizes, but she could see that the blouse came in shocking pink, which Mrs. Melville secretly adored, and which tempted her very much; in chartreuse, which she thought she would take as a second choice; in a sort of palish blue, which she was convinced made her complexion look sallow; in white, which was impractical in her eyes; in black, which would be odd with a black suit; and in several plaids, which Mrs. Melville had regretfully abandoned when her age turned forty overnight and her size passed almost imperceptibly from a thirty-eight into something more than her age. If the shocking pink came in her size… or the chartreuse…

“May I help you?”

Mrs. Melville jumped; she had been lost in dreams of herself in the black faille suit with the shocking pink (or the chartreuse?) blouse. ("I hunted all over town," she was telling some unidentified friend with whom she was lunching in a terribly smart restaurant, "and I simply couldn't find the blouse I wanted. Until one day — I don't know why I was there, it was just by chance, I never *thought* of looking at blouses — anyway, I said to myself that it wouldn't do any harm just to run in here and…") "I've been waiting here for half an hour," Mrs. Melville said. "Is there any *reason* why I should wait half an hour for service?"

"I'm sorry," said the salesgirl, obviously refraining with an effort from telling Mrs. Melville that she had been there no more than four minutes. "I had a customer."

"Well, are you the only person here? Aren't there more salesgirls?"

"The other girl is out to lunch, madam. What was it you wished to see?"

"Lunch?" said Mrs. Melville crossly.

The salesgirl sighed, hesitated, and said, "May I show you anything?"

Mrs. Melville decided to secure her blouse first and be angry afterward. "Well," she said reluctantly, "I might just like to look at the blouse on this figure."

"What size, please?"

Mrs. Melville glanced at her nervously. "Fairly large, I think," she said. "I always like to get my blouses good and large." The salesgirl waited. "Forty-four," Mrs. Melville said softly.

"Forty-four," repeated the salesgirl loudly. "What color?"

"The pink," said Mrs. Melville, "or the chartreuse."

"I'm not sure I have it in your size, madam," said the salesgirl. Her voice still seemed overloud for the circumstances. She turned without enthusiasm and began to leaf through the blouses in the stack. “Forty,” she said. “Forty-two. I don’t think *any* of these come in forty-four.”

“Not even the pink?” said Mrs. Melville. “Are you sure you’re looking in the right place?”

“I have the black,” said the salesgirl. “Most large figures prefer the black.”

“Young lady,” said Mrs. Melville, “I am buying a *blouse*, not your *opinions.”*

The salesgirl looked at Mrs. Melville over her shoulder. “I can’t give you what I haven’t got,” she said.

“The chartreuse?” said Mrs. Melville. “Don’t I see a chartreuse in there?”

The girl pulled it out of the stack rudely. “Does that look like a forty-four?” she said.

“Forty-two,” said Mrs. Melville, consulting the tag. “I *could* wear a forty-two,” she said earnestly to the girl. “I just like to get my blouses large.”

The girl shrugged. “I have the pink *and* the green in forty-two,” she said. “That is, if you think you can wear a forty-two. That blouse is twelve ninety-five.”

“That’s very expensive,” said Mrs. Melville immediately.

“It’s what it says on the tag,” said the girl. “I don’t set the prices.”

“I’m not at *all* sure about that pink,” said Mrs. Melville.

“I have that blouse in pink, chartreuse, blue, black, and white,” said the girl wearily.

“Well,” said Mrs. Melville, “I *can’t* take black, and white just isn’t right for me. I need color near my face.”

The girl looked up at Mrs. Melville and said without interest, “It comes in black, white, blue, pink, or chartreuse.”

“The pink is very nice,” said Mrs. Melville, considering. She held it up against herself and looked at herself in the mirror over the counter. Then she put it down and held up the chartreuse. “I really think the pink does more for me,” she said.

The girl yawned, covering her mouth politely, and said, “They’re both very good numbers.”

“But, on the other hand,” said Mrs. Melville, “the chartreuse… somehow, it’s more sophisticated. Don’t you think so?”

“The chartreuse is a very good number,” said the girl. “So is the pink.”

“Which one do *you* think?” said Mrs. Melville.

“I really couldn’t say,” said the girl.

Mrs. Melville looked at her sharply; this girl was really being very annoying. “I’ll take *this* one,” Mrs. Melville said abruptly. The girl nodded without interest, not glancing at the blouse Mrs. Melville held out. She took the blouse indifferently, with Mrs. Melville’s money, and went off. Mrs. Melville had to wait again.

By the time the girl came back with Mrs. Melville’s blouse in a bag and her change, Mrs. Melville was angry again. “Before I leave,” she said to the girl in a voice that implied that the quality of service Mrs. Melville had been vouchsafed in this store was very low indeed, “will you please give me your name and number?”

“It’s on the sales slip,” said the girl. “In the bag.”

“You may as well know,” said Mrs. Melville, “that I intend to report you for insolence. I think that your attitude toward this sale has been perfectly dreadful, and I shall make every effort to—”

“Excuse me,” said the girl. “I have to go and wait on another customer.”

She was smiling as she went off, and then she turned and came back. “The complaint department,” she said. “Report your complaints to the complaint department. On the ninth floor, near the elevator.”

Mrs. Melville turned with anger and marched away.

She was on the second floor. She knew from past experience that it would do her no good at all to report the insolent girl to the floorwalker or to the elevator operator. With her jaw set and her package under her arm, Mrs. Melville headed for the escalator and the ninth floor, thinking as she went that in any well-regulated store the complaint department would be more accessible. When she came to the escalator she stepped on as one who goes toward a duty not entirely unpleasant.

The third floor was to Mrs. Melville nothing more than a brief display of bathing suits, all obviously size nine, and, Mrs. Melville thought righteously, all far too shocking to be seen on a public beach. The fourth floor was suits, extravagantly cut, overdecorated, and seeming to come no larger than about a fourteen. The fifth floor was china and glassware and Mrs. Melville thought, as she passed, that they must lose a lot of sales because they had placed their tables full of china displays so close together that no one but a very slim person could pass between them without danger of upsetting something.

On the sixth floor was the restaurant. It was called Ye Olde Taverne, and was heavily decorated in dark red and old oak. The walls were paneled and tapestried, with small leaded windows looking out onto the rug and credit departments on one side, facing a blank wall on the other.

Mrs. Melville was not able to pass by a restaurant. Restaurant, her mind ran, food, sit down, menu, eat. The complaint department, it occurred to her, would be there as well in an hour. The salesgirl, kept in suspense that much longer, would probably learn a more severe lesson. With no more resistance than a glance at the escalator, Mrs. Melville passed through the ornamental wooden portals and into Ye Olde Taverne. She sat down at a table comfortably near the back, and stretched her feet out with a sigh.

A waitress in a full, starched yellow skirt came over to take her order, and when Mrs. Melville looked at the menu, she was wholeheartedly glad she had stopped. By some extraordinarily lucky chance, she had hit the exact moment when the Shopper's Lunch gives way before the Shopper's Tea, and so, if she wished, she might choose from either. Her eye was caught by the tuna fish salad on the Shopper's Lunch, and by the cinnamon toast on the Shopper's Tea. Hot roast beef sandwich? Mrs. Melville — who had lunched two hours before on chicken croquettes and French fried potatoes and chocolate cream pie — wondered if the beef was lean. Or the assorted tea sandwiches? Mrs. Melville dwelt lovingly on the thought of tiny crustless delicacies, filled perhaps with cream cheese and jelly, or a rich salmon filling, or peanut butter and bacon, and sighed again. She read the Fountain Suggestions, the lists of possible beverages, the desserts, and hesitated long over the butterscotch nut sundae. Perhaps a deviled *egg?* An English muffin? Mrs. Melville tapped the menu against her cheek in a long moment of indecision.

Finally, with the waitress standing impatiently over her, Mrs. Melville hesitated one last time, and chose the tuna fish salad. With another sigh, this time a sigh of pure satisfaction, Mrs. Melville carefully set her package on the chair beside her and slipped her coat from her shoulders. Easing her tired feet under the table, she leaned back and closed her eyes for a minute. Shopping was tiring, particularly with everything so hard to find and salesgirls so impudent and the complaint department so far away.

Her tuna fish salad, when it arrived, was not quite all that Mrs. Melville could have wished. The tuna fish was scanty, with little mayonnaise and much celery, the lettuce was wilted, and the waitress had, for some reason, decided to serve Mrs. Melville Ry-Krisp instead of the hot muffins promised by the menu. Finger upraised, Mrs. Melville summoned the waitress.

“I thought I was supposed to have hot muffins?” she said.

“Sorry,” said the waitress. “All out of muffins.”

“Rolls?”

“All gone.”

“Bread?” said Mrs. Melville, her voice rising slightly.

The waitress indicated the Ry-Krisp. “That’s all we got,” she said shortly.

“That woman over there has muffins,” Mrs. Melville pointed out.

“She was here before you.”

“This is disgraceful,” said Mrs. Melville. “I certainly would *not* have ordered the salad if I had known there were no more muffins. Don’t you *tell* customers these things?”

Without answering, the waitress began to move slowly away toward another table. “Miss!” Mrs. Melville said sharply. The waitress turned. “Bring me more mayonnaise,” Mrs. Melville directed, “another pat of butter, and coffee without cream or sugar at once.”

The waitress glanced at Mrs. Melville and moved away again. Mrs. Melville began her salad. She would report the girl in the blouse department and stand there until she was assured the girl was fired. She would report the waitress and insist upon a formal apology.

Someone sat down in the chair across the table from her.

Now, Mrs. Melville at all times hated to have anyone watch her eat, and she detested having to ask for more butter under the eye of an unknown person, particularly if, as it seemed in this case, the unknown person was small and quick-moving and a woman. To indicate her extreme disapproval, Mrs. Melville did not once glance up at the woman, but she could see from under her lashes that this was a woman in a dark suit or coat, and certainly someone very small, since she had gone into the narrow seat between the table and the wall without squeezing and without stirring the table or asking Mrs. Melville to move. When the waitress came, the other woman said, briefly, “Tea with lemon,” and further infuriated Mrs. Melville. Anyone who came into a restaurant, where the serving and eating of food was an obligation, and ordered only a cup of tea with lemon, was automatically in Mrs. Melville’s bad graces. More annoyed than she had been all day, Mrs. Melville abandoned the vestiges of her salad and said, “Check, please,” to the waitress.

Without comment, the waitress wrote on the check and handed it to Mrs. Melville. Mrs. Melville, with an effort, began to edge into her coat, carefully avoiding looking at the woman across the table; Mrs. Melville did not like being watched while getting into her coat. Ye Olde Taverne was beginning to fill up with shoppers taking Shopper’s Tea, and the passage of people back and forth behind Mrs. Melville’s chair made her effort to don her coat more violent; as she gave the lapels a last pull together across the front, the waitress returned, set down a cup of tea in front of the woman across the table, and a tiny paper cup in front of Mrs. Melville. “Your mayonnaise,” said the waitress, and grinned.

* * *

Mrs. Melville indignantly forbore leaving any tip, but got up with vast dignity and made her way to the cashier.

“I wish to report this waitress for impertinence,” she said. “The one over there in the yellow skirt.”

"What'd she do?" asked the cashier without interest.

"She refused to give me what I had ordered," Mrs. Melville said. "She spoke rudely, and when I asked for more—"

"Complaint department," said the cashier unenthusiastically. "I can't do nothing about that here, miss."

She looked up at Mrs. Melville without interest and said, "Complaint department" again wearily as she took Mrs. Melville's money. "Ninth floor," she said. *"I think."*

With one final furious glance at the waitress, Mrs. Melville snatched up her change and made purposefully for the escalator. The salesgirl, the waitress, the cashier — what sort of a store could this be? Mrs. Melville, setting her shoulders firmly as she stood on the escalator, thought with satisfaction that she was certainly glad no one she knew ever came here to shop; how could anything be purchased in a store where the salesgirls criticized one's figure, the waitress kidnapped one's muffins, the cashiers had no sympathy for one's feelings?

She stepped off the escalator at the eighth floor, started for her final escalator, and stopped dead. Her package. Her package, her bag with her precious blouse in it, was down in the restaurant.

"Now, why do you think no one *reminded* me?" Mrs. Melville said aloud, so that a woman passing her on the way to the next escalator looked at her disagreeably. Irritated beyond further words, Mrs. Melville turned silently and made her way across the store to the down escalator. Back she went, the way she had come, and back through the wooden portals of Ye Olde Taverne. There were people at the table she had used — indeed, almost all the tables were filled now — two young women, obviously suburban matrons, in neat pretty hats and neat pretty coats, sitting where Mrs. Melville and the unknown woman had sat so shortly before. Although one of the two young suburban matrons wore a dark green coat with a mink collar and a green straw hat and the other one wore a brown wool suit with a fur scarf and a tan straw hat, they looked somehow subtly, unbelievably alike, and both raised calm, assured eyes to Mrs. Melville as she came up to the table and said, restraining her voice:

"I beg your pardon, but I left a package here on the chair." She indicated the chair in which the young woman in dark green was sitting. "Have you seen it?"

The two young women glanced at one another. "A bag, was it?" said the one in brown; she was, Mrs. Melville noticed, having tea with cinnamon toast. "A bag from this store?"

"Yes, certainly," said Mrs. Melville, growing impatient again. "Where is it?"

"Good heavens," the one in green said to the one in brown. She was having a ham and cheese sandwich on whole wheat; a good choice, Mrs. Melville thought.

"I *know"* said the one in brown, nodding. She turned to Mrs. Melville. "I think we did a *terrible* thing," she said. "There was a woman here drinking tea when we came and she left just as we came and we found the package on the chair and I called her back and gave it to her."

"Gave her *my* package?" said Mrs. Melville, mystified.

"We thought it was hers," the one in green explained. "It was here on the chair, you see. Now that I think of it," she said to the one in brown, "she *did* act sort of funny."

"Sort of funny," the one in brown agreed. *"Very* funny. When I gave her the package she sort of *looked* at me."

"Yes," the one in green agreed. "Why don't you ask at the Lost and Found?" she inquired brightly of Mrs. Melville.

“What did she look like, this woman?” said Mrs. Melville.

“Well,” said the one in green, “she was small and dark. And sort of funny.”

“I thought she was definitely funny,” said the one in brown decisively. “Sort of dark, and small, she was.”

Mrs. Melville turned abruptly, without thanking them, and found the waitress who had been so rude to her. Marching up to the girl, Mrs. Melville said, “Did you see the other woman who sat at my table?”

The girl stared. “No,” she said. Mrs. Melville remembered that she had left no tip. When the girl continued to stare at her blankly, Mrs. Melville said persuasively, “She stole a package that belonged to me. I want to get my package back.”

“What was in the package?” said the waitress.

“A blouse,” said Mrs. Melville tensely. “Did you see her?”

The waitress looked sweetly at Mrs. Melville. “Try the complaint department,” she said. “It’s up on the ninth floor.”

Mrs. Melville tightened her lips, and then decided not to bandy words with this impolite girl; she hurried over to the cashier, who turned her blond head tiredly. “Did you see a small, dark woman come out of here with a package?”

“I seen a million,” said the cashier.

“This one had a cup of tea, that’s all she had,” Mrs. Melville said.

“A thousand of them had a cup of tea,” the cashier said. “You was here before.”

“I lost a package,” Mrs. Melville said. “She stole it.”

The cashier shook her head. “Never seen it,” she said.

Irritably, Mrs. Melville stamped out of Ye Olde Taverne. Near the escalator to the seventh floor, and beyond it, on the way to the ninth floor, she stopped again. Her blouse had been stolen, certainly, but by a very small woman. Now, Mrs. Melville was very well aware that her blouse was a size forty-two, and, whatever else she knew about the small woman who had stolen it, she knew perfectly well that the small woman would not wear a blouse size forty-two; she had, after all, squeezed without complaint into the narrow space between the table and the wall; she had ordered only a spartan cup of tea. Furthermore, anyone who had taken illegally a blouse bought in the store would be in immediate terror of being found out. Now, Mrs. Melville reasoned, if *she* (perish the thought!) had stolen a package and, taking it to the nearest ladies' room, had found that it contained a blouse several sizes too large, *and* the sales slip for the blouse, what would she do? Why, Mrs. Melville told herself triumphantly, she would hurry with the blouse to the department where it had been purchased, and, with some credible story, return it for a smaller size before any fuss could be raised about its loss. Obviously, Mrs. Melville deduced, the woman with the blouse was perhaps even now exchanging it.

Mrs. Melville doggedly got back onto the escalator again, this time going down. She went as quickly as possible back to the blouse department, looking as she went for a small, dark, suspicious size ten.

The blouse department was deserted. The salesgirl whom Mrs. Melville was still on her way to report lounged on the counter. Mrs. Melville headed for her.

"Miss," she said loudly, even before she had reached the counter. "Do you remember me buying a blouse here?"

The girl nodded. She remembered.

Mrs. Melville said emphatically, "Someone *stole* that blouse."

The salesgirl took a deep breath. "What am I supposed to do about it?" she said. "Give you another?"

"Now, listen here," Mrs. Melville began, and then stopped herself, and said instead, "What I want to know is this: has anyone come here to return that blouse for another size?"

"Let me see," said the girl. "It was a size forty-two, wasn't it? Or a forty-four?"

"A forty-two," said Mrs. Melville.

"Well," said the girl, "not very many people wear blouses that *large*. So if anyone came to return a blouse of that *size*, I'd surely notice it."

Mrs. Melville clenched her hands around her pocketbook. "Someone in this store stole that blouse," she said.

"You might try the complaint department," the girl said innocently.

As Mrs. Melville was opening her mouth to answer, a woman came up beside her at the counter. "Miss?" she said softly.

Mrs. Melville turned slowly. The woman was small, and wearing a dark coat and hat. Moreover, she was carrying a package that looked suspiciously like Mrs. Melville's package, and she was saying to the salesgirl:

"Earlier today I bought a blouse here. I think I bought it from the other girl, because I'm pretty sure *you* didn't sell it to me." She laughed embarrassedly. "Anyway," she said, "when I bought it I told her I wanted to take it upstairs and try it on with a suit and perhaps exchange it for another color if it didn't match the suit…." Her voice trailed off as she saw the salesgirl nod politely.

"Wrong color?" said the salesgirl professionally, beginning to open the bag.

"Oh, *no*," said the woman. "I mean, the color is *perfect*. I *love* it. No, it's the size. She must have got it mixed up, somehow."

The salesgirl took the blouse out of the bag and spread it on the counter. Mrs. Melville looked at it and began to breathe more quickly; a deep happiness filled her.

“It’s just the right shade of pink,” the small woman said timidly. “But I mean, it’s a size forty-two. She must have given it to me by mistake.” The small woman laughed. “You can *see* I don’t wear a forty-two,” she said.

It was the laugh which decided Mrs. Melville on her future course of action. She looked briefly at the salesgirl, who looked back at her without expression, and then stepped back a few feet. The small woman looked at her nervously. “I didn’t mean to push in here,” the small woman said, smiling shyly at Mrs. Melville. “I was so upset, I mean, and I’m in such a hurry…”

“That’s perfectly all right,” said Mrs. Melville. “Go right ahead.” She had never said this before in her life.

“Well,” said the small woman to the salesgirl, “you can see, it must have been some kind of a mistake. I wanted the pink blouse, size ten, and somehow she picked up the pink blouse, size forty-two, and put it in the bag by mistake. I mean, she must have made a mistake.”

“Size ten?” said the salesgirl. She turned to the stacks of blouses behind her. “The pink, size ten.” Without looking at Mrs. Melville, she said clearly, “I can use the forty-two back. Had a call for a size forty-two blouse this morning.”

“Really?” said the small woman. “You wouldn’t think anyone that large would wear this pink.”

“You’d be surprised what people think they can wear,” said the salesgirl, not looking at Mrs. Melville. “I had a lady in here this morning looking at that pink blouse size forty-two.”

The small woman shuddered. “I didn’t know they made *anything* that large,” she said. “Not in any colors except maybe black or brown.”

“Oh, yes,” said the salesgirl. She was folding the blouse to put it into the bag. “I don’t think some of these women ever think what they’re going to look like. They figure they’re going to look like anyone else in that blouse.”

The small woman took the bag. “Thanks *very* much,” she said. “I appreciate all your trouble.”

“No trouble at all,” said the salesgirl.

The small woman smiled again at Mrs. Melville. “I hope I didn’t delay *you.”*

“Not at all,” said Mrs. Melville.

The small woman moved off quickly and Mrs. Melville, giving the salesgirl one last ominous glance, followed her.

The small woman had several packages, but the bag containing the blouse was the one Mrs. Melville was watching; it was being carried under one of the thin, black-covered arms, and as the woman walked hurriedly toward the down escalator, Mrs. Melville was able to see her dark hat and the package under her arm.

The store was not crowded, so it was not difficult for Mrs. Melville to keep the woman in sight without coming recognizably close, and she let the woman step onto the escalator and go nearly halfway down before stepping on herself. When the woman reached the bottom she turned to the right, heading for one of the big avenue entrances of the store, and then Mrs. Melville realized that she must hurry, because the woman was planning to leave the store and, once out on the street, would be practically uncatchable. Closing in on her quarry, Mrs. Melville debated the possibilities: Could she corner the woman, accuse her, between handkerchiefs and stockings? Bring her to bay in cosmetics? Face her down before the interested shoppers at the glove counter? Force her to give up the blouse under the eyes of the information clerk?

Then, mercifully, the woman ahead hesitated, glanced at the clock, at a counter, at the clock again, and then paused and turned to the counter. Mrs. Melville came up behind her purposefully and saw that she was hastily turning over a pile of sweaters that lay on the counter, with a sign above reading “Reduced — $1.98.” Moving up beside the woman, Mrs. Melville also began turning over sweaters. They were hideous, she thought, brightly colored small things, not fit for any female over the age of ten. The woman next to her pulled one sweater from the pile, shifting all her packages to one arm to use the other hand to spread the sweater out.

“Miss,” she said shyly to the salesgirl, “how much is this?”

Mrs. Melville moved closer.

“All one ninety-eight,” the salesgirl said. “All the same price.”

The woman looked at the sweater. “Is it my size?” the woman asked the salesgirl. “I can’t seem to find a tag.”

The salesgirl regarded the sweater with cynicism. “These people pull the tags off of everything just because it’s on sale,” she said. “About a ten.”

The woman nodded briskly, and set her packages down on the counter next to Mrs. Melville in order to lift the sweater and hold it against her. “It’s a pretty color,” she said to the salesgirl. “Much prettier than a blouse I just bought upstairs, and I paid…”

But Mrs. Melville did not hear what the small woman had paid for the blouse; she already knew, in any case, and she was heading rapidly for the escalator with the package containing the expensive blouse clutched tightly in front of her. She tried to lose herself immediately among the crowds of shoppers, and went onto the escalator with a group of people, pushing herself without apology ahead of them. On the escalator she walked quickly, almost running up the moving steps, and then, on the second floor, walked as rapidly as she had ever walked in her life, toward the blouse department. The same girl, as bored and dreamy as ever, stood at the counter. Mrs. Melville slammed the bag containing the blouse down on the counter and said loudly, “There.”

The salesgirl recognized her; by now Mrs. Melville’s must have been as familiar a face to her as her own mother’s, or the floorwalker’s, because, looking once at Mrs. Melville, she closed her eyes briefly and said, “Yes?”

“Give me back my blouse,” Mrs. Melville said; she was frankly trying too hard to breathe slowly to speak much. “I want you to give my own blouse back to me.”

The salesgirl opened the bag and took out the pink size ten blouse. “You want,” she said deliberately, “to exchange this blouse for another size?”

“I do,” Mrs. Melville said. “You know perfectly well what I want.”

“And what size did you want?”

“Give it to me,” said Mrs. Melville through her teeth. “You know which one it is. Give it to me.”

The salesgirl shrugged, turned, and took down the pink blouse, glanced at the tag, said, “Size forty-two” in a loud voice, and put it in the bag.

“The next time…” Mrs. Melville began, and then for the life of her could not conceive of a next time; there was no statement crushing enough. “The next time…” Mrs. Melville said again futilely. She turned and stamped away.

“Complaint department, ninth floor,” the girl called after her, and giggled.

Mrs. Melville, her blouse tightly held under her arm — although she did not really believe that the small woman was now following *her* — went on her way deep in thought. She had triumphed, she thought, over this store with its discourtesy and inefficiency, this store where people were allowed to steal from harmless customers. Where would this store be, Mrs. Melville asked herself indignantly, if people like herself did not shop here? It had just been pure chance that she had come into the store at all, and did they think for a minute that the way she had been treated would encourage her to come *back?* Mrs. Melville remembered clearly her initial irritation, when she had bought the blouse in the first place. The girl, so rude about the shocking pink and the chartreuse…

Mrs. Melville stopped dead in the middle of the shoe department.

She remembered herself buying the blouse, debating over the color, deciding that the chartreuse was more sophisticated, and — she realized it suddenly and irresistibly — buying the chartreuse blouse. She had definitely considered the pink, worried about it, and then decided that the chartreuse blouse was more sophisticated, it was the very thing she had told herself, it was the very word she had used. She had most emphatically bought the chartreuse blouse the first time. And the blouse in the bag now under her arm was shocking pink.

Hesitation was not one of Mrs. Melville's vices. For a moment, she stood still in the middle of the shoe department and then, shifting the bag to hold it more firmly, she set her shoulders back and with goodwill toward the world, marched heartily down to where the sign for the up escalator showed her the way toward the small suits, the glassware, Ye Olde Taverne, and — Mrs. Melville knew she would make it this time — the complaint department.

JOURNEY WITH A LADY; OR, THIS IS THE LIFE

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"HONEY," MRS. WILSON SAID uneasily, "are you *sure* you'll be all *right?"* "Sure," said Joseph. He backed away quickly as she bent to kiss him again. "Listen, *Mother*" he said. "Everybody's *looking."*

"I'm still not sure but what someone ought to go with him," said his mother. "Are *you sure* he'll be all right?" she said to her husband.

"Who, Joe?" said Mr. Wilson. "He'll be fine, won't you, son?"

"Sure," said Joseph.

"A boy nine years old ought to be able to travel by himself," said Mr. Wilson in the patient tone of one who has been saying these same words over and over for several days to a nervous mother.

Mrs. Wilson looked up at the train as one who estimates the probable strength of an enemy. "But suppose something should *happen?"* she asked.

"Look, Helen," her husband said, "the train's going to leave in about four minutes. His bag is already on the train, Helen. It's on the seat where he's going to be sitting from now until he gets to Merrytown. I have spoken to the porter and I have given the porter a couple of dollars, and the porter has promised to keep an eye on him and see that he gets off the train with his bag when the train stops at Merrytown. He is nine years old, Helen, and he knows his name and where he's going and where he's supposed to get off, and Grandpop is going to meet him and will telephone you the minute they get to Grandpop's house, and the porter—"

"I know," said Mrs. Wilson, "but are you sure he'll be all *right?"*

Mr. Wilson and Joseph looked at one another briefly and then away.

Mrs. Wilson took advantage of Joseph’s momentary lapse of awareness to put her arm around his shoulders and kiss him again, although he managed to move almost in time and her kiss landed somewhere on the top of his head. *“Mother”* Joseph said ominously.

“Don’t want anything to happen to my little boy,” Mrs. Wilson said with a brave smile.

“Mother, for heaven’s *sake”* said Joseph. “I better get on the train,” he said to his father. “Good idea,” said his father.

“Bye, Mother,” Joseph said, backing toward the train door; he took a swift look up and down the platform, and then reached up to his mother and gave her a rapid kiss on the cheek. “Take care of yourself,” he said.

“Don’t forget to telephone the minute you get there,” his mother said. “Write me every day, and tell Grandma you’re supposed to brush your teeth every night and if the weather turns cool—”

“Sure,” Joseph said. “Sure, Mother.”

“So long, son,” said his father.

“So long, Dad,” Joseph said; solemnly they shook hands. “Take care of yourself,” Joseph said.

“Have a good time,” his father said.

As Joseph climbed up the steps to the train he could hear his mother saying, “And telephone us when you get there and be careful—”

“Goodbye, goodbye,” he said, and went into the train. He had been located by his father in a double seat at the end of the car and, once settled, he turned as a matter of duty to the window. His father, with an unmanly look of concern, waved to him and nodded violently, as though to indicate that everything was going to be all right, that they had pulled it off beautifully, but his mother, twisting her fingers nervously, came close to the window of the train, and, fortunately unheard by the people within, but probably clearly audible to everyone for miles without, gave him at what appeared to be some length an account of how she had changed her mind and was probably going to come with him after all. Joseph nodded and smiled and waved and shrugged his shoulders to indicate that he could not hear, but his mother went on talking, now and then glancing nervously at the front of the train, as though afraid that the engine might start and take Joseph away before she had made herself absolutely sure that he was going to be all right. Joseph, who felt with some justice that in the past few days his mother had told him every conceivable pertinent fact about his traveling alone to his grandfather's, and her worries about same, was able to make out such statements as "Be careful," and "Telephone us the minute you get there," and "Don't forget to write." Then the train stirred, and hesitated, and moved slightly again, and Joseph backed away from the window, still waving and smiling. He was positive that what his mother was saying as the train pulled out was "Are you *sure* you'll be all right?" She blew a kiss to him as the train started, and he ducked.

Surveying his prospects as the train took him slowly away from his mother and father, he was pleased. The journey should take only a little over three hours, and he knew the name of the station and had his ticket safely in his jacket pocket; although he had been reluctant to yield in any fashion to his mother's misgivings, he had checked several times, secretly, to make sure the ticket was safe. He had half a dozen comic books — a luxury he was not ordinarily allowed — and a chocolate bar; he had his suitcase and his cap, and he had seen personally to the packing of his first baseman's mitt. He had a dollar bill in the pocket of his pants, because his mother thought he should have some money in case — possibilities which had concretely occurred to her — of a train wreck (although his father had pointed out that in the case of a major disaster the victims were not expected to pay their own expenses, at least not before their families had been notified) or perhaps in the case of some vital expense to which his grandfather's income would not be adequate. His father had thought that Joe ought to have a little money by him in case he wanted to buy anything, and because a man ought not to travel unless he had money in his pocket. "Might pick up a girl on the train and want to buy her lunch," his father had said jovially and his mother, regarding her husband thoughtfully, had remarked, "Let's hope *Joseph* doesn't do things like that," and Joe and his father had winked at one another. So, regarding his comic books and his suitcase and his ticket and his chocolate bar, and feeling the imperceptible but emphatic presence of the dollar bill in his pocket, Joe leaned back against the soft seat, looked briefly out the window at the houses now moving steadily past, and said to himself, "This is the life, boy."

Before indulging in the several glories of comic books and chocolate, he spent a moment or so watching the houses of his hometown disappear beyond the train; ahead of him, at his grandfather's farm, lay a summer of cows and horses and probable wrestling matches in the grass; behind him lay school and its infinite irritations, and his mother and father. He wondered briefly if his mother was still looking after the train and telling him to write, and then largely he forgot her. With a sigh of pure pleasure he leaned back and selected a comic book, one that dealt with the completely realistic adventures of a powerful magician among hostile African tribes. This *is* the life, boy, he told himself again, and glanced again out the window to see a boy about his own age sitting on a fence watching the train go by. For a minute Joseph thought of waving down to the boy, but decided that it was beneath his dignity as a traveler; moreover, the boy on the fence was wearing a dirty sweatshirt, which made Joe move uneasily under his stiff collar and suit jacket, and he thought longingly of the comfortable old shirt with the insignia “Brooklyn Dodger,” which was in his suitcase. Then, just as the traitorous idea of changing on the train occurred to him, and of arriving at his grandfather’s not in his good suit became a possibility, all sensible thought was driven from his mind by a cruel and unnecessary blow. Someone sat down next to him, breathing heavily, and from the quick flash of perfume and the movement of cloth that could only be a dress rustling Joe realized with a strong sense of injustice that his paradise had been invaded by some woman.

“Is this seat taken?” she asked.

Joe refused to recognize her existence by turning his head to look at her, but he told her sullenly, “No, it’s not.” Not taken, he was thinking, what did she think I was sitting here for? Aren’t there enough old seats in the train she could go and sit in without taking mine?

He seemed to lose himself in contemplation of the scenery beyond the train window, but secretly he was wishing direly that the woman would suddenly discover she had forgotten her suitcase or find out she had no ticket or remember that she had left the bathtub running at home — anything, to get her off the train at the first station, and out of Joe’s way.

“You going far?”

Talking, too, Joe thought, she has to take my seat and then she goes and talks my ear off, darn old pest. “Yeah,” he said. “Merrytown.”

“What’s your name?”

Joe, from long experience, could have answered all her questions in one sentence, he was so familiar with the series — I’m nine years old, he could have told her, and I’m in the fifth grade, and, no, I don’t like school, and if you want to know what I learn in school it’s nothing because I don’t like school and I do like movies, and I’m going to my grandfather’s house, and more than anything else I hate women who come and sit beside me and ask me silly questions and if my mother didn't keep after me all the time about my manners I would probably gather my things together and move to another seat and if you don't stop asking me —

"What's your name, little boy?"

Little boy, Joe told himself bitterly, on top of everything else, little boy.

"Joe," he said.

"How old are you?"

He lifted his eyes wearily and regarded the conductor entering the car; it was surely too much to hope that this female plague had forgotten her ticket, but could it be remotely possible that she was on the wrong train?

"Got your ticket, Joe?" the woman asked.

"Sure," said Joe. "Have you?"

She laughed and said — apparently addressing the conductor, since her voice was not at this moment the voice women use in addressing a little boy, but the voice that goes with speaking to conductors and taxi drivers and salesclerks— "I'm afraid I haven't got a ticket. I had no time to get one."

"Where are you going?" said the conductor.

Would they put her off the train? For the first time, Joe turned and looked at her, eagerly and with hope. Would they possibly, hopefully, desperately, put her off the train? "I'm going to Merrytown," she said, and Joe's convictions about the generally weak-minded attitudes of the adult world were all confirmed: The conductor tore a slip from a pad he carried, punched a hole in it, and told the woman, "Two seventy-three." While she was searching her pocketbook for her money — if she knew she was going to have to buy a ticket, Joe thought disgustedly, whyn't she have her money ready? — the conductor took Joe's ticket and grinned at him. "Your boy got *his* ticket all right," he pointed out.

The woman smiled. “He got to the station ahead of me,” she said.

The conductor gave her her change, and went on down the car. “That was funny, when he thought you were my little boy,” the woman said.

“Yeah,” said Joe.

“What’re you reading?”

Wearily, Joe put his comic book down.

“Comic,” he said.

“Interesting?”

“Yeah,” said Joe.

“Say, look at the policeman,” the woman said.

Joe looked where she was pointing and saw — he would not have believed this, since he knew perfectly well that most women cannot tell the difference between a policeman and a mailman — that it was undeniably a policeman, and that he was regarding the occupants of the car very much as though there might be a murderer or an international jewel thief riding calmly along on the train. Then, after surveying the car for a moment, he came a few steps forward to the last seat, where Joe and the woman were sitting.

“Name?” he said sternly to the woman.

“Mrs. John Aldridge, Officer,” said the woman promptly. “And this is my little boy, Joseph.”

“Hi, Joe,” said the policeman.

Joe, speechless, stared at the policeman and nodded dumbly.

“Where’d you get on?” the policeman asked the woman.

“Ashville,” she said.

“See anything of a woman about your height and build, wearing a fur jacket, getting on the train at Ashville?”

“I don’t think so,” said the woman. “Why?”

“Wanted,” said the policeman tersely.

“Keep your eyes open,” he told Joe. “Might get a reward.”

He passed on down the car, and stopped occasionally to speak to women who seemed to be alone. Then the door at the far end of the car closed behind him and Joe turned and took a deep look at the woman sitting beside him. “What’d you do?” he asked.

“Stole some money,” said the woman, and grinned.

Joe grinned back. If he had been sorely pressed, he might in all his experience until now have been able to identify only his mother as a woman both pretty and lovable; in this case, however — and perhaps it was enhanced by a sort of outlaw glory — he found the woman sitting next to him much more attractive than he had before supposed. She looked nice, she had soft hair, she had a pleasant smile and not a lot of lipstick and stuff on, and her fur jacket was rich and soft against Joe’s hand. Moreover, Joe knew absolutely when she grinned at him that there were not going to be any more questions about nonsense like people’s ages and whether they liked school, and he found himself grinning back at her in quite a friendly manner.

“They gonna catch you?” he asked.

“Sure,” said the woman. “Pretty soon now. But it was worth it.”

“Why?” Joe asked; crime, he well knew, did not pay.

“See,” said the woman, “I wanted to spend about two weeks having a good time there in Ashville. I wanted this coat, see? And I wanted just to buy a lot of clothes and things.”

“So?” said Joe.

“So I took the money from the old tightwad I worked for and I went off to Ashville and bought some clothes and went to a lot of movies and things and had a fine time.”

"Sort of a vacation," Joe said.

"Sure," the woman said. "Knew all the time they'd catch me, of course. For one thing, I always knew I had to come home again. But it was worth it!"

"How much?" said Joe.

"Two thousand dollars," said the woman.

"Boy!" said Joe.

They settled back comfortably. Joe, without more than a moment's pause to think, offered the woman his comic book about the African headhunters, and when the policeman came back through the car, eyeing them sharply, they were leaning back shoulder to shoulder, the woman apparently deep in African adventure, Joe engrossed in the adventures of a flying newspaper reporter who solved vicious gang murders.

"How is your book, Ma?" Joe said loudly as the policeman passed, and the woman laughed and said, "Fine, fine."

As the door closed behind the policeman the woman said softly, "You know, I like to see how long I can keep out of their way."

"Can't keep it up forever," Joe pointed out.

"No," said the woman, "but I'd like to go back by myself and just give them what's left of the money. I had my good time."

"Seems to me," Joe said, "that if it's the first time you did anything like this they probably wouldn't punish you so much."

"I'm not ever going to do it again," the woman said. "I mean, you sort of build up all your life for one real good time like this, and then you can take your punishment and not mind it so much."

"I don't know," Joe said reluctantly, various small sins of his own with regard to matches and his father's cigars and other people's lunch boxes crossing his mind; "seems to me that even if you do think *now* that you'll never do it again, sometimes — well, sometimes, you do it anyway.” He thought. “I always *say* I’ll never do it again, though.”

“Well, if you do it again,” the woman pointed out, “you get punished twice as bad the next time.”

Joe grinned. “I took a dime out of my mother’s pocketbook once,” he said. “But I’ll never do *that* again.”

“Same thing I did,” said the woman.

Joe shook his head. “If the policemen plan to spank you the way my father spanked me…” he said.

They were companionably silent for a while, and then the woman said, “Say, Joe, you hungry? Let’s go into the dining car.”

“I’m supposed to stay here,” Joe said.

“But I can’t go without you,” the woman said. “They think I’m all right because the woman they want wouldn’t be traveling with her little boy.”

“Stop calling me your little boy,” Joe said.

“Why?”

“Call me your son or something,” Joe said. “No more little-boy stuff.”

“Right,” said the woman. “Anyway, I’m sure your mother wouldn’t mind if you went into the dining car with *me*.”

“I bet,” Joe said, but he got up and followed the woman out of the car and down through the next car; people glanced up at them as they passed and then away again, and Joe thought triumphantly that they would sure stare harder if they knew that this innocent-looking woman and her son were outsmarting the cops every step they took.

They found a table in the dining car and sat down. The woman took up the menu and said, “What’ll you have, Joe?”

Blissfully, Joe regarded the woman, the waiters moving quickly back and forth, the shining silverware, the white tablecloth and napkins. “Hard to say right off," he said.

"Hamburger?" said the woman. "Spaghetti? Or would you rather just have two or three desserts?"

Joe stared. "You mean, like, just blueberry pie with ice cream and a hot fudge sundae?" he asked. "Like that?"

"Sure," said the woman. "Might as well celebrate one last time."

"When I took that dime out of my mother's pocketbook," Joe told her, "I spent a nickel on gum and a nickel on candy."

"Tell me," said the woman, leaning forward earnestly, "the candy and gum — was it all right? I mean, the same as usual?"

Joe shook his head. "I was so afraid someone would see me," he said, "I ate all the candy in two mouthfuls standing on the street and I was scared to open the gum at all."

The woman nodded. "That's why I'm going back so soon, I guess," she said, and sighed.

"Well," said Joe practically, "might as well have blueberry pie first, anyway."

They ate their lunch peacefully, discussing baseball and television and what Joe wanted to be when he grew up; once the policeman passed through the car and nodded to them cheerfully, and the waiter opened his eyes wide and laughed when Joe decided to polish off his lunch with a piece of watermelon. When they had finished and the woman had paid the check, they found that they were due in Merrytown in fifteen minutes, and they hurried back to their seat to gather together Joe's comic books and suitcase.

"Thank you very much for the nice lunch," Joe said to the woman as they sat down again, and congratulated himself upon remembering to say it.

"Nothing at all," the woman said. "Aren't you my little boy?"

“Watch that little-boy stuff,” Joe said warningly, and she said, “I mean, aren’t you my son?”

The porter who had been delegated to keep an eye on Joe opened the car door and put his head in. He smiled reassuringly at Joe and said, “Five minutes to your station, boy.”

“Thanks,” said Joe. He turned to the woman. “Maybe,” he said urgently, “if you tell them you’re *really* sorry—”

“Wouldn’t do at all,” said the woman. “I really had a fine time.”

“I guess so,” Joe said. “But you won’t do it again.”

“Well, I knew when I started I’d be punished sooner or later,” the woman said.

“Yeah,” Joe said. “Can’t get out of it now.”

The train pulled slowly to a stop and Joe leaned toward the window to see if his grandfather was waiting.

“We better not get off together,” the woman said; “might worry your grandpa to see you with a stranger.”

“Guess so,” said Joe. He stood up, and took hold of his suitcase. “Goodbye, then,” he said reluctantly.

“Goodbye, Joe,” said the woman. “Thanks.”

“Right,” said Joe, and as the train stopped he opened the door and went out onto the steps. The porter helped him to get down with his suitcase and Joe turned to see his grandfather coming down the platform.

“Hello, fellow,” said his grandfather. “So you made it.”

“Sure,” said Joe. “No trick at all.”

“Never thought you wouldn’t,” said his grandfather. “Your mother wants you to—”

“Telephone as soon as I get here,” Joe said. “I know.”

“Come along, then,” his grandfather said. “Grandma’s waiting at home.”

He led Joe to the parking lot and helped him and his suitcase into the car. As his grandfather got into the front seat beside him, Joe turned and looked back at the train and saw the woman walking down the platform with the policeman holding her arm. Joe leaned out of the car and waved violently. “So long,” he called.

“So long, Joe,” the woman called back, waving.

“It’s a shame the cops had to get her after all,” Joe remarked to his grandfather.

His grandfather laughed. “You read too many comic books, fellow,” he said. “Everyone with a policeman isn’t being arrested — he’s probably her brother or something.”

“Yeah,” said Joe.

“Have a good trip?” his grandfather asked. “Anything happen?”

Joe thought. “Saw a boy sitting on a fence,” he said. “I didn’t wave to him, though.”

THE MOST WONDERFUL THING

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YOUNG MRS. HARTLEY, WHO could still remember most clearly the pain and bitterness and injustice she had known so recently, lay absolutely flat on the hospital bed, trying to count to a thousand by sevens, or to recite from memory as many recipes as she could. When a nurse (young Rose, who came singing down the halls) glanced quickly in through the doorway, Mrs. Hartley smiled and lifted a hand to wave to her, and the nurse smiled back and went on. They're so sure I'm all right, Mrs. Hartley thought. When she lost count at four hundred and twenty, or could not remember a half teaspoonful of rosemary, Mrs. Hartley raised herself on her elbow to sip water through the glass straw, or she counted the squares in the ceiling — such clean, perfect squares, so sanitary and neat, like the beds, and the food, and even Mrs. Hartley herself — or she did crossword puzzles, worrying irritably over a ten-letter word meaning "hopeless." Today, her pencil well within reach on the bed table, she took up her watch instead. It was just after three: an hour and a half to washing-for-supper, six hours to bedtime, fifteen hours to waking-tomorrow-morning. She glanced at the stack of mystery stories conveniently close on the table, and sighed. Only an hour and a half to washing-for-supper, she told herself as though it were a kind of magic, only six hours to —

"Now, then," said Mac, and Mrs. Hartley said without turning, "I'm all *right*, Mac." Mac was the nurse who took care of Mrs. Hartley and heaven only knew how many others; who had probably not been called Miss MacIntyre since she first shook a thermometer; who prided herself on her

natural talents with the enema bag and the hypodermic needle; who brought daily bulletins about whether or not the sun was warm outside the hospital. *"Now*, then," said Mac.

Mrs. Hartley turned, frowning. "Mac," she began, "I said—" She interrupted herself to stare. "Look," she went on after a minute, "this is supposed to be a private room, Mac. I'm *paying* for a private room."

"So?" said Mac amiably. *"I'm* the one will be getting into trouble for it, I suppose. But be quiet, please; this lady is sleeping."

"But she can't come in here," Mrs. Hartley said. "This is a *mistake*, Mac."

Mac grinned, and Mrs. Hartley had to smile back, even though Mac continued to maneuver the wheeled stretcher past Mrs. Hartley's bed and toward the other bed in the room.

"You'll only have to move her right out again," Mrs. Hartley said.

Mac left the front of the stretcher and came over to shake a warning finger under Mrs. Hartley's nose. "Just scream," she said. "Raise your voice and get everyone in here and tell them I brought a sick lady into a hospital room. But *unless* you're going to scream, you keep quiet and let me get her into bed."

"What's wrong with her?" Mrs. Hartley asked suspiciously.

Mac scowled, then laughed. "She's got a baby she didn't have before," Mac said. "What else would be wrong with her?"

Silently Mrs. Hartley watched, raised on one elbow, while Mac and another nurse lifted the slight body from the stretcher and onto the other bed, left vacant for so long because Mrs. Hartley had insisted on a private room. The girl's blond head lay quietly on the pillow, and she seemed to be scarcely breathing, but now and then in the silence she stirred a little and murmured.

“She’ll be awake soon,” Mac said. “Let me know, will you?” She pinched Mrs. Hartley’s toe under the covers, and wheeled the stretcher through the door.

“Mac, listen,” Mrs. Hartley began, and then fell silent as the girl on the other bed stirred. What if she tried to get out of bed? Mrs. Hartley thought nervously, what could I do? It wasn’t fair of Mac to do this; I could even complain about her — Mrs. Hartley took a firm hold of the small button that turned on the light outside the door and summoned Mac, and then, ready, she told herself firmly that tomorrow morning, first thing, this girl was leaving her private room. Was the girl’s breathing weaker? Her finger hovering over the light button, Mrs. Hartley watched, looking from the door to the other bed and back again.

“Jimmie?” the girl on the other bed said clearly. “Jimmie?”

Mrs. Hartley stared for a minute, but when the girl said again, insistently, “Jimmie?” Mrs. Hartley said, “He’ll be here soon.”

“Mother?”

Mrs. Hartley cleared her throat nervously. “Right here, dear,” she said.

“Jimmie?” said the girl. She turned her head. Horrified, Mrs. Hartley saw that her eyes were open.

“What happened?” asked the girl. Her voice was suddenly different, conscious instead of unaware, firm instead of wavering. “Where am I now?”

“In the hospital. Everything’s fine.”

The girl frowned. “I don’t understand,” she said fretfully. “First you’re on a bus and everything’s fine, and then you’re in a hospital and everything’s fine, and what’s happened? I mean, why am I here?” She turned and looked accusingly at Mrs. Hartley. “Who are *you?”*

“My name’s Beth Hartley. You’re not supposed to move.” The girl on the other bed tried to sit up, and Mrs. Hartley put her finger down hard on the nurse button. “Please lie still,” she said.

“I want to get out of here,” the girl said.

“So do I,” Mrs. Hartley said wryly. And I want *you* out of here, too, she thought; you couldn’t be more anxious to leave than I am to have you. “I tell you, you’d better lie still,” she said, her voice more gentle because of what she was thinking.

Briskly, Mac swept into the room. “Well, well,” she said, “are we awake? So soon?” She glanced professionally at Mrs. Hartley. “Any trouble?”

“I’m not the nurse,” Mrs. Hartley said sulkily.

“Why am I here?” the girl demanded, her voice rising. “I wake up all of a sudden and find myself in a strange room with a strange woman and no one will take the least bit of trouble to explain to me—”

“This lady is Mrs. Hartley,” Mac said. “And you’re here because not five minutes ago I personally wheeled you in on a stretcher. My name’s Mac.” She smiled engagingly, then turned to Mrs. Hartley. “This lady” she said, “is Mrs. Williams, Mrs. Molly Williams. And now we’ve all been introduced.”

The blue eyes moved over to Mrs. Hartley and then away again. “What do I say?” the girl demanded. “How do you do?”

Mrs. Hartley tried to smile, but could only grin unenthusiastically. “I’m so glad you’re in here with me,” she said, looking squarely at Mac.

“How long do I have to stay here?” the girl asked.

“As long as it takes to get you feeling fine again,” Mac said, and moved toward the door. “Supper soon,” she said, and pinched Mrs. Hartley’s toe before she went out.

“I’m sorry you don’t like it here,” Mrs. Hartley said after a minute.

“Why don’t they leave me alone?” said the girl.

Mrs. Hartley laughed. “They can’t, very well,” she said. “You’re sick.”

“I am *not,”* said the girl. She moved again, stirring irritably under the bedclothes, and Mrs. Hartley again reached apprehensively for the light button. But the girl only said, “You sick, too?”

“I am,” said Mrs. Hartley shortly, hoping to discourage other questions.

The girl continued the conversation. “What’s the matter with *you?* You look all right.”

“I’m nearly all right,” Mrs. Hartley said evasively. “I ought to be going home in a few days.”

“Me, too,” said the girl. “They’re not going to keep *me* here.”

“How did you happen to come? I mean,” Mrs. Hartley went on, embarrassed, “what made you pick this hospital if you didn’t like it?”

“I wish I knew,” said the girl; her voice was emphatic. “It must have been that busybody on the bus. I wasn’t feeling very well and she chafed my hands; and then the bus stopped and she helped me off and she was going to get me some coffee and then — well, I guess then they must have brought me here, because I don’t remember any more.”

She hasn’t even *asked* about her baby, Mrs. Hartley thought suddenly, appalled; could anyone be that callous? “What were you doing on a bus, for heaven’s sake?” she asked, and added gracefully, “in your condition?”

“My condition!” said the girl, and laughed. “Who cared about my condition? — me?” She thought for a minute. “Maybe that woman on the bus,” she conceded. “I was going home, you know. My father lives upstate and I was going there, only he didn’t even know I was coming.”

Mrs. Hartley hesitated, debated with herself for a minute, started to speak, and then hesitated again. What do I care? she thought; it’s not *my* worry. Finally, she said, “Isn’t there anyone else who might care?”

"No," said the girl.

Mrs. Hartley plunged. "What about your husband?"

There was a short silence, and then the girl said, as though she clearly recognized Mrs. Hartley's hesitation and wanted the subject closed at once, "He's in the army, overseas. Somewhere." She raised her hands and let them fall helplessly, and spoke louder because Mrs. Hartley tried to interrupt. "We never figured on having any children," she said. "We don't either of us *like* kids, and he certainly wasn't planning on coming back to find a whole family waiting for him…" Her voice trailed off, bitterly, and Mrs. Hartley could not find anything to say. "He'd be better off if he never found either of us again," the girl said with finality.

"Mrs. Williams," Mrs. Hartley began, and then stopped. I'm not a welfare society, she thought; I don't care if this disagreeable girl and her disagreeable husband never see each other again. I'm sorry about the baby, it's too bad about the baby, but what business is it of mine? No one worries about *me*. "It's none of my business," Mrs. Hartley began again, "but—"

"That's right," the girl said. "It's not."

They were lying silent, separated by four feet of space and a world of animosity, when Mac's step, heavier because she was carrying a bowl of warm water in each hand, forced them both to stir and smile slightly. I'll catch Mac after this girl is asleep, Mrs. Hartley was telling herself; she's *got* to get her out of here tomorrow. A great feeling of self-pity had filled Mrs. Hartley; it seemed just too much that after all she had been through, and the long days she had spent alone in this room, she should now be forced to endure this flat and insolent company. I am really really annoyed with Mac, Mrs. Hartley thought.

"Wash for supper, girls," Mac said cheerfully. "Can't have any supper till your hands are clean."

“Suppose I don’t want any supper?” the girl asked sourly.

“Then you don’t have to eat it. But you’ll be clean anyway.”

Mrs. Hartley, who was allowed to have the head of her bed slightly raised, had learned to wash her face inadequately with a damp washcloth, and to scrub her hands almost without being able to see them; the bed table was raised enough above eye level to make normal gestures impossible. Her favorite joke with Mac was a remembrance of the evening when supper had been spaghetti and Mrs. Hartley had tried to eat it lying down. Tonight, she glanced across at the other bed, where Mrs. Williams, lying flat on her back, was irritably struggling to wash her hands. “Careful not to tip the bowl,” Mrs. Hartley said.

“How do they expect *anybody*—”

“Wait till you try to eat,” Mrs. Hartley said. “You know, the first night I was here they served spaghetti, and—”

“I’ll bet the food is terrible,” Mrs. Williams said. She gave a disgusted little shove to her bed table, and the water in the bowl spilled a little. “I hate this place,” she said.

“They always serve supper,” Mac said, sweeping wildly into the room and scooping up the bowls, “before my ladies are clean. Always, always — you washed?” she demanded severely of Mrs. Williams as she darted outside for the trays.

“I don’t want any supper,” Mrs. Williams said.

“Too bad,” said Mac, reappearing. “Chicken soup, veal cutlet, mashed potatoes, asparagus, chocolate pudding.”

“I don’t want any,” Mrs. Williams said sullenly. “I hate this place.”

“Suppose I just set the tray down anyway,” Mac said. “No place else to put it.” She put the tray down on the table in front of Mrs. Williams, and came over to stand by the foot of Mrs. Hartley's bed. "How is it tonight?" she asked softly. "You doing any better?"

"Fine," Mrs. Hartley said, avoiding looking at Mac. "I'm doing beautifully."

"It's a shame, sometimes," Mac said. "If they could only fix it so we all could stop thinking altogether."

Mrs. Hartley laughed. "I don't believe you have time to think," she said.

Mac glanced cautiously at Mrs. Williams, who was now taking quick mouthfuls of her chocolate pudding. "Sometimes I manage to get an idea," she said.

* * *

After the supper trays had been taken away, Mrs. Williams asked suddenly, "How long have you been here?"

"Six days."

"Why so long?"

Mrs. Hartley sighed. "I'm leaving soon," she said. "I'll be walking around tomorrow, maybe, or the day after."

"How soon do you think they'll let me out? A couple of days, maybe?"

"That depends on the doctor."

"I'm getting up right away," Mrs. Williams said with finality.

"You ready for your baby?" Mac said, putting her head around the door.

"Me?" said Mrs. Williams. She turned to Mrs. Hartley. "Does she mean me?"

"I certainly do," Mac said. "Coming now."

She moved aside as another nurse, looking, if possible, even cleaner and more starched than Mac, came in the door, smiled at Mrs. Hartley, and said, "Mrs. Williams? Here's your baby."

“I don’t want it,” Mrs. Williams said. “Take it away.”

The nurse hesitated and glanced at Mac, who shrugged. “Well, someone’s got to see that she gets this bottle,” the nurse said.

“You could leave her on a doorstep somewhere,” Mac said.

“I don’t want her,” Mrs. Williams said, her voice muffled by the pillow.

“You take her?” Mac said to Mrs. Hartley. “Just this once?”

Mrs. Hartley stared at Mac, wanting to push the baby away, yet finding that instead she held out her arms. Mac pinched Mrs. Hartley’s toe under the covers. “Good girl,” she said.

Mrs. Hartley, looking down at the small, unthinking face, the clenched hands and tiny head of the baby, thought, I started like this, and half smiled. “It’s a pretty baby,” she said tentatively.

“Wipe your fingers on the gauze pad,” the nurse said mechanically. “Remember to support the head.”

Ushering Mac ahead of her, she went out, leaving Mrs. Hartley alone with Mrs. Williams and the baby. “It’s a pretty baby,” Mrs. Hartley said again, suddenly appalled at the concentrated desire for food in this very small creature. Every part of it, even the toes she could feel curling under the blankets, the hands, the neck, seemed bent on nothing but nourishment. “Such small hands,” Mrs. Hartley said inadequately.

“Who cares?” said the muffled voice from the other bed.

Perhaps I will be able to do this right, Mrs. Hartley thought, and she said carefully, “My baby died, you know.”

“What?”

Perhaps, Mrs. Hartley thought — I might just as well learn to say these things without thinking too much about them. “It would have been a girl,” she said. “That’s why I’ve been here so long.” Don’t *keep* talking about it, she thought; everyone has troubles.

There was a sudden movement from the other bed, and then the blond head turned toward Mrs. Hartley. “That’s really too bad,” Mrs. Williams said.

“It’s not as though we didn’t *know”* Mrs. Hartley said carefully. “I mean, if you know ahead of time that things are not going all right, then somehow it’s not as great a shock when — I was going to name her Elizabeth. That’s my name, even though everyone calls me Beth. I have two boys, you see,” she added, knowing that she was talking on and on but thinking, It’s the first person I’ve talked to about it, even Mac won’t listen, and I ought to say it all first before she asks me any more questions, and anyway she’d have to know later on. She said insistently, “You see, it isn’t as though I won’t try again. I have two fine boys, but this one would have been a girl. We were going to name her Elizabeth, after me.”

There was a short pause. Then Mrs. Williams said, “It’s funny, you wanted your baby and all, and me—”

“You’ve got a pretty baby,” Mrs. Hartley said, looking down at the baby again. “She’s almost finished her bottle.”

“Most people,” said Mac, putting her head around the door, “are hanging over their babies and saying ‘Didums want its bottle?’ or ‘Was it a tweet ‘ittle sing,’ and here you two ladies sit with a baby and you talk to each other. It’s not human, that it isn’t.” She came and stood over Mrs. Hartley and the baby. “Nice baby,” she said. “What’re you going to name her?”

“Me?” said Mrs. Williams.

“Well,” Mac said consideringly, “the poor child is going to have an awful time of it *without a* name. Suppose she gets to be six or seven years old, and she’s in school, and people are still calling her ‘Hey!’ or ‘Miss X.’”

“I want to call her Elizabeth,” Mrs. Williams said.

Mac glanced quickly at Mrs. Hartley and then away. “Pretty name,” she said. “You could call her Betty, or Lizzie, or Betsy.”

“I want to call her just Elizabeth,” Mrs. Williams said. She lifted her head and smiled for the first time, directly at Mrs. Hartley. “Elizabeth,” she said again.

Mrs. Hartley smiled back. “I always liked the name,” she said.

“Do you suppose I could hold her for a minute before you take her back?” Mrs. Williams said to Mac.

Later that night, after Mac had straightened the beds, and taken out Mrs. Hartley’s flowers, and opened the window, and after Mrs. Hartley and Mrs. Williams had both protested violently — and been overruled — about the little paper cups of milk of magnesia, Mrs. Williams, who had been lying back staring at the ceiling, asked suddenly, “You got any writing paper?”

“Here somewhere.” Mrs. Hartley put down her mystery story and searched on her bed table. “In a box; I’ll toss it over. Pen inside.”

“Thanks,” said Mrs. Williams.

Mrs. Hartley leaned her head back against the pillow and thought, Nine hours to waking-tomorrow-morning. I could be back here in a year, and I’d know all the routine when I came. There’s nothing wrong with *me;* if she can do it, I can…. Nine hours to waking-tomorrow-morning, maybe ten months and I’ll be back. She glanced across at the other bed and saw that Mrs. Williams was looking at her.

“Tired?” Mrs. Hartley asked.

“Sort of,” Mrs. Williams said. “All right if I keep your stuff and finish my letter tomorrow?”

“Of course,” Mrs. Hartley said. “You’d better get to sleep — they bring your baby back again a little after six in the morning.”

“Golly,” Mrs. Williams said. “I guess she’s going to keep me pretty busy.”

There was a minute’s silence, and then Mrs. Williams said softly, “Good night, Elizabeth.”

“Good night, Molly,” Mrs. Hartley said.

Mrs. Hartley lay awake a long time, watching Mrs. Williams, counting the hours. Then, when she was almost asleep, the door opened softly and Mac came in. Mac stood looking down at Mrs. Williams, and Mrs. Hartley thought, She thinks I’m asleep, too. And then, How tired Mac looks; she isn’t smiling now that no one can see her. It was too much to see Mac not smiling, and Mrs. Hartley said softly, “Good night, Mac.”

Mac turned quickly, and she was smiling again. “You still awake?” she said. “Look at this.” She went across to Mrs. Hartley’s bed and held out a sheet of paper.

Mrs. Hartley realized that it was the letter Mrs. Williams had been writing when she fell asleep. “You want me to *read* it?” she asked.

“I do indeed,” Mac said. “It isn’t addressed to you and me, but I think it’s partly meant for us.”

Looking up at Mac and then across at the other bed, Mrs. Hartley took the letter and read it in the dim light of her bed lamp.

“Dearest Jimmie,” it began. “The most wonderful thing in the world has happened. Little Elizabeth—”

THE FRIENDS

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ELLEN LANSDOWNE HAD SURELY never considered herself a cruel, or an unkind, or a vicious woman. She still retained a tiny sense of sick shame at vaguely remembered schoolgirl injustices (that poor child, so long ago, the one who had that dreadful mother), and whenever possible Ellen Lansdowne made a clear and conscious effort to exhibit generosity and thoughtfulness. When there was literally no one who would volunteer to run the community concerts this year, or *someone* had to collect the articles for the white elephant sale, or the laundress's poor children were going to have an inadequate Christmas, dear Mrs. Lansdowne could always be counted on, cheerful and accommodating, sympathetic.

"I have so *much*" she told herself often. "I've been so *lucky*." The rich fur of her coat, she might remind herself with quiet happiness, the good health and intelligence of her two young sons, her pleasant home, the near probability of a glittering birthday present from Arthur… Ellen Lansdowne could point to a world of treasures to show that she had indeed been greatly favored by life.

Much more so, indeed, than most of her friends; certainly much more so than her dear friend Marjorie, with whom she had gone to school and to luncheons, to church to be married, and to concerts. Marjorie had always been weak, Ellen thought sometimes when she was counting her blessings; Marjorie never had quite enough of anything or the best of what she did have. It was a source of deep satisfaction to Ellen that dear Marjorie, too, had a fur coat — not quite so expensive a fur, certainly, as Ellen's — and an affectionate husband, and children — only little Joan, of course — and a nice home. Perhaps Arthur patronized the Actons a little, understandably, because Charles Acton *was* a bit on the pompous side and hadn't done nearly so well as he might, and Marjorie *did* whine a little about almost everything — well, Ellen would think, sighing, I have been *so* lucky. Arthur, and the boys, and everything I ever wanted. Poor Marjorie, she thought constantly and unwillingly, poor, lovely Marjorie, always so much prettier than the rest of us, poor Marjorie. And from reflections like this Ellen Lansdowne would usually step briskly out to do some good deed — invite someone's aunt to lunch, perhaps, or volunteer to drive the high school cheering section to the basketball game.

Poor Marjorie, Ellen always thought, poor Marjorie — up to the night of the country club dance when, running upstairs to gather her fur jacket, she absentmindedly opened the door of the cloakroom and then, stunned, backed out into the hall again, her hands trembling and her mind saying over and over, "Why, that was Marjorie, Marjorie and John Forrest. *Marjorie*." For a minute she stood, bewildered, her hand still shaking against the doorknob, and then she turned and ran back downstairs, thinking only of getting away. A few couples were still dancing, and Arthur came across the dance floor, looking surprised. "Thought you went to get your coat," he said. "Changed your mind?"

No, no, Ellen wanted to say, I just couldn't go in while Marjorie and John — while John and Marjorie — I could hardly just walk right in and say… "I stopped to talk to someone," she said, surprised at the quiet of her own voice. "I'll get it now."

This is silly, she thought, holding up her long dress as she went back up the stairs, making two trips to get my jacket — they should have more sense. The door of the cloakroom was open, and Marjorie, inside, was touching up her lipstick at the mirror. Ellen refused to meet Marjorie's eyes in the mirror, and hoped she was not reddening as she crossed the room quickly to the rack where her jacket hung. "Nearly everyone's leaving," she said, addressing her jacket.

"Did you see us?" Marjorie asked.

"Arthur's waiting for me," Ellen said, and fled. Of course I saw you, you crazy fool, she thought, of course. "Ready?" she said, smiling, to her husband: It must have been going on for a long time, she thought, remembering slight oddnesses of behavior, sudden glances, almost unnoticed disappearances at dances and parties; could anyone else know? Not *her* husband, surely; not mine. Not John's wife.

"Nice party, wasn't it?" Arthur asked, and after a minute she said, "Lovely. But I'm tired."

"Poor Ellen," he said. "You worked so hard arranging everything."

I would like, she thought with the great clarity of weariness, to arrange Marjorie Acton right out of this town. And then she thought, how perfectly *beastly* of her, how foul.

Half a dozen times, during the ride home and after Arthur had come back from taking the sitter home and while they were having a glass of milk companionably together in the cool kitchen and then when they were getting ready for bed, Ellen came close to saying, bluntly and without warning, "Dear, Marjorie and John Forrest — I only *knew*, tonight, but I think I've felt it for a long time — Marjorie and John Forrest—" Each time she deliberately stopped herself from speaking, thinking that she had to be loyal to Marjorie, that Marjorie was her friend, that there was no imaginable word she could bring herself to use to her husband that would describe what she thought about Marjorie.

She did not realize how clearly she knew all the truth of it until the next morning when she met Marjorie in the grocery, and, saying, “Good morning, Marjorie,” and hearing Marjorie say, “Ellen, hello,” she found herself strongly wanting not to remember, and then saw last night’s speculative fear still in Marjorie’s eyes.

“How are you this morning?” Marjorie asked, and the words had a special weight, as though they should be translated (“I suppose you told Arthur?”) before they could be entirely understood.

“Very well. And you?” (“No, of course not; how could I tell anyone?”)

“See you soon,” Marjorie said as they separated.

It was, however, a day or two before the complete destructiveness of her knowledge came to Ellen. Here we were, she realized suddenly, sitting one morning at her kitchen table with the coffeepot and the morning paper waiting for her, here we were, a little group of friends, playing bridge, dancing, dining, swimming together, and then two among us fall out of step and introduce a new pattern, frightening and dreadful, into our well-filled lives. Good Lord, Ellen thought. I’ve known Marjorie for twenty-two years. Always so much prettier than the rest of us, we thought she’d do so well for herself, but I got Arthur. I *have* been lucky. Sitting peacefully at her kitchen table in the morning sunlight, she thought, without warning, but could I be wrong? Am I, perhaps, the only one who *hasn’t* been in step; is everyone like Marjorie, like John, perhaps laughing at innocent Ellen: has Arthur…? “No, *no*” she said aloud, pushing violently at her coffee cup, “this business has me all upset.”

Although she tried to avoid seeing Marjorie, and succeeded, she believed, in largely forgetting that there had been any noticeable break in the deepest foundations of all their lives, she found that she had become an unwilling observer; it was almost as though Marjorie and John, reconciled to her awareness, felt a kind of relief at having one person they need not trouble to deceive. There was an evening not more than a week after the country club dance when Ellen, turning to light a cigarette at a cocktail party, saw John Forrest rise and walk casually out onto the terrace; after a minute Marjorie, meeting Ellen's eyes and even smiling a little, went quietly and without other notice after him. "I enjoyed his first play much more," Ellen said easily without more than a second's pause in the conversation in which she had been engaged. "I think this one is somehow too — pretentious."

"And did you see—" someone went on, and Ellen was thinking, it's as though I were doing it; I feel guilty. They ought to be punished, she thought.

Then there was a moment when, sitting quietly across a bridge table from her husband, with Charles Acton on her left and Marjorie on her right, safe with her own home around her, Ellen turned politely to Charles, waiting for him to bid, and he said, arranging his cards, "You girls enjoy your lunch today?"

"Lunch?" Ellen said, comprehending almost at once, and angry; she had lunched alone and not agreeably on a bowl of vegetable soup at home. The king of hearts winked at her from her hand; irrepressibly she thought of some private little restaurant, where the waiter was quiet and unobtrusive and perhaps recognized them (the handsome young lovers, they came every week), and Marjorie speaking softly, leaning forward, and music, perhaps, in the background, and the conversation of romance, of undying devotion. "Of course," she said half to herself, and Marjorie at the same time cut in swiftly, speaking ostensibly to Arthur, "Ellen and I went out to lunch together in town today. As though we were a couple of debutantes."

"Two spades," Charles said.

“As though we had no responsibilities at all,” Ellen said, looking at Marjorie.

“Good idea,” Arthur said, nodding. “Ellen ought to get around more. Always doing something for other people,” he told Charles, “all this planning bazaars, and concerts, and whatnot.”

“Marjorie, too,” Charles said vaguely. “I bid two spades.”

“Ellen,” Marjorie said with all appearance of sincerity, “you look *so* pretty tonight.”

No, no, oh, no, Ellen thought, she can’t pay off like that, and, almost without thinking of what she was saying, she said to her husband, “Marjorie has offered to take the boys this weekend so we can go skiing. I thought we might go back to that nice place by the lake.”

“But I—” Marjorie began, and Ellen cut in smoothly, “I saw John Forrest for a minute today in the bank,” she said to Arthur. “That’s what made me think of skiing, actually — he was talking about it. And then when Marjorie offered to take the boys…” She smiled affectionately on Marjorie.

“Two no trump,” Marjorie said, her voice sullen, and Charles glanced up reprovingly and said, “Not your turn to bid, dear.”

Skiing at the lake was wonderful, and Ellen, who had at the last moment decided to borrow Marjorie’s new scarlet snowsuit, had never enjoyed herself more; for two days she successfully forgot the precarious defense she and Marjorie held against catastrophe. Driving home from the lake, luxuriously tired and warm in her fur coat, she leaned her head back against the seat, thinking, I *have* been taking this too seriously, and asked, “Arthur, did you ever love anyone but me?”

“Millions of girls,” he said obligingly. “Movie stars, and Oriental princesses, and beautiful international spies, and—”

“What would you do if I fell madly in love with some other man?”

"Make him pay for your birthday present," Arthur said without hesitation. "Why, have you got an offer?"

Ellen laughed happily, and fell asleep.

The boys welcomed them with enthusiasm, and Ellen, thanking Marjorie, found herself speaking and laughing with almost the old friendship. "It was *marvelous,"* she said. "You've simply got to—"

"I want to hear all about it," Marjorie said, "at lunch tomorrow." And she glanced briefly past Ellen to Charles, and then back at Ellen again.

Ellen, holding on to a hand of each of her sons, turned toward the door at once and said flatly, "Of course, I'll see you tomorrow."

She was weak with anger and helplessness, seeing how this small fiction had been eased past her; she and Marjorie now lunched together regularly in town because dear Ellen needed more gadding about, and she recognized that her lonely lunch at home might give her more discomfort in deception and guilt than Marjorie's clandestine appointment. She is asking too much of loyalty, Ellen thought; she is charging right ahead and expecting to sweep me before her: she thinks I can be handled easily. "Marjorie," she said on the phone the next morning, "I've decided that you can manage the flower show this year. I've done it for three years and I'm tired of it."

"But I can't manage *anything* — you know I'm not any—"

"But of course you'll do it," Ellen said lightly. "Unless it interferes with your various social entanglements?"

"Ellen, look—"

"Shall we discuss it today at lunch?" Ellen said, and hung up. The flower show would be abominable under Marjorie's management, but then, she thought wryly, Marjorie managed *everything* so badly.

It was more difficult to persuade Marjorie to give up little Joan's dancing class in order to take Ellen's boys into town to a matinee, but Ellen, who disliked unpleasant words and avoided unpleasant scenes, found that by now she and Marjorie had developed a private language where comparatively harmless words substituted for the disagreeable ones the rest of the world was required to use: "Cloakroom," for instance, was a word of such threatening import to Marjorie that it might easily have meant "exposure" or "scandal," and even such a trivial phrase as "lunch in town" had come to mean something close to "liar" or "hypocrite." And yet, even though it was Marjorie whose world was endangered, it was Ellen who seemed to suffer for it; when Marjorie and John, driving together to the Golfers' Dinner at the club, arrived half an hour late, only Ellen came, worried, to meet them at the door. "Did you get lost?" she asked, "Don't tell me the two of you lost your way?"

"We had to stop for gas," John said easily, moving already toward their party in the dining room.

"By the way," Ellen said to Marjorie, "I want you to take me to that auction tomorrow, over in East Sundale."

"But tomorrow—" Marjorie began, glancing after John.

"Are you busy tomorrow? Something you can't break?"

"No, of course not," Marjorie said, and turned to follow John, pulling away from Ellen's hand on her arm.

Ellen came up to the long table with them, saying loudly, "Well, here they are, everybody; made it at last."

She slid into her own place next to Charles Acton, and said, "Honestly, how they could get *lost* around *here*," and smiled down the table at Marjorie.

It was not always difficult for Ellen. "I'm going into town to the theater," she told Marjorie one morning over the phone. "With my *own* husband, of course. And I'd like to borrow the pearls Charles gave you last Christmas;

will you run over with them later?” Or, lightly at the meat counter in the mornings, “Marjorie, I’ve such a headache today; suppose *you* could bake the cakes for the club luncheon?” And always, if Marjorie protested, or refused, or looked sulky, Ellen could say with affectionate solicitude, “Poor Marjorie, you *do* look worn out. I’m really tempted to speak to Charles about you — you’re doing too much. I’m going to tell that husband of yours that he has to keep more of an eye on you.” And, with a gentle laugh, “Why don’t you just run over to the florist’s for me this afternoon? The flowers for the school, you know. I’ve got so much else to do… unless *you’re* too busy?”

It was finally with a kind of amusement that Ellen recognized Marjorie’s decision to give up the humiliating affair. It’s a shame, Ellen thought, regarding Marjorie amiably over a cup of tea, always the weakest way; poor Marjorie, she was always so much prettier than the rest of us. “You *do* look exhausted these days,” Ellen said, setting down her cup.

Marjorie looked up at her, and then down again. She’s afraid of me, Ellen thought, leaning back comfortably, and we’ve been friends for twenty-two years. They were in Marjorie’s living room, alone together of an afternoon for an intimate cup of tea. Unpleasantly, it occurred to Ellen that John Forrest must often have come here, secretly, afraid of the neighbors, and she made a little face of disgust and sat up, drawing away from the back and arms of the chair. “How beastly you are,” she said, and it was the first time since she had known that she had mentioned, directly, her knowledge.

Marjorie looked up again, steadily this time. “I think you’re jealous of me,” she said.

“Good *Lord.”* Ellen laughed, a little shocked laugh. “After all,” she said with a gesture of distaste, “don’t try to drag *me* down *with* you.”

"That's what John says — he says you're only jealous." A little thrill of fury went up Ellen's back at the light, familiar naming of John. "I'd really rather not talk about it, I think," she said.

"There's just one thing you ought to know, though," Marjorie said. "There's not going to be any more. It's all through. Over with."

"Marjorie, my dear." Ellen got up and came across the room to sit down next to her friend. "I'm really glad; you've no idea how *worried* I've been."

"So I'll tell Charles myself," Marjorie said. "You needn't bother."

Ellen gasped. "Marjorie!" she said, almost crying. "Did you think I would tell *Charles? I?* Why, I'm your oldest friend and I—"

"How lucky I am," Marjorie said evenly, "that it was my oldest friend who found out and not," she went on, smiling at Ellen, "one of my enemies."

"Margie," Ellen said, her voice tender, "you *are* taking this hard. Look — put it this way. You got yourself caught up in a kind of romantic adolescent dream, and it just wasn't till you began to see it through my eyes that you realized that it wasn't a great rosy love at all, but just something kind of cheap and nasty. After all," she added, touching Marjorie's cheek gently with one finger, "we've always been pretty honest, you and I."

"More tea?" Marjorie asked. She moved away from Ellen and lifted the teapot.

"Thanks, no," Ellen said, and then, after a minute, "I must rush. Million things to do."

"Incidentally," Marjorie said, rising, "I won't be able to pick up your groceries for you this afternoon. I'll be busy."

The coward, Ellen thought, stamping homeward through the snow: I would have fought tooth and nail, and she laughed, walking by herself, at the thought of poor Marjorie scratching and biting. Oh, *poor* Marjorie, she thought, and John thinks I'm jealous.

It was like an entirely new kind of freedom, somehow, knowing that she need no longer watch Marjorie. The sun the next day was bright on the snow, and the thought of spring coming inevitably was exhilarating.

"John," she said, sitting in his banker's office looking up at him prettily, "I've done a *dreadful* thing," and then laughed without being able to help it at the panic that showed immediately in his eyes. "No, no," she said, laughing, "not *that* bad." The man's poor conscience, she thought; outside the broad window of the bank the snow seemed cleaner with the sun on it, and Ellen knew that people passing in the street might look in and see her, a pretty woman, talking and laughing with Mr. Forrest in his private office, her furs thrown back over her chair and her head bent charmingly forward to accept a light for her cigarette. "If you're going to jump at every word I say…" she said, and shook her head sadly. "All I've *really* done is overdraw my account."

He smiled, relieved. "New dress?" he asked.

"Hardly. I'm not as wicked as you *think* I am. No, it's some things I got for my boys — clothes, and a bicycle for Jimmie — and I just didn't realize how it mounted up, and then when I came to figure it out—" She stopped, and made a face. "The thing is, I don't dare tell Arthur," she said. "You know all wives keep *some* things from their husbands."

"How much does it come to?" John asked.

Ellen thought. "Not more than forty dollars, I'm *sure*. Probably even less than that. But say fifty to be sure."

"I see," said John.

"If you could…" She was embarrassed, but she went on bravely. "Well… sort of *cover* it for me, and I could get it to you the first of the month."

“Yes,” John said without expression. “Of course.”

“I don’t usually ask men to lend me money,” Ellen said, laughing, “but of course with *you* it’s different. That is, I never mind borrowing from a banker.”

“It’s part of the business of a bank,” John said, “lending money.”

“Is it part of the business of a banker,” she asked, almost flirtatiously, “to take his clients to lunch? I’ve been waiting for you to ask me.”

He looked at her, perplexed, and she went on mockingly. “I wouldn’t want to force you into it: perhaps you—”

“Not at all,” John said, “I’ve been waiting for *you* to ask *me.”*

They laughed together then, and she said, “But I want you to be sure to figure out the right interest on my loan. This is an honest business transaction.”

“Of course,” John said, still laughing.

“And,” she went on, rising and taking up her gloves and her furs. “I’ll surely get it to you on the first of the month. Or, at the very *latest*, the month after.” Then, aware that she was a pretty woman and that her half smile made her look even prettier, she turned toward the door and waited for him to open it for her.

ALONE IN A DEN OF CUBS

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ALTHOUGH I KNOW PERFECTLY well that I am by nature trustworthy, loyal, helpful, friendly, courteous, kind, obedient, cheerful, thrifty, brave, clean, and reverent, I do not flatter myself that I am therefore true-steel material for a Cub Scout Den Mother. Up until the time my older son Laurie became a Cub Scout, I had always pictured a Den Mother as a woman of iron, with a clear head and a strong right arm, and I still do, I still do.

And yet, although Den Four had no relief maps, knot displays, model villages, homemade fudge, or amateur radio sets to show at the annual meeting, I congratulate myself secretly on having introduced a revolutionary disciplinary technique into the movement, which had a marked effect on the six Cub Scouts with whom I came in contact, and may indeed influence the whole future course of American manhood.

When Laurie asked me if I would be a Den Mother for the group of Cub Scouts he belonged to, I did not have to pause for any reflection before I said no. “I’m too busy,” I told him. “Much too busy.”

“At what?” Laurie wanted to know.

“At all sorts of things,” I said firmly. “Learning to pitch horseshoes with your father, and all sorts of things.”

“You’ll never learn to pitch horseshoes,” Laurie said. “Not as long as you throw with both hands, you won’t. So why—”

“Why don’t you ask Mrs. Oliver?” I suggested magnanimously. “Or Mrs. Roberts? Or Mrs. Stuart? I’m sure they’d be glad to do it. But I’m too busy.”

“They’re all too busy, too,” Laurie said. “If we could get anyone else, we wouldn’t ask you, for heaven’s sake.”

“Or Mrs. Williams,” I said with enthusiasm. “I’m sure Mrs. Williams would love to be your Den Mother.”

“You think we didn’t ask?” Laurie said. He looked at me wearily. “She told us she couldn’t. You’re the only one left,” he said.

“But I’m too *busy”* I insisted.

“At what?”

And so I became official Den Mother of Den Four. Since I have no illusions about my own abilities at climbing a greased pole or laying a trail over ten miles of rough country or tying a cow-hitch, I found myself forced to consider the few talents I do possess. My bridge game, although fairly good, would not do for Cub Scouts, I felt, although I also feel — as I believe every bridge player has at one time or another — that the young might really be taught to play a decent game now, instead of waiting to learn until they sit down at the table with me.

At any rate, bridge would not do, and neither would the composing of limericks, another talent upon which I pride myself and which I gave up reluctantly as Den Four’s project for the fall season; the art form is really too difficult for the minds of young boys, for one thing.

The whole tone of my Den Mothership was finally set by a lucky inspiration, and once the disciplinary setup was arranged, our meetings went smoothly: I supplied two bottles of soda and four doughnuts for each Cub at each meeting, we had a brief parliamentary discussion, and then everybody went quietly about his business. The boys tied their knots and painted the attic walls — of their own volition and with great energy —

while I peeled potatoes for dinner and sang old camp songs to myself. And every Cub came to every meeting every week.

I confess to some nervousness at our first meeting. I gathered up my six Den Fours at the school on Wednesday afternoon. I knew most of them slightly, and apparently they all knew me, since conversation in the car was devoted exclusively to speculation on what kind of Den Mother Laurie's old lady was going to be. I had anticipated some difficulty with my son's feeling arrogant and superior because his mother was the Den Mother and the meetings were to be in his house; but it turned out that my fears were as nothing compared to his.

When we got out of the car, he took me aside and said nervously, "Look, don't try anything you can't *finish."*

"Nonsense," I told him. "We're all going to have a lovely time."

"Listen," he asked, "did you remember to get food?"

At ten minutes past three, when all the doughnuts had been consumed and all the empty soda bottles had been put back neatly in the case, my six Cub Scouts folded their hands, sat dutifully in a row on the playroom floor, and turned expectant, and in one case cynical, looks upon me. "Well?" said my son.

"Boys," I said brightly, "I think we ought to elect officers." There was a long silence. "Like a Den president," I continued weakly, "and a treasurer." I looked around at the silent faces. "To collect dues, you know," I said, remembering unhappily that Election of Officers, on my rough schedule, was supposed to take us until four o'clock and was supposed, also, to be an enthusiastic, although gentlemanly, sporting event, approximating movies I had seen of the British House of Commons. "Officers," I finished, smiling at the blank faces.

"She means like a president and stuff," Laurie said with desperate urgency.

"No, I don't," I said, suddenly getting my inspiration. "I mean, for instance, an Official Whiner. So that all the whining about everything" — I looked at my son— "can be done by one person, and the rest of you won't have to bother."

"Hey," said one of the boys, interested, "that would do for Harry, here, I bet." He shoved the boy next to him violently, and the other Cubs said, "Cut it out," and, "Shuddup," and, *"Will* ya?"

"I nominate George," said the Cub who had been pushed. "George for Official Whiner."

"Sure," said someone I took to be George. He sounded flattered. "And I betcha Billy could be the Giggler and laugh for all of us."

"And whaddya say we make Artie Old Know-It-All?"

I caught a respectful glance from my son and sat back, grinning smugly. Elections went on until I had to herd the boys into the car to take them home. We elected Laurie the Big Talker, and Artie got to be the General Expert Who Knows the Best Way to Do Everything, and Michael, who is able to crow like a rooster, got the rooster-crowing job, but was confined by bylaws to one crow per meeting. (I did not know at the time, although I do now, why the other Cubs insisted on putting that in about only one crow per meeting; they were, of course, more farsighted than I was.) By unanimous consent, Peter was elected Guy Who Always Says He Isn't Coming to Cub Scouts but Then Always Comes Anyway, and I got an honorary post — Utility Outfielder. Toby, our dog, was elected President, and Laurie's year-old brother, Barry, got to be Sergeant at Arms, with a salary of one doughnut a meeting.

I discovered, too, that something I believed peculiar to Laurie was actually true of all ten-year-old boys; they feel an extreme sentimentality toward babies, kittens, and little girls under four. Jannie, our seven-year-old daughter, was just old enough to be regarded as an intruder. She wanted to participate as a full member and was told, “G’way. We don’t want no *girls*.” But Barry and Sally — who is only just four — were regarded instantly as Den pets, and Sally was voted in as Bat Girl and Mascot. When I insisted that it wasn’t fair to leave out Jannie, she was elected Waitress, to hand out the soda at meetings, with one dissenting vote — her older brother’s.

My contribution to the world of discipline came during the voting for Rooster-Crower, when silence became imperative. I had thought to use the method of insuring silence that has always been most practical with my own four children when general roughhouse prevails; I usually yell *Quiet!* at the top of my lungs, and since I can yell louder than four children, of whom two are still pretty small, I frequently get quiet. If my own voice cannot prevail, I can always get their father to come and yell with me. I do not suppose that this is the ideal method of silencing children who are knocking each other around and stamping and pulling and shoving and screaming and howling; but it is the only way I have ever found that works, and so I assumed that it would work with six Cub Scouts.

The first time I yelled *Quiet!* at my Cub Scouts, however, the effect was so shocking, they were immediately silenced. The second time I yelled *Quiet!* nobody heard me. When I had yelled *Quiet!* about six times and gotten no results, I reached without conscious intention (I sincerely maintain) into my box of groceries, which sat on the floor behind me, and in which I vaguely hoped I might uncover a forgotten box of doughnuts or a bunch of bananas or some such, and in which I found, instead, an egg.

I took little thought, but good aim. Assuming that my own son was the most reasonable target, since I had to wash his shirts myself, I fired. Silence was instant and profound. Five potential roosters, halted in mid-crow, regarded Laurie dripping eggshell and yolk, and when I remarked that that was better, and set the box of eggs meaningfully on the floor next to me, our meeting resumed in a manner almost subdued.

Later that year, when eggs went way up in price, I fell back on marshmallows as ammunition; these had the additional advantage of being edible (edible, that is, by Cub Scouts), and although they did not carry the impact of a raw *egg*, I found that by then all I had to do to bring a dead silence was to raise my right arm.

Except for the improvement in my throwing arm, a new technique of discipline, and our painted attic walls, we had, as I say, nothing to show for our work at the annual meeting. We had been laboriously working out a haphazard and hilarious skit to present, although at the last minute Michael got chicken pox and Jannie had to fill in as the Tree. Suddenly, as I sat there, eyes shut and teeth clenched in the despairing hope that the Lion would not forget his lines and the Cake would not stumble again over the Crocodile’s tail, a staggering and frightening thought came to me. Someday — and not very long off, either — Laurie will be a Boy Scout, Jannie will be a Girl Scout, Sally will be a Brownie, and Barry will be a Cub Scout. All at once. I hope the price of eggs comes down again before then.

THE ORDER OF CHARLOTTE'S GOING

First published in Charm, July 1954

I ALWAYS USED TO love June, and the roses, and the heat; I used to sit at the breakfast table and feel the warm, rich air coming in from the garden, and linger over my coffee just because it seemed somehow to make the days longer, and everything, all day, was easier when the weather was warm. I can remember that Charlotte felt the same way; sometimes at the breakfast table we would catch each other smiling. "I wish I could sleep all winter," I said once, "and only wake up for June."

"You're wishing your life away," Charlotte said.

That must have been early in the summer of Charlotte's death; I cannot remember a time during her illness when that remark was not at the back of my mind. Wishing my life away, I might think, the roses heavy in the window beside me, and Charlotte just faintly more pale than the morning before; "You look well this morning," I would say.

Charlotte would look over at me, and smile, and say, "Thanks so much, dear. And please either stop telling me or make it sound true." Then we would both laugh, because neither of us took the notion of Charlotte's dying very seriously; no one, I think we both felt, could just *die*, not in June with the roses out. We tried making a joke of it — only at first, of course— "Coffee?" I would say, giving the coffeepot a little shove in her direction, "It may be your last cup, you know." Or she might remark, eyeing the pastries, "I feel that I have a right to the larger, since I shall so soon be deprived of earthly joys." I believed then that if Charlotte ever did think she was dying, she rather enjoyed the idea — it was all but painless, at first, and more than anything else like a schoolgirl dream of Camille, you know; she felt reasonably well, sometimes better than others, but she knew she was dying only because Doctor West and Doctor Nathan said so, and it seemed so silly, after all, to let *them* decide.

Actually, she had all the pleasures of dying for that whole summer. Everyone knew about it, and they gave her the best of everything, and always found a chair for her at the garden parties, and someone was always sure to be there to fetch poor Charlotte a drink or to talk to poor Charlotte or to play up to poor Charlotte's gallant attempts to tone down her part; she used to wink at me across the room and I might wander over and say amiably, "Well, Charlotte dear, dead yet?" and everyone would gasp and say "Shhh" and "Good *Lord,"* and Charlotte wouldn't be able to keep from laughing, and of course *that* made everyone tell everyone else how courageous poor Charlotte was, and wasn't it lucky she was taking it so well, when of course all the time she was just enjoying herself right up to the hilt, more than she ever did before she was dying.

Charlotte was, of course, several years older than I; she was my older cousin, and I was the one always left out when she and my sisters used to gather together at parties and whisper and giggle, but then, the way things turned out, Charlotte and I ended up together, after all. There was I, no money and no place to go, just out of college and a little bit frightened, and there was Charlotte, all the money in the family, and tired of paid companions and being alone, and we ran into each other one day in town, and had lunch together, and decided we'd try putting up with each other for a while, with the understanding, of course, that we could always quit if we couldn't stand each other. Well, it was fourteen years now, and we'd fought our way through most of it, spending our winters quarreling in town and our summers quarreling out at the cottage, and both of us livelier and happier than we would have been any other way. Charlotte always wanted to die at the cottage, anyway, so we came out early that year, after she'd seen Nathan, in town, and he'd told her about her heart, and her blood pressure, and everyone had looked gravely at everyone else, and Nathan said to me, "Take very good care of her, Miss Baxter — she's always taken good care of *you*." Charlotte of course began to laugh when he said that, and that made poor old Nathan the first person to pat Charlotte on the shoulder and say she was taking it courageously. So we came out to the cottage early that summer, and I began wishing my life away, and then around the middle of June Charlotte got the first communication. We started right away calling them communications, right with that first one, because there wasn't much else to call them without taking them too seriously.

The first one was in the morning mail, and addressed to Charlotte, of course. I used to be complacent about how all the mail I got meant something; Charlotte was the one who got all the bills and all the ads and all the begging letters, and anything I got was either a letter from someone or an invitation. Anyway, this first communication made Charlotte laugh. "Look at this thing," she said, tossing it across the table to me, "someone's gotten *some* wire crossed."

It was an ordinary congratulatory card, and very ordinary indeed — vulgar, I would have called it, actually. It was full of painted pink roses and cupids and was sticky with sequins: "Best Wishes on Your Plighted Troth," it read in pink letters, and there was a white satin bow.

"Golly," I said, "you suppose it's meant for Martha?"

"If Martha's getting married, I want to know about it," Charlotte said grimly, and she put her head back and yelled, "Martha!"

"Hon, cut it out," I said. "You know you're supposed to be an invalid. Let me do the yelling, if you won't let me go and get her."

“Martha?” Charlotte said over my shoulder. “You getting married?”

“Me?” Martha was a good solid country woman; she was the greatest glory of our summer life, and thinking about it, Martha — who had already tried it twice, anyway — would as soon think of getting married again as she would of putting tomatoes in a chowder. “You think I’m crazy?” Martha said.

“Look,” Charlotte said, holding out the card. *“I’m* not getting married, and neither is Anne.”

“Me neither,” Martha said. “So I guess that’s none of us.” She looked down at the card disdainfully, holding it far away so she could read it. “Look at that card,” she said, and handed it back delicately. “My,” she said, and made a face. “Could use it to trim a cake,” Martha said.

“I believe I’ll put it on the mantel,” Charlotte said.

“I’ll do it,” I said as Charlotte started to get up, and Martha winked at me. “Might as well let her,” Martha said to me, “neither of us can stop her doing *anything.”*

“She’s supposed to be sick,” I said. “I’m supposed to be taking care of her, Doctor Nathan said so.”

“Hah,” said Martha. “You feel like coconut cake for lunch? That card put it in my mind.”

“Sure,” I said. “Plenty of frosting.”

The card stayed there on the mantel for about a week, but I don’t think Charlotte kept on finding it as funny as she thought she would. In the first place, just about all the jokes you could think of to make to an unmarried lady of forty-eight about her getting congratulations on her engagement either were made in the first twenty-four hours or were too indelicate to make, anyway, and in the second place, Charlotte and I had gotten sort of used to being spinsters, and never gave it much thought, and even talked about it sometimes, between ourselves, but having the card up there on the mantel sort of brought it to mind, somehow, and even made people think we *did* wonder a little about ourselves. Anyway, Charlotte took the card down and I imagine she burned it, because it wasn't there by the time the second one came.

"This isn't funny," Charlotte said, passing it across the breakfast table to me. "You think it's funny?"

It was covered with sequins, like the first one, and cupids and roses, only this one had a white satin heart in the center, and *it* said "Blessings on Your Nuptials." It was like the first one also in that it was not signed; this time we both looked at the envelope and wondered where it had come from. "Two can't be an accident," Charlotte said. "Someone's doing it on purpose."

"Some kind of a misguided practical joke," I said.

"Trying to cheer me up in my last hours?" Charlotte said. "Not quite the way to do it, I think."

"Mailed locally, too," I said. "Put down that cigarette. You've had one," I added. "You're not allowed *any*."

"It's not worth it," Charlotte said, "I'd even rather live."

"You can't, now," I told her. "All arrangements have been made. Mrs. Austin's planning a luncheon for after the funeral."

"You suppose Mrs. Austin…?" Charlotte wondered, regarding the envelope.

"Why on earth? It's some fool who got caught in a joke in bad taste and won't ever admit it now."

The third card was done in pink ribbons, and read "Love to the New Arrival." It amused no one very much. We decided that the envelopes had been addressed left-handed, and got everyone we knew trying left-handed stabs at writing Charlotte’s name, although we were sure by then we’d never know who sent them, because anyone who thought they were funny would have come out with it by that time, and in any case it’s easy to make a mess of trying to write left-handed. The next card, which I thought was probably the least happily chosen, was bright yellow, with puppies looking dolefully at one another, and on the front it said, “Sorry for Your Aches and Pains,” and inside there was a verse about being sorry she was sick, and hoping she’d be real well soon and back at play with the other boys and girls. “I don’t *like* these,” Charlotte said, handing me this last one, “they are beginning to frighten me.”

“Suppose I open the mail?” I said. “I know the writing by now, and I’ll just sort out any of these things and throw them away.”

Charlotte shrugged, and laughed a little. “I guess I’m curious,” she said, “I want to know what they’ll think of next.”

Well, then, of course, the next one did it. We both recognized the handwriting on the envelope and I came around the table to watch Charlotte open it and she tore open the flap and two live spiders skidded out and one ran along her hand and up her arm. I thought she was going right then — and I think it was the first time I ever took the doctor seriously — because she screamed and jumped up and kicked over her chair and slapped at her arm and said, “Get it away, get it *away*.” I stepped on one of the spiders and took the second one off her arm and squeezed it between my fingers; I’ve never done such a thing in my life, but for some reason this particular spider just made me sick.

I had to call Doctor West from the village, and he put Charlotte to bed and I told him about the cards and the spiders and he looked as sick as I felt and said, “I can only believe that someone thinks it’s funny. Horrible thing to do, though.”

"He probably didn't know how she loathes insects," I said. "They horrify her."

He nodded. "She ought to take it a lot easier, though, Miss Baxter," he said. "I tell you, I don't know what your doctor in town saw fit to warn you against, but I'm not going to try to confuse you or make you feel better by hiding it in a lot of medical phrases; Miss Allison is in a dangerous condition, and it's not going to take much—" He had to stop because Charlotte was calling me, and then even so he held my arm long enough to say, "Watch out for Martha's cooking; those rich cakes and fried chicken are no good at all for Miss Allison. And of course see that she doesn't get any more spiders in the mail."

"I'll open everything," I told him. "Even if it's a man-eating tiger in an envelope."

"Good girl," he said.

Well, of course Martha thought the only thing she could do to show how mad she was at whoever sent those spiders was to get to work and make brown-sugar pie and shrimp casserole for lunch, and when I sat there with my plate full and saw Charlotte's tray with the cup of vegetable soup and glass of buttermilk, what could I do?

"This once, *only*," I said, passing her over my shrimp casserole. "I won't tell the doc. But from now on it's whole wheat bread and beet greens."

"Certainly," she said, diving into the shrimp.

"And no cigarettes."

"I don't smoke," she said virtuously. "Doctor's orders."

I told Martha not to put her homemade strawberry preserves on the breakfast table anymore, and to butter the toast in the kitchen, and to use one slim pat of butter for four slices of toast, and not to serve *more* than four slices of toast. I began ordering a coffee without caffeine, but Charlotte raised such a fuss, I had to go back to our regular brand, but I made Martha serve only hot water and lemon juice at dinner. I broke Martha's heart by ruling out absolutely all baked goods and all fried foods and all spices, which, since it eliminated fried chicken and blueberry pie and lamb curry, got Martha's cooking down to a kind of basic boiled codfish, with now and then a lamb chop for variety. Charlotte began losing weight, and I began dropping in to the kitchen after dinner to take a little of whatever Martha had prepared for herself. "If I didn't know it was doing her good," I told Martha, my mouth full of kidney stew, "I'd give it up right now. It's making her suffer."

"Not right for a person not to eat," Martha said.

"My God," I said, "I can't live on it."

"You're not sick," Martha said reasonably. "After she's gone, after all, *you'll* still be eating good meals."

"Doesn't seem fair, does it? You and me eating kidney stew, and Charlotte…" I looked at Martha and she looked at me. "Why not?" I said.

"Shouldn't do it," Martha said.

"I don't care." I fixed a tray with a generous serving of kidney stew, threw on a couple of Martha's hot yeast rolls, and a cup of coffee with plenty of cream and sugar. Then I stuck my tongue out at Martha and took the tray upstairs.

After that, whenever Martha made anything particularly nice, I took Charlotte along a tray; it was always done as a special treat, and Martha and I always pretended it was something unusual for Charlotte, and Charlotte and I always pretended it was a trick on Martha, and then after a while it seemed silly and Martha went back to making her regular meals and Charlotte and I got strawberry preserves for breakfast again.

The cards stopped coming, but Charlotte began finding little boxes of candy everywhere. Now, candy, and especially chocolate, was one thing she was absolutely *not* supposed to have, and leaving it around was about the crudest practical joke anyone could try, because Charlotte was one of those people who just can't turn her back on a piece of candy. Not the way you and I eat candy, you see — if there was a dish of candy on the table, Charlotte couldn't sit still until she'd polished it off, just keep coming back and coming back and knowing all the time she shouldn't. I like candy well enough, and I used to keep some in my room until once Charlotte found out about it and made me give it to her, but as far as the house in general was concerned, I kept it out. Cooking chocolate in the pantry and not even Charlotte could eat *that* — but no sweets of any kind around where anyone could get at them. Even Charlotte hadn't the nerve to go dipping sugar out of the sugar bowl, so we were all right until this joker started getting little boxes of candy to Charlotte. First it came in the mail, a small sample box of sweet chocolate, and naturally I couldn't stop Charlotte from going right at it, even in the middle of breakfast. Then one day I found a box of chocolates on the living room table, and I knew Martha hadn't put them there, and I didn't dare ask Charlotte, so I gave them to Martha to take home, but Charlotte wandered into the kitchen and saw them. Then it got worse. Little wax paper packages, two or three pieces, would turn up on her dresser — homemade fudge, sometimes, or caramels, or orange creams, or plain chocolate — and sometimes I found them and of course sometimes I didn't. I remember once I found a package in the pocket of her dressing gown, and one in the drawer of her desk, next to her checkbook. I knew I wasn't finding them all because she was always asking Martha for soda for indigestion or heartburn, and of course that was no good for her either. Then one day I came into her room without knocking, just to catch her, and there she was eating candy and with a cigarette in her hand, and of course I was just as mad as could be. I threw the candy into the wastebasket and took away the cigarette — and the pack of cigarettes in her pocket, too, by the way — and said, "Now, look, hon, this is really getting out of hand. What on *earth* do you think you're *doing?*"

It was the first time she was ever sullen with me. As I say, we did a good deal of fighting, back and forth, but always giving as good as we got, and here she was now, acting like a child caught stealing a nickel out of its mother's pocketbook, and I felt awful. "I've got a right to do as I please," she said.

"Not if you deliberately harm yourself. You *know* this is all bad for you. Smoking, and eating rich candy, and trying to keep it all a secret."

"I don't care," she said. "I can enjoy myself if I want to."

"Don't be silly," I said, and then something occurred to me, because that didn't sound at all like Charlotte, and I went and put my hand into her bathrobe pocket and took out a note, written the way the cards had been addressed — left-handed, and in purple ink — and the note said, "You got a right to enjoy yourself."

"Where did you get *this?"* I asked, disgusted.

"It was with the cigarettes," she said, and then she smiled up at me, like my old Charlotte. *"Don't* I have a right?" she wanted to know.

"Look," I said, "what I want is that you'll still be enjoying yourself next year at this time. You've gotten into a state of mind where you think fooling me is enjoying yourself. Go ahead and fool me all you like — send me spiders in the mail if it gives you any pleasure — but just keep off the cigarettes and the candy and stuff."

I shouldn't have reminded her of the spiders; her face got all sick again and she turned away from me and wouldn't talk anymore. And I suppose the candy and stuff kept coming because she kept talking about indigestion and she began to look frightened, as though she couldn't stop herself anymore and knew just the same that she was getting worse. We weren't making our little jokes anymore; somehow people had stopped thinking of her as being so courageous, I suppose because she looked so terrible, and had started talking about how long she could last, and where she had left the money. I was pretty sure she had left the money to me, but I was getting more and more worried about how long she could last, so I went and had a talk with Doctor West in the village about the secret candy and cigarettes.

"There's no controlling her," I said to him, and he shook his head.

"I don't know of any cruelty like it," he said. "You might better give her a dose of arsenic on the spot, and get it over with fast. This way, she's not only pushing herself into the grave, she feels guilty about it besides. I can't do anything except warn her."

"I can't even do that," I said. "She's stopped listening to me at all and if I try to keep an eye on her she just laughs at me."

"Keep after her as much as you can," he said. "All you *can* do."

Well, the roses bloomed and kept their blossoms and got heavier and richer as the summer went on, and by the end of August our garden was so lovely, I would have liked to die there myself. Charlotte was tired and lethargic all the time; she might come downstairs for an hour or so in the morning, but she spent most of her time in her room, looking down at the roses from her window and I suppose stuffing herself with the lavish gifts from her unknown friend. It was all I could do to coax her out into the air for five minutes, and of course in the end that was what finally did it.

We had had breakfast together, eating buckwheat cakes and country sausage and toast and Martha's strawberry preserves, and the mail had been good — one invitation for me, to a dance; one subscription renewal and one dividend check for Charlotte — and I asked her if she'd like to spend half an hour in the garden, after being indoors so much.

"I don't think so." Charlotte shook her head. "I believe I'll just go back to bed."

"You haven't seen the rock garden. You can't see it from your window. And you're not sick enough to stay in bed and pamper yourself; you've *got* to get outdoors more."

Charlotte sighed. "I'm so tired," she said. "I hate walking around or standing up."

"Half an hour?" I asked.

She shrugged. "These days," she said wearily, "it's more trouble to resist. Ten minutes."

I took her arm, because she had trouble walking, and we went together out into the garden, among the roses. I knew I was right, when she stopped at once and just touched a rose with one finger. "They're lovely this year," she said.

"Each summer they're lovelier than the last. That's one of the things about roses."

She laughed. "You thinking that next summer they'll be just as lovely without me?"

"I'll plant some on your grave," I said amiably. "Come and see the rock garden."

We went slowly down the path beside the cottage, between the rows of roses, past Martha's kitchen window, and she leaned out to say, "Good to see *you* outdoors at last," and then we went around past the house down to the back, to the rock garden that Charlotte and I had built together, and which I had tended alone this summer. "You've been spending too much time on *me*" Charlotte said critically. "Look at those weeds."

“I’ve been more concerned about you.” I gave her a little hug. “Next year—” I said.

“Anne,” she said as though she hadn’t expected to be saying anything, and was a little bit surprised, and even shocked, to hear her own voice saying this, “Anne, you know I’ve left you all of it?”

“Have you, Charlotte?”

“The house, and the money, and everything. I thought you knew.”

“I just think it’s silly to talk about it.”

“I suppose it is. I’ve been wondering if maybe they weren’t wrong, Nathan and this other fellow. If maybe I’m not going to—”

“Look out,” I shouted, *“snake*, Charlotte, look *out!*” I jumped away from her, screaming, “Martha, Martha, help, *snake!”*

Martha ran out, gasping, and killed the snake with a shovel, and Doctor West told me afterward that of course it was not a rattler, but only a milk snake.

“I feel so awful,” I told him, “I keep thinking of how we were standing there talking quietly, and if I had only kept my head…”

“You couldn’t know, of course,” he said.

“I guess I’m about as afraid of snakes as she was of spiders. But still… it was my job to take care of *her*. If I had only thought in time…”

“It was bound to happen sometime,” Doctor West said.

About the worst job Martha and I had was going over Charlotte’s clothes. There was still chocolate in some of the pockets, and in one pocket, in the sweater she was wearing that morning, I found another note, saying, “They’re just trying to leave you out. You better show them you can still be in the center of things.” It was the only one of those things that I hadn’t written left-handed, and I burned it.

ONE ORDINARY DAY, WITH PEANUTS

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MR. JOHN PHILIP JOHNSON shut his front door behind him and went down his front steps into the bright morning with a feeling that all was well with the world on this best of all days, and wasn't the sun warm and good, and didn't his shoes feel comfortable after the resoling, and he knew that he had undoubtedly chosen the very precise tie that belonged with the day and the sun and his comfortable feet, and, after all, wasn't the world just a wonderful place? In spite of the fact that he was a small man, and though the tie was perhaps a shade vivid, Mr. Johnson radiated a feeling of well-being as he went down the steps and onto the dirty sidewalk, and he smiled at people who passed him, and some of them even smiled back. He stopped at the newsstand on the corner and bought his paper, saying, "*Good* morning" with real conviction to the man who sold him the paper and the two or three other people who were lucky enough to be buying papers when Mr. Johnson skipped up. He remembered to fill his pockets with candy and peanuts, and then he set out to get himself uptown. He stopped in a flower shop and bought a carnation for his buttonhole, and stopped almost immediately afterward to give the carnation to a small child in a carriage, who looked at him dumbly, and then smiled, and Mr. Johnson smiled, and the child's mother looked at Mr. Johnson for a minute and then smiled, too.

When he had gone several blocks uptown, Mr. Johnson cut across the avenue and went along a side street, chosen at random; he did not follow the same route every morning, but preferred to pursue his eventful way in wide detours, more like a puppy than a man intent upon business. It happened this morning that halfway down the block a moving van was parked, and the furniture from an upstairs apartment stood half on the sidewalk, half on the steps, while an amused group of people loitered, examining the scratches on the tables and the worn spots on the chairs, and a harassed woman, trying to watch a young child and the movers and the furniture all at the same time, gave the clear impression of endeavoring to shelter her private life from the people staring at her belongings. Mr. Johnson stopped, and for a moment joined the crowd, then he came forward and, touching his hat civilly, said, “Perhaps I can keep an eye on your little boy for you?”

The woman turned and glared at him distrustfully, and Mr. Johnson added hastily, “We’ll sit right here on the steps.” He beckoned to the little boy, who hesitated and then responded agreeably to Mr. Johnson’s genial smile. Mr. Johnson took out a handful of peanuts from his pocket and sat on the steps with the boy, who at first refused the peanuts on the grounds that his mother did not allow him to accept food from strangers; Mr. Johnson said that probably his mother had not intended peanuts to be included, since elephants at the circus ate them, and the boy considered, and then agreed solemnly. They sat on the steps cracking peanuts in a comradely fashion, and Mr. Johnson said, “So you’re moving?”

“Yep,” said the boy.

“Where you going?”

“Vermont.”

“Nice place. Plenty of snow there. Maple sugar, too; you like maple sugar?” Sure.

“Plenty of maple sugar in Vermont. You going to live on a farm?”

“Going to live with Grandpa.”

“Grandpa like peanuts?”

"Sure."

"Ought to take him some," said Mr. Johnson, reaching into his pocket. "Just you and Mommy going?"

"Yep."

"Tell you what," Mr. Johnson said. "You take some peanuts to eat on the train."

The boy's mother, after glancing at them frequently, had seemingly decided that Mr. Johnson was trustworthy, because she had devoted herself wholeheartedly to seeing that the movers did not — what movers rarely do, but every housewife believes they will — crack a leg from her good table, or set a kitchen chair down on a lamp. Most of the furniture was loaded by now, and she was deep in that nervous stage when she knew there was something she had forgotten to pack — hidden away in the back of a closet somewhere, or left at a neighbor's and forgotten, or on the clothesline — and was trying to remember under stress what it was.

"This all, lady?" the chief mover said, completing her dismay.

Uncertainly, she nodded.

"Want to go on the truck with the furniture, sonny?" the mover asked the boy, and laughed. The boy laughed, too, and said to Mr. Johnson, "I guess I'll have a good time at Vermont."

"Fine time," said Mr. Johnson, and stood up. "Have one more peanut before you go," he said to the boy.

The boy's mother said to Mr. Johnson, "Thank you so much; it was a great help to me."

"Nothing at all," said Mr. Johnson gallantly. "Where in Vermont are you going?"

The mother looked at the little boy accusingly, as though he had given away a secret of some importance, and said unwillingly, "Greenwich."

“Lovely town,” said Mr. Johnson. He took out a card, and wrote a name on the back. “Very good friend of mine lives in Greenwich,” he said. “Call on him for anything you need. His wife makes the best doughnuts in town,” he added soberly to the little boy.

“Swell,” said the little boy.

“Goodbye,” said Mr. Johnson.

He went on, stepping happily with his new-shod feet, feeling the warm sun on his back and on the top of his head. Halfway down the block he met a stray dog and fed him a peanut.

At the corner, where another wide avenue faced him, Mr. Johnson decided to go on uptown again. Moving with comparative laziness, he was passed on either side by people hurrying and frowning, and people brushed past him going the other way, clattering along to get somewhere quickly. Mr. Johnson stopped on every corner and waited patiently for the light to change, and he stepped out of the way of anyone who seemed to be in any particular hurry, but one young lady came too fast for him, and crashed wildly into him when he stooped to pat a kitten, which had run out onto the sidewalk from an apartment house and was now unable to get back through the rushing feet.

“Excuse me,” said the young lady, trying frantically to pick up Mr. Johnson and hurry on at the same time, “terribly sorry.”

The kitten, regardless now of danger, raced back to its home. “Perfectly all right,” said Mr. Johnson, adjusting himself carefully. “You seem to be in a hurry.”

“Of course I’m in a hurry,” said the young lady. “I’m late.”

She was extremely cross, and the frown between her eyes seemed well on its way to becoming permanent. She had obviously awakened late, because she had not spent any extra time in making herself look pretty, and her dress was plain and unadorned with collar or brooch, and her lipstick was noticeably crooked. She tried to brush past Mr. Johnson, but, risking her suspicious displeasure, he took her arm and said, “Please wait.”

“Look,” she said ominously, “I ran into you, and your lawyer can see my lawyer and I will gladly pay all damages and all inconveniences suffered therefrom, but please this minute let me go because *I am late*.”

“Late for what?” said Mr. Johnson; he tried his winning smile on her but it did no more than keep her, he suspected, from knocking him down again.

“Late for work,” she said between her teeth. “Late for my employment. I have a job, and if I am late I lose exactly so much an hour and I cannot really afford what your pleasant conversation is costing me, be it *ever* so pleasant.”

“I’ll pay for it,” said Mr. Johnson. Now, these were magic words, not necessarily because they were true, or because she seriously expected Mr. Johnson to pay for anything, but because Mr. Johnson’s flat statement, obviously innocent of irony, could not be, coming from Mr. Johnson, anything but the statement of a responsible and truthful and respectable man.

“What *do* you mean?” she asked.

“I said that since I am obviously responsible for your being late, I shall certainly pay for it.”

“Don’t be silly,” she said, and for the first time the frown disappeared. “I wouldn’t expect you to pay for anything — a few minutes ago I was offering to pay *you*. Anyway,” she added, almost smiling, “it *was* my fault.”

“What happens if you don’t go to work?”

She stared. “I don’t get paid.”

“Precisely,” said Mr. Johnson.

"What do you mean, precisely? If I don't show up at the office exactly twenty minutes ago I lose a dollar and twenty cents an hour, or two cents a minute or" — she thought— "almost a dime for the time I've spent talking to you."

Mr. Johnson laughed, and finally she laughed, too. "You're late already," he pointed out. "Will you give me another four cents' worth?"

"I don't understand why."

"You'll see," Mr. Johnson promised. He led her over to the side of the walk, next to the buildings, and said, "Stand here," and went out into the rush of people going both ways. Selecting and considering, as one who must make a choice involving perhaps whole years of lives, he estimated the people going by. Once he almost moved, and then at the last minute thought better of it and drew back. Finally, from half a block away, he saw what he wanted, and moved out into the center of the traffic to intercept a young man, who was hurrying, and dressed as though he had awakened late, and frowning.

"Oof," said the young man, because Mr. Johnson had thought of no better way to intercept anyone than the one the young woman had unwittingly used upon him. "Where do you think you're going?" the young man demanded from the sidewalk.

"I want to speak to you," said Mr. Johnson ominously.

The young man got up nervously, dusting himself and eyeing Mr. Johnson. "What for?" he said. "What'd I do?"

"That's what bothers me most about people nowadays," Mr. Johnson complained broadly to the people passing. "No matter whether they've done anything or not, they always figure someone's after them. About what you're going to do," he told the young man.

"Listen," said the young man, trying to brush past him, "I'm late, and I don't have any time to listen. Here's a dime, now get going."

"Thank you," said Mr. Johnson, pocketing the dime. "Look," he said, "what happens if you stop running?"

"I'm late," said the young man, still trying to get past Mr. Johnson, who was unexpectedly clinging.

"How much you make an hour?" Mr. Johnson demanded.

"A Communist, are you?" said the young man. "Now will you please let me—"

"No," said Mr. Johnson insistently, *"how* much?"

"Dollar fifty," said the young man. "And *now* will you—"

"You like adventure?"

The young man stared, and, staring, found himself caught and held by Mr. Johnson's genial smile; he almost smiled back and then repressed it and made an effort to tear away. "I got to *hurry*," he said.

"Mystery? You like surprises? Unusual and exciting events?"

"You selling something?"

"Sure," said Mr. Johnson. "You want to take a chance?"

The young man hesitated, looking longingly up the avenue toward what might have been his destination and then, when Mr. Johnson said, "I'll pay for it" with his own peculiar convincing emphasis, turned and said, "Well, okay. But I got to *see* it first, what I'm buying."

Mr. Johnson, breathing hard, led the young man over to the side, where the girl was standing; she had been watching with interest Mr. Johnson's capture of the young man and now, smiling timidly, she looked at Mr. Johnson as though prepared to be surprised at nothing.

Mr. Johnson reached into his pocket and took out his wallet. "Here," he said, and handed a bill to the girl. "This about equals your day's pay."

“But no,” she said, surprised in spite of herself. “I mean, I *couldn’t.”*

“Please do not interrupt,” Mr. Johnson told her. “And *here,”* he said to the young man, “this will take care of *you.”* The young man accepted the bill dazedly, but said, “Probably counterfeit” to the young woman out of the side of his mouth. “Now,” Mr. Johnson went on, disregarding the young man, “what is your name, miss?”

“Kent,” she said helplessly. “Mildred Kent.”

“Fine,” said Mr. Johnson. “And you, sir?”

“Arthur Adams,” said the young man stiffly.

“Splendid,” said Mr. Johnson. “Now, Miss Kent, I would like you to meet Mr. Adams. Mr. Adams, Miss Kent.”

Miss Kent stared, wet her lips nervously, made a gesture as though she might run, and said, “How do you do?”

Mr. Adams straightened his shoulders, scowled at Mr. Johnson, made a gesture as though *he* might run, and said, “How do you do?”

“Now, *this,”* said Mr. Johnson, taking several bills from his wallet, “should be enough for the day for both of you. I would suggest, perhaps, Coney Island — although I personally am not fond of the place — or perhaps a nice lunch somewhere, and dancing, or a matinee, or even a movie, although take care to choose a really *good* one; there are *so* many bad movies these days. You might,” he said, struck with an inspiration, “visit the Bronx Zoo, or the Planetarium. Anywhere, as a matter of fact,” he concluded, “that you would like to go. Have a nice time.”

As he started to move away, Arthur Adams, breaking from his dumbfounded stare, said, “But see here, mister, you *can’t* do this. Why — how do you know — I mean, *we* don’t even know — I mean, how do you know we won’t just take the money and not do what you said?”

"You've taken the money," Mr. Johnson said. "You don't have to follow any of my suggestions. You may know something you prefer to do — perhaps a museum, or something."

"But suppose I just run away with it and leave her here?"

"I know you won't," said Mr. Johnson gently, "because you remembered to ask *me* that. Goodbye," he added, and went on.

As he stepped up the street, conscious of the sun on his head and his good shoes, he heard from somewhere behind him the young man saying, "Look, you know you don't *have* to if you don't want to," and the girl saying, "But unless *you* don't want to…" Mr. Johnson smiled to himself and then thought that he had better hurry along; when he wanted to he could move very quickly, and before the young woman had gotten around to saying, "Well, I will if *you* will," Mr. Johnson was several blocks away and had already stopped twice, once to help a lady lift several large packages into a taxi, and once to hand a peanut to a sea gull. By this time he was in an area of large stores and many more people, and he was buffeted constantly from either side by people hurrying and cross and late and sullen. Once he offered a peanut to a man who asked him for a dime, and once he offered a peanut to a bus driver who had stopped his bus at an intersection and had opened the window next to his seat and put out his head as though longing for fresh air and the comparative quiet of the traffic. The man wanting a dime took the peanut because Mr. Johnson had wrapped a dollar bill around it, but the bus driver took the peanut and asked ironically, "You want a transfer, Jack?"

On a busy corner Mr. Johnson encountered two young people — for one minute he thought they might be Mildred Kent and Arthur Adams — who were eagerly scanning a newspaper, their backs pressed against a storefront to avoid the people passing, their heads bent together. Mr. Johnson, whose curiosity was insatiable, leaned onto the storefront next to them and peeked over the man’s shoulder; they were scanning the Apartments Vacant columns.

Mr. Johnson remembered the street where the woman and her little boy were going to Vermont and he tapped the man on the shoulder and said amiably, “Try down on West Seventeen. About the middle of the block, people moved out this morning.”

“Say, what do you—” said the man, and then, seeing Mr. Johnson clearly, “Well, thanks. Where did you say?”

“West Seventeen,” said Mr. Johnson. “About the middle of the block.” He smiled again and said, “Good luck.”

“Thanks,” said the man.

“Thanks,” said the girl as they moved off.

“Goodbye,” said Mr. Johnson.

He lunched alone in a pleasant restaurant, where the food was rich, and only Mr. Johnson’s excellent digestion could encompass two of their whipped-cream-and-chocolate-and-rum-cake pastries for dessert. He had three cups of coffee, tipped the waiter largely, and went out into the street again into the wonderful sunlight, his shoes still comfortable and fresh on his feet. Outside he found a beggar staring into the windows of the restaurant he had left and, carefully looking through the money in his pocket, Mr. Johnson approached the beggar and pressed some coins and a couple of bills into his hand. “It’s the price of the veal cutlet lunch plus tip,” said Mr. Johnson. “Goodbye.”

After his lunch he rested; he walked into the nearest park and fed peanuts to the pigeons. It was late afternoon by the time he was ready to start back downtown, and he had refereed two checker games, and watched a small boy and girl whose mother had fallen asleep and awakened with surprise and fear that turned to amusement when she saw Mr. Johnson. He had given away almost all of his candy, and had fed all the rest of his peanuts to the pigeons, and it was time to go home. Although the late afternoon sun was pleasant, and his shoes were still entirely comfortable, he decided to take a taxi downtown.

He had a difficult time catching a taxi, because he gave up the first three or four empty ones to people who seemed to need them more; finally, however, he stood alone on the corner and — almost like netting a frisky fish — he hailed desperately until he succeeded in catching a cab that had been proceeding with haste uptown, and seemed to draw in toward Mr. Johnson against its own will.

“Mister,” the cabdriver said as Mr. Johnson climbed in, “I figured you was an omen, like. I wasn’t going to pick you up at all.”

“Kind of you,” said Mr. Johnson ambiguously.

“If I’d of let you go it would of cost me ten bucks,” said the driver.

“Really?” said Mr. Johnson.

“Yeah,” said the driver. “Guy just got out of the cab, he turned around and give me ten bucks, said take this and bet it in a hurry on a horse named Vulcan, right away.”

“Vulcan?” said Mr. Johnson, horrified. “A fire sign on a Wednesday?”

“What?” said the driver. “Anyway, I said to myself, if I got no fare between here and there I’d bet the ten, but if anyone looked like they needed a cab I’d take it as an omen and I’d take the ten home to the wife.”

“You were very right,” said Mr. Johnson heartily. “This is Wednesday, you would have lost your money. Monday, yes, or even Saturday. But never never never a fire sign on a Wednesday. Sunday would have been good, now.”

“Vulcan don’t run on Sunday,” said the driver.

“You wait till another day,” said Mr. Johnson. “Down this street, please, driver. I’ll get off on the next corner.”

“He *told* me Vulcan, though,” said the driver.

“I’ll tell you,” said Mr. Johnson, hesitating with the door of the cab half open. “You take that ten dollars and I’ll give you another ten dollars to go with it, and you go right ahead and bet that money on any Thursday on any horse that has a name indicating… let me see, Thursday… well, grain. Or any growing food.”

“Grain?” said the driver. “You mean a horse named, like, Wheat or something?”

“Certainly,” said Mr. Johnson. “Or, as a matter of fact, to make it even easier, any horse whose name includes the letters C, R, L. Perfectly simple.”

“Tall Corn?” said the driver, a light in his eye. “You mean a horse named, like, Tall Corn?”

“Absolutely,” said Mr. Johnson. “Here’s your money.”

“Tall Corn,” said the driver. “Thank *you*, mister.”

“Goodbye,” said Mr. Johnson.

He was on his own corner, and went straight up to his apartment. He let himself in and called, “Hello?” and Mrs. Johnson answered from the kitchen, “Hello, dear, aren’t you early?”

“Took a taxi home,” Mr. Johnson said. “I remembered the cheesecake, too. What’s for dinner?”

Mrs. Johnson came out of the kitchen and kissed him; she was a comfortable woman, and smiling as Mr. Johnson smiled. “Hard day?” she asked.

“Not very,” said Mr. Johnson, hanging his coat in the closet. “How about you?”

"So-so," she said. She stood in the kitchen doorway while he settled into his easy chair and took off his good shoes and took out the paper he had bought that morning. "Here and there," she said.

"I didn't do so badly," Mr. Johnson said. "Couple young people."

"Fine," she said. "I had a little nap this afternoon, took it easy most of the day. Went into a department store this morning and accused the woman next to me of shoplifting, and had the store detective pick her up. Sent three dogs to the pound — *you* know, the usual thing. Oh, and listen," she added, remembering.

"What?" asked Mr. Johnson.

"Well," she said, "I got onto a bus and asked the driver for a transfer, and when he helped someone else first I said that he was impertinent, and quarreled with him. And then I said why wasn't he in the army, and I said it loud enough for everyone to hear, and I took his number and I turned in a complaint. Probably got him fired."

"Fine," said Mr. Johnson. "But you do look tired. Want to change over tomorrow?"

"I *would* like to," she said. "I could do with a change."

"Right," said Mr. Johnson. "What's for dinner?"

"Veal cutlet."

"Had it for lunch," said Mr. Johnson.

THE MISSING GIRL

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SHE WAS HUMMING, TUNELESSLY, moving around somewhere in the room stirring things gently, and always humming. Betsy tightened her shoulders over the desk and bent her head emphatically over her book, hoping that her appearance of concentration would somehow communicate a desire for silence, but the humming went on. Debating a dramatic gesture, a wild throwing of the book to the floor, a shout of annoyance, Betsy thought as she had so often before, but you *can't* be cross with her, you just *can't*, and she bent farther over her book.

"Betsy?"

"Um?" Betsy, still trying to look as though she were studying, realized that she could have described every movement in the room until now.

"Listen, I'm going out."

"Where? At this time of night?"

"I'm going out anyway. I've got something to do."

"Go ahead," Betsy said; just because one could not be cross, one need not necessarily be interested.

"See you later."

The door slammed and Betsy, with relief and a feeling of freshness, went back to her book.

It was not, as a matter of fact, until the next night that anyone asked Betsy where her roommate had gone. Even then it was casual, and hardly provoked Betsy to thought: "You all alone tonight?" someone asked. "She out?"

"Haven't seen her all day," Betsy said.

The day after that, Betsy began to wonder a little, mostly because the other bed in the room had still not been slept in. The monstrous thought of going to the Camp Mother occurred to her ("Did you *hear* about Betsy? Went tearing off to old Auntie Jane to say her roommate was missing, and here all the time the poor girl was…") and she spoke to several other people, wondering and curious, phrasing it each time as a sort of casual question; no one, it turned out, had seen her roommate since the Monday night when she had told Betsy, "See you later," and left.

"You think I ought to go tell Old Jane?" Betsy asked someone on the third day.

"Well…" consideringly. "You know, it might mean trouble for *you* if she's really missing."

The Camp Mother, comfortable and tolerant and humorous, old enough to be the mother of any of the counselors, wise enough to give the strong impression of experience, listened carefully and asked, "And you say she's been gone since Monday night? And here it is Thursday?"

"I didn't know what to do," Betsy explained candidly; "she could have gone home, or…"

"Or…?" said the Camp Mother.

"She said she had something to do," Betsy said.

Old Jane pulled her phone over and asked, "What was her name again? Albert?"

"Alexander. Martha Alexander."

"Get me the home of Martha Alexander," Old Jane said into her phone, and from the room beyond, in the handsomely paneled building that served as the camp office and, at the other end, as kitchen, dining room, and general recreation room, Old Jane and Betsy could hear the voice of Miss

Mills, Old Jane's assistant, saying irritably, "Alexander, Alexander," as she turned pages and opened filing drawers. "Jane?" she called out suddenly, "Martha Alexander from…?"

"New York," Betsy said. "I *think*"

"New York," Old Jane said into her phone.

"Righto," Miss Mills said from the other room.

"Missing since Monday," Old Jane reminded herself, consulting the notes she had made on her desk pad. "Said she had something to do. Picture?"

"I don't think so," Betsy said uncertainly. "I may have a snapshot somewhere."

"Year?"

"Woodsprite, I *think*," Betsy said. "I'm a woodsprite, I mean, and they usually put woodsprites in with woodsprites and goblins in with goblins and senior huntsmen in with—" She stopped as the phone on Old Jane's desk rang and Old Jane picked it up and said briskly, "Hello? Is this Mrs. Alexander? This is Miss Nicholas calling from the Phillips Education Camp for Girls Twelve to Sixteen. Yes, that's right…. Fine, Mrs. Alexander, and how are *you?*… Glad to hear it. Mrs. Alexander, I'm calling to check on your daughter…. Your *daughter*, Martha…. Yes, that's right, Martha." She raised her eyebrows at Betsy and continued. "We're checking to make sure that she's come home or that you know where she is… yes, where she is. She left the camp very suddenly last Monday night and neglected to sign out at the main desk and of course our responsibility for our girls requires that even if she has only gone home we must—" She stopped, and her eyes focused, suddenly, on the far wall. "She is not?" Old Jane asked. "Do you know where she is, then?… How about friends?… Is there anyone who might know?"

The camp nurse, whose name was Hilda Scarlett and who was known as Will, had no record of Martha Alexander in the camp infirmary. She sat on the other side of Old Jane's desk, twisting her hands nervously and insisting that the only girls in the infirmary at that moment were a goblin with poison oak and a woodsprite with hysterics. "I suppose you *know*," she told Betsy, her voice rising, "that if you had come to one of us the *minute* she *left*…"

"But I didn't *know*" Betsy said helplessly. "I didn't know she was gone."

"I am afraid," said Old Jane ponderously, turning to regard Betsy with the air of one on whom an unnecessary and unkind burden has been thrust, "I am very much afraid that we must notify the police."

It was the first time the chief of police, a kindly family man whose name was Hook, had ever been required to visit a girls' camp; his daughters had not gone in much for that sort of thing, and Mrs. Hook distrusted night air; it was also the first time that Chief Hook had ever been required to determine facts. He had been allowed to continue in office this long because his family was popular in town and the young men at the local bar liked him, and because his record for twenty years, of drunks locked up and petty thieves apprehended upon confession, had been immaculate. In a small town such as the one lying close to the Phillips Education Camp for Girls Twelve to Sixteen, crime is apt to take its form from the characters of the inhabitants, and a stolen dog or broken nose is about the maximum to be achieved ordinarily in the sensational line. No one doubted Chief Hook's complete inability to cope with the disappearance of a girl from the camp.

"You say she was going somewhere?" he asked Betsy, having put out his cigar in deference to the camp nurse, and visibly afraid that his questions would sound foolish to Old Jane; since Chief Hook was accustomed to speaking around his cigar, his voice without it was malformed, almost quavering.

“She said she had something to do,” Betsy told him.

“How did she say it? As though she meant it? Or do you think she was lying?”

“She just *said* it,” said Betsy, who had reached that point of stubbornness most thirteen-year-old girls have, when it seems that adult obscurity has passed beyond necessity. “I *told* you eight times.”

Chief Hook blinked and cleared his throat. “She sound happy?” he asked.

“Very happy,” said Betsy. “She was singing all evening while I was trying to write in my Nature Book, is how I remember.”

“Singing?” said Chief Hook; it was not possible to him that a girl upon the very edge of disappearance had anything to sing about.

“Singing?” said Old Jane.

“Singing?” said Will Scarlett. “You never told *us.”*

“Just sort of humming,” Betsy said.

“What tune?” said Chief Hook.

“Just *humming,”* Betsy said. “I *told* you already, just *humming*. I nearly went crazy with my Nature Book.”

“Any idea where she was going?”

“No.”

An idea came to Chief Hook. “What was she interested in?” he asked suddenly. “You know, like sports, or boys, or anything.”

“There are no boys at the Phillips Educational Camp for Girls,” Old Jane said stiffly.

“She could have been *interested* in boys, though,” Chief Hook said. “Or — like, well, books? Reading, you know? Or baseball, maybe?”

“We have not been able to find her Activity Chart,” the camp nurse said. “Betsy, what recreational activity group was she in?”

“Golly.” Betsy thought deeply, and said, “Dramatics? I think she went to Dramatics.”

“Which nature study group? Little John? Eeyore?”

“Little John,” said Betsy uncertainly. “I *think*. I’m pretty sure she was in Dramatics because I think I remember her talking about *Six Who Pass While the Lentils Boil.”*

“That would be Dramatics,” Old Jane said. “Surely.”

Chief Hook, who had begun to feel that this was all unnecessarily confusing, said, “What about this singing?”

“There’s singing in *Six Who Pass While the Lentils Boil,”* Will Scarlett said.

“How about boys?” said Chief Hook.

Betsy thought again, remembering as well as she could the sleeping figure in the other bed, the soiled laundry on the floor, the open suitcase, the tin boxes of cookies, the towels, the face cloths, the soap, the pencils… “She had her own clock,” Betsy volunteered.

“How long have you roomed together?” Old Jane asked, and her voice was faintly sardonic, as though in deference to Chief Hook she were forced to restrain the saltier half of her remark.

“Last year and this year,” Betsy said. “I mean, we both put in for rooms at the same time and so they put us together again. I mean, most of my friends are senior huntsmen and of course I can’t room with them because they only put senior huntsmen with—”

“We know.” Old Jane was beginning to sound shrill. “Any mail?”

“I don’t know about that,” Betsy said. “I was always reading my own mail.”

“What was she wearing?” Chief Hook asked.

"I don't know," Betsy said. "I didn't turn around when she left." She looked from Chief Hook to Will Scarlett to Old Jane with a trace of impatience. "I was doing my *Nature* Book."

A search of the room, from which Betsy abstained and which was carried on with enthusiasm by Old Jane and Will Scarlett and with some embarrassment by Chief Hook, showed that after Betsy's possessions had been subtracted from the medley, what was left was astonishingly little. There was a typed script of *Six Who Pass While the Lentils Boil*, and a poorly done painting of Echo Lake, which was part of the camp. There was a notebook, labeled, like Betsy's, "Nature Book," but it was unused, lacking the pressed wildflowers and blue jay feathers; there was a copy of *Gulliver's Travels* from the camp library, which Old Jane felt might be significant. No one was able to tell certainly what she had been wearing, because the clothes in the closet were mostly Betsy's, and jackets or overshoes left in the room by Betsy's friends. In the drawers of the second dresser were a few scraps of underwear, a pair of heavy socks, and a red sweater which Betsy was fairly sure belonged to a woodsprite on the other side of camp.

A careful checkup of Recreational Activity lists showed that while she was listed for dramatics and nature study and swimming, her attendance at any of them was dubious; most of the counselors kept slipshod attendance records, and none of them could remember whether any such girl could have come on any given day.

"I'm almost sure I remember *her*, though," Little John, an ardent girl of twenty-seven who wore horn-rimmed glasses and tossed her hair back from her face with a pretty gesture that somehow indicated that winters she wore it decently pinned up, told Chief Hook. "I have an awfully good memory for faces, and I think I remember her as one of Rabbit’s friends and relations. Yes, I’m sure I remember her, I have a good memory for faces.”

“Ah,” said the librarian, who was called Miss Mills when she was secretary to Old Jane, and the Snark when she was in the library, “one girl is much like another, at *this* age. Their unformed minds, their unformed bodies, their little mistakes; we, too, were young once, Captain Hook.”

“Hell,” said the muscular young woman who was known as Tarzan because she taught swimming, “did you ever look at fifty girls all in white bathing caps?”

“Elm?” said the nature study counselor, whose name was Bluebird. “I mean, wasn’t she an elm girl? Did a nice paper on blight? Or was it the other girl, Michaels? Anyway, whichever one it might have *been*, it was a nice job. Out of the ordinary for *us*, you know; remember it particularly. Hadn’t noticed either of the girls to speak of — but if she’s really gone, she might be up on Smoky Trail looking for fern; want the girls to make a special topic of fern and mushroom.” She stopped and blinked, presumably taking in a new supply of chlorophyll. “Fern,” she said. “Pays to know plenty about fern.”

“Few of them have any talent, anyway,” the painting counselor said. “In any of the progressive schools *this* sort of thing—” She gestured tiredly at the canvases propped up against tree stumps or stacked upon a rock, and moved her shoulders nervously under her brand-new blue and yellow checked shirt. “Interested *psychologically*, of course,” she added quickly. “If I remember this girl, she did sort of vague stuff, almost *unwilling*. Rejection, almost — if I can find a picture you’ll see right away what I mean.” She poked unenthusiastically among the canvases stacked on the rock, pulled her hand back and said, “Why did I ever—” wiping wet paint off on her blue jeans. “Funny,” she said, “I could have taken an oath she had a canvas around here somewhere. Sort of vague stuff, though — no sense of design, no eye."

"Did she *ever,"* Chief Hook asked Betsy, "ever ever *ever* mention anyplace she might want to go? Some foreign country, maybe?"

Old Jane's voice had an odd tone. "The parents are arriving tomorrow."

Chief Hook rubbed his forehead nervously. "Lost a hunter last fall on Bad Mountain," he suggested.

It was decided to search Bad Mountain, and then, unexpectedly, a house-to-house canvass along the road leading to Bad Mountain uncovered an honest clue. A housewife, glancing out her window to see if her husband was coming home from a poker game, had seen, she thought, the figure of a girl moving along the road, lighted occasionally by the headlights of passing cars.

"I couldn't *swear* it was a girl, though," the housewife persisted nervously. "That is, nights when Jim is out playing, I go to bed, and this night I was only up on account we had fried clams for supper, and I like clams but they don't—"

"What was she wearing?" Chief Hook demanded.

The woman thought. "Well," she said finally, "the reason I figured she was one of those girls from the camp was she was wearing pants. But then, it could have been a man, you see, or a boy. Only somehow I sort of figured it was a girl."

"Did she have on a coat? Hat?"

"A coat, I think," the woman said, "leastways, one of those short jackets. She was going up the road toward Jones Pass."

Jones Pass led to Bad Mountain. It was not possible to get a picture of the girl; the picture on her camp application blank was so blurred that it resembled a hundred other girls in the camp; it was assumed, however, from the picture, that she had dark hair. A man was discovered who had given a ride to a girl hitchhiking on the road to Jones Pass; she had dark hair and was wearing blue jeans and a short tan leather jacket.

"I don't think she was a *camp* girl, though," the man added earnestly, "not the way she talked, she wasn't any girl from Phillips Camp, not *her,"* he said, and looked at Chief Hook, "Bill, you remember that youngest girl over to Ben Hart's?"

Chief Hook sighed. "You see anyone else driving down the road?" he asked. The man shook his head emphatically.

One of the junior counselors at the camp, who went by the name of Piglet, had been driving home late from town that night and at one point in the road near Jones Pass had had the clear impression of someone ducking behind a tree into the shadows. She was unable to say whether or not it had been a girl, or even whether it had been a person, but Chief Hook questioned her remorselessly.

"Can you face this girl's parents and honestly tell them you never lifted a finger to save her?" he demanded of Piglet. "That innocent girl?"

Will Scarlett had shut herself into the infirmary and refused to let go of the phenobarbital; it was announced that she could not be disturbed. The press agent for the camp was taking all calls and managing the general search. Newspaper reporters were encouraged, but the seventeen-year-old son of the owner of the local paper was given first chance at all new developments; it occurred to this young man to ensure that a search be made over Bad Mountain by helicopter, and the camp went to tremendous expense to import one, although its six-day tour of the mountains showed nothing, and the son of the newspaper owner subsequently informed his father that he preferred having a plane to inheriting the paper, which went to a distant cousin. It was said that the girl had turned up in a town seventy-five miles away, dead drunk and trying to get a job in a shoe store, but the proprietor of the shoe store was unable to identify her picture, and it was later proven that the girl in question was actually the daughter of the mayor of that town. The widowed mother of the missing girl was prostrate with grief and under the care of a physician, but her uncle arrived at the camp and took personal charge of the search. The girls from the camp, led by the counselor in nature study and the senior huntsmen, had already gone over the mountain, looking for bent twigs and rock signs, but without success, although they had the assistance of chosen boy and girl scouts from the town. It was afterward told that Old Jane, indefatigable in leather puttees and a striped bandana and known to be extraordinarily susceptible to cold, had fallen down dead drunk in front of Chief Hook and had had to be carried home on a stretcher hastily improvised by the boy scouts, leading many people to believe that the girl's body had been found.

In the town it was generally believed that the girl had been killed and *"You* know," and her body buried in a shallow grave somewhere east of Jones Pass, where the woods were deepest and ran downhill and for miles along the edge of Muddy River; knowing folk in town who had hunted the pass and Bad Mountain were quoted as saying that it would be mighty easy for anyone to miss a body in them woods; go ten feet off the path and you're lost, and the mud that deep already; it was generally conceded in the town that the girl had been followed in the darkness by a counselor from the camp, preferably one of the quiet ones, until she was out of sight or sound of help. The townspeople remembered their grandfathers had known of people disposed of in just that way, and no one had ever heard about it, either.

In the camp it was generally believed that one of the low bloods around the town — and try to match them for general vulgarity and insolence, and the generations of inbreeding that had led to idiocy in half the families and just plain filth in the rest — had enticed the girl off into an assignation on the mountain, and there outraged and murdered her and buried her body. The camp people believed that it was possible to dispose of a body by covering it with lime — heaven knew these country farmhands had enough lime in a barn to dispose of a dozen bodies — and that by the time the search started there wasn't enough left of the body to find. The camp people further believed that it was no more than you might expect of a retarded village in an isolated corner of the world, and they thought you might go far before you met up with a lower and a stupider group of clods; they pointed with triumph to the unusual lack of success of the Camp Talent Show early in the summer, to which the townspeople had been invited.

On the eleventh day of the search, Chief Hook, who perceived clearly that he might very well lose his job, sat down quietly for a conference with the girl's uncle, Old Jane, and Will Scarlett, who had emerged from the infirmary on the ninth day, to announce that she had for a long time been renowned as a minor necromancer and seer, and would gladly volunteer her services in any possible psychic way.

"I think," said Chief Hook despondently, "that we might as well give it up. The boy scouts quit a week ago, and today the girl scouts went."

The girl's uncle nodded. He had gained weight on Mrs. Hook's cooking and he had taken to keeping his belt as loose as Chief Hook's. "We haven't made any progress, certainly," he said.

"I told you to look under the fourth covered bridge from the blasted oak," said Will Scarlett sullenly. "I *told* you."

"Miss Scarlett, *we* couldn't find no blasted oak," Chief Hook said, "and we looked and looked — No oaks in this part of the country at all," he told the girl's uncle.

"Well, I told you to keep looking," said the seer. "I told you also look on the left-hand side of the road to Exeter."

"We looked there, too," Chief Hook said. "Nothing."

"You know," said the girl's uncle, as though it were a complete statement. He passed his hand tiredly across his forehead and looked long and soberly at Chief Hook, and then long and soberly at Old Jane, who sat quietly at her desk with papers in her hands. "You know," he said again. Then, addressing himself to Old Jane and speaking rapidly, he went on. "My sister wrote to me today, and she's very upset. Naturally," he added, and looked around at Old Jane, at Will Scarlett, at Chief Hook, all of whom nodded appreciatively, "but listen," he went on, "what she says is that of course she loves Martha and all that, and of course *no* one would want to say anything about a girl like this that's missing, and probably had something horrible done to her…" He looked around again, and again everyone nodded. "But she says," he went on, "that in spite of all that… well… she's pretty sure, what I mean, that she decided against Phillips Educational Camp for Girls. What I *mean*" he said, looking around again, "she has three girls and a boy, my sister, and of course we both feel *terribly* sorry and of course we'll still keep in our end of the reward and all that, but what I *mean* is…" He brushed his hand across his forehead again. "… What I mean is this. The oldest girl, that's Helen, she's married and out in San Francisco, so that's *her*. And — I'll show you my sister's letter — the second girl, that's Jane, well, *she's* married and *she* lives in Texas somewhere, has a little boy about two years old. And then the third girl — well, *that's* Mabel, and she's right at home with her mother, around the house and whatnot. Well — you see what I mean?"

No one nodded this time, and the girl's uncle went on nervously. "The boy, *he's* in Denver, and his name is—"

“Never mind,” said Chief Hook. He rose wearily and reached into his pocket for a cigar. “Nearly suppertime,” he said to no one in particular.

Old Jane nodded and shuffled the papers in her hand. “I have all the records here,” she said. “Although a girl named Martha Alexander applied for admission to the Phillips Educational Camp for Girls Twelve to Sixteen, her application was put into the file marked ‘possibly undesirable’ and there is no record of her ever having come to the camp. Although her name has been entered upon various class lists, she is not noted as having participated personally in any activity; she has not, so far as we know, used any of her dining room tickets or her privileges with regard to laundry and bus services, not to mention country dancing. She has not used the golf course nor the tennis courts, nor has she taken out any riding horses. She has never, to our knowledge, and our records are fairly complete, sir, attended any local church—”

“She hasn’t taken advantage of the infirmary,” said Will Scarlett, “or psychiatric services.”

“You see?” said the girl’s uncle to Chief Hook.

“Nor,” finished Old Jane quietly, “nor has she been vaccinated or tested for any vitamin deficiency whatsoever.”

A body that might have been Martha Alexander’s was found, of course, something over a year later, in the late fall when the first light snow was drifting down. The body had been stuffed away among some thorn bushes, which none of the searchers had cared to tackle, until two small boys looking for a cowboy hideout had wormed their way through the thorns. It was impossible to say, of course, how the girl had been killed — at least Chief Hook, who still had his job, found it impossible to say — but it was ascertained that she had been wearing a black corduroy skirt, a reversible raincoat, and a blue scarf.

She was buried quietly in the local cemetery; Betsy, a senior huntsman the past summer but rooming alone, stood for a moment by the grave, but was unable to recognize any aspect of the clothes or the body. Old Jane attended the funeral, as befitted the head of the camp, and she and Betsy stood alone in the cemetery by the grave. Although she did not cry over her lost girl, Old Jane touched her eyes occasionally with a plain white handkerchief, since she had come up from New York particularly for the services.

THE OMEN

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IT WOULD BE PUSHING truth too far to say that Grandma Williams was the finest person in the world to live with. As her daughter said sometimes, but only after the greatest professions of loyalty, “She’s just the *sweetest* old lady in the world, of course, but sometimes she’s *very* trying.” And her son-in-law, whose patience was immense, and whose courtesy was unfailing, had been heard to say with an affectionate smile to his wife, “Granny seems to be aging rapidly these days.” Even her grandchildren, of whom there were two, sometimes found themselves exasperated by her, and would say in such cases, “Oh, *Granny*,” or *“Gosh,”* in the tone of voice used by children when words fail them.

Ordinarily, however, everyone loved Grandma Williams almost as much as she loved them, and they ate the custards she prepared so tenderly, and bore with the small surprises she invented for them, and gave her warm scarves and gloves for Christmas, and homemade valentines on Valentine’s Day, and gardenias on Mother’s Day, and took her out to dinner and the theater on her birthday, and saw that her glasses were found when she lost them, and brought her home books from the lending library, and remembered to kiss her good night, and to be polite to the two or three old friends who still remained to her, and who came sometimes to call. And when Granny announced brightly at breakfast one morning that today she was going shopping, no one criticized her, or even smiled.

“Isn’t it something I can do for you, dear?” her daughter asked, looking into the coffeepot. “I may go into town today, and I’d be glad to do any errands you want.”

“Happy to get you anything myself,” said her son-in-law. “Easy to stop off somewhere on my way home.”

Granny shook her head vehemently. “This is important shopping,” she said. “I have to do it myself.”

“Can I go with you?” asked her younger grandchild, who was eight years old, and who was named Ellen and was commonly supposed to resemble Granny as a girl.

“Indeed you may not,” Granny said. “This is a surprise.”

If a slight sigh went around the breakfast table, Granny did not notice. “A surprise for everyone,” she said. “You remember yesterday?”

Everyone remembered yesterday; yesterday had been an event. Yesterday Granny had received in the morning mail a check for thirteen dollars and seventy-four cents, with a covering letter saying that the sender had owed it to Granny’s husband for nearly fifty years, and so was paying it now to his widow, with interest. Granny’s son-in-law had figured out the interest for her, and it was quite proper. Granny, today, was rich. “A surprise for everyone,” she repeated happily, “with my new money.”

Her daughter opened her mouth to protest, and then stopped. Nothing that Granny could possibly buy with thirteen dollars and seventy-four cents would give her more pleasure than surprises for everybody. “I think that’s *wonderful*” her daughter said finally, eyeing her family around the table.

“Very kind of you,” said Granny’s son-in-law.

“I want—” began Ellen.

“Dear,” said her mother, “this is to be a surprise.”

“But I want to *know*” said Granny. “Robert, will you get me a pencil and paper?” Her older grandchild, who was ten, departed and returned in haste, partly because he had been carefully taught to treat his granny courteously, and partly because surprises did not come every day.

"Now," said Granny, her pencil poised over the paper. "Margaret?"

"You mean what do I want?" said her daughter. She thought. "I don't really know," she said slowly. "A handkerchief, perhaps? Or a box of candy?"

"If I were to get you a bottle of perfume," said Granny with great cunning, "what kind would you most like?"

Her daughter considered again. "Well," she said, "I usually wear a kind called Carnation."

"Carnation" Granny said. She wrote on her paper. Then she looked inquiringly at her son-in-law. "John," she said. "What for you?"

He frowned soberly. "Let me see," he said. "I suppose what I most need is a few good cigars. El Signo, I generally smoke."

"Cigars," Granny said complacently. "A very good thing in a man. Your grandfather used to say that cigarettes were for women and children. What kind, again?"

"El Signo," said her son-in-law.

"I can't possibly write such an outlandish name," said Granny. "What is it in English?"

"The sign," he told her, not looking at his wife.

"The sign" Granny said as she wrote. "You see," she explained, "I can always ask the man what it means, in cigars."

"Now me?" said Ellen.

"Now you, Granddaughter."

"A doll's house with real glass in the windows," said Ellen immediately, "and a bride doll, and a live kitty and—"

"Not a live kitty," said her mother hastily.

“A stuffed kitty?” said Ellen, wide-eyed. “A blue stuffed kitty?”

“Splendid,” said Granny. *“Blue cat,”* she wrote. “Robert?” she said.

“Roller skates,” said Robert. “Walkie-talkie.”

“What?” said Granny.

“Walkie-talkie,” said Robert. “It’s a sort of telephone, like.”

Granny stared at her son-in-law, who smiled and shrugged. *“Telephone,”* Granny said, and wrote it down. Then she leaned back and looked farsightedly at her list. *“Carnation,”* she read. *“The sign. Blue cat. Telephone.”* She smiled around the table at the family. “Now me,” she said. “I want a ring.”

“A ring?” said her daughter. “Granny, you *have* rings. You have your diamond ring, and the little one set with a cameo, and Dad’s silver seal ring, and—”

“Not any of those,” said Granny, shaking her head vigorously. “I saw a little ring I wanted, in the five and ten the other day. It cost twenty-nine cents, and it was silver-plated and it had on it two hearts set together. I *liked* that ring.”

Her daughter and son-in-law exchanged glances. “If you’ll wait till your birthday,” said her daughter, “perhaps you might have the same ring in real silver; if it’s something you like, we could easily have it made.”

“I want this one,” said Granny. She rose from the table, picked up her list, and put it carefully into her pocket. “Now,” she said. “Now I am going shopping.”

She departed for her room to get her coat and hat, and her daughter said anxiously to her son-in-law, “Do you think it’s all right? I could insist on going along.”

“She’s getting so much pleasure out of it,” said the son-in-law, “it would be a real shame to spoil it. And of course she’ll be all right.”

“Everyone’s always glad to help an old lady, anyway,” said the daughter. “If she gets into any difficulty, that is.”

Granny, stylish in her neat black coat and a small rakish hat trimmed with violets, set out at precisely ten o’clock, an hour after her son-in-law had gone off to his office, and an hour and ten minutes after her grandchildren had climbed noisily into the school bus. Her daughter stood in the doorway and waved to her as she went down the street; Granny had insisted upon traveling into town on the bus, instead of taking a taxi, and her daughter stood in the doorway until she saw Granny reach the corner, signal competently to the bus driver with her umbrella, and climb aboard, helped, as she always was, somehow, by the driver and two friendly passengers. People would be taking care of Granny like that all day, her daughter thought, and, with an admiring smile, she turned back inside to finish the breakfast dishes. I’ll just dress later, she thought, and run into town myself. I might meet her somewhere and bring her home.

Granny sat proudly in the bus, perfectly aware of the attention she was attracting. Her son-in-law had kindly cashed her check, and Granny had thirteen dollars and seventy-four cents in her pocketbook. Her list, she thought, was safely tucked into her pocket, but, as a matter of fact, it had slipped out, and lay unnoticed on the seat when Granny alighted in the center of town, assisted by the bus driver, a kind gentleman, and two schoolgirls.

Not everyone had had such a pleasant two days as Granny had. Miss Edith Webster, for instance, had put in forty-eight hours (and this the first week of her vacation!) of unpleasant and fruitless argument. Edith loved her mother quite as much as Granny’s daughter loved Granny, but Edith’s mother was perhaps a shade more selfish than Granny — Granny, as Edith would have pointed out if she had known about it, had at least allowed her daughter to get married. Edith's mother was explicit upon this point.

"If you marry this Jerry fellow," she told Edith — as she had gone on telling Edith, over and over, for three years— "you will be leaving your poor old mother all alone, not that I think you *cares* about me — no, by now I know better than to think my only daughter *cares* about what happens to her poor old mother — but you'd always have it on your conscience, I hope, that you left your poor old mother to starve."

"You wouldn't starve," Edith had pointed out over and over for three years, although by now the words had no meaning, from being said so often. "Aunt Martha has been wanting you to come and live with her for a long time, and Jerry and I could always give you enough money to get along."

"Aunt Martha? What would I want to live with Aunt Martha for? You certainly couldn't have much respect for my *comfort* if you tried to make me go and live with Aunt *Martha*."

On the morning that Granny set out so blithely, Edith had finally said with more anger than she had ever shown her mother before, "I have every right in the world to get married and have a family of my own, and it's not fair for you to try and stop me."

"You're my daughter," her mother retorted, "and you owe me all your education and all the care and love I've given you all these years. And I'm not going to let you throw yourself away on some good-for-nothing, and leave your poor old mother to starve."

At that point Edith snatched up her hat and fled from the house, leaving her mother still talking, dwelling lovingly upon the symptoms of starvation, and how Edith might possibly remember to show up at her deathbed — not, however, to be forgiven.

Walking down the street, Edith, who was actually an agreeable and pleasant girl, and who did not enjoy quarreling, told herself firmly that a decision must be reached, and immediately. Her mother did not show any signs of ever changing her mind, and, no matter how hard she tried to ignore it, there was the telling fact that Jerry, who had waited patiently for three years, was beginning to remark restlessly that all his friends were married, that a man expected to settle down before he was thirty, that he personally thought that Edith's mother would never give in, and that *he* thought the thing to do was up and get married, and let the old lady give her consent afterward. Edith thought he was right, *if* she tried to be impartial about it, but still the courage required to defy her mother was more than she could muster.

Going down the street (and she was at this time approximately two miles from Granny Williams, who was just then marching boldly down her own street on her way to a different bus), Edith, in her neat dark blue coat and red hat (as opposed to Granny, who was wearing a black coat and a hat with violets), sighed deeply, and thought: If I only had an idea of what to do; if only somebody, something, somehow, would show me the way, make up my mind for me, give me an omen.

All of which is, of course, a most dangerous way of thinking.

Edith, on her own bus, reached the center of town almost the same time Granny did, and, by an odd coincidence, Edith even passed Granny on the street without noticing her; nor did Granny notice Edith. Perhaps, indeed, Edith thought swiftly: *look at the nice old lady in the hat with flowers;* perhaps the thought passed through Granny's mind: *look at the pretty girl with the sad frown*. These things happen daily, among the thousands of people who pass one another in crowds. At any rate, Edith, whose ultimate destination was the home of a girl friend on the other side of town (someone to whom Edith could pour out her troubles, and who would give her sympathy, if no kind of help), got on the wrong bus. She was worried, and thinking about something else, and there were a lot of people waiting at the bus stop, and Edith did not look up in time to see the sign on the front of the bus, and a man in the crowd near her said loudly, “It’s the Long Avenue bus,” which was the one Edith wanted, so Edith got on, and paid her fare, and sat down in the first seat she came to, which was the seat vacated by Granny not long ago, and on the seat, Granny’s list was waiting to be an omen to Edith. Edith picked it up and put it into her pocket, thinking it was something she herself had dropped, such as a transfer or a scrap of envelope with an address on it; she did not even look at it as she put it into her pocket.

Edith was not the sort of person who, realizing suddenly that she is on the wrong bus, immediately stands up and screams and reproaches the driver for taking her in the wrong direction, and insists upon being put off on a strange street corner at once. She was annoyed at herself for her mistake, but was not inclined to think that the bus company had deceived her. It was not vitally important, after all, for her to reach her girl friend’s house before lunch: she was in a strange section of town, and she knew she could easily get out of the bus, have her lunch in the first restaurant she came to, and then proceed in a leisurely manner. So, at the first stop, she got down from the bus and stood while it roared away, regarding her surroundings.

Now, at this point began a series of events that might easily have been a dream of Edith’s except for its conclusion. For, as Edith stood on the corner, she realized first that she was in a part of town she had never seen before, and second, that there was no landmark in sight, not even a sign saying RESTAURANT or COFFEE SHOPPE or EAT or DINER or

LUNCHEONETTE or FOUNTAIN; in other words, no place where a girl alone could ask for information about where she was without looking foolish. Then, with that enjoyable feeling of anonymity that comes when you are a little lost, with plenty of money in your pocket, and the secret feeling that you can always get home by calling for a taxi, Edith thought that for a little while anyway she had escaped the problem of her mother and Jerry, for the simple reason that neither of them could at present find her to remind her of it. The next thing that happened was her shocking discovery that she did not have any money after all. The change purse she had slipped into her pocket contained, instead of several one-dollar bills and a five — which she now recalled having spent for the hat she was wearing on her head at the moment — only four nickels and approximately seven pennies. Thus was Edith marooned.

It seemed wise, at first, to retire to a secluded spot and wonder what to do. A bus back to the center of town? Then where was the bus stop? Edith craned her neck, but could not find a familiar sign. She fumbled in her pockets, and at that moment found Granny's list. Staring at it uncomprehendingly, thinking for a minute that it was a stray dollar bill in her pocket, Edith read: *"Carnation. The sign. Blue cat. Telephone. Ring"*

"What on earth?" said Edith out loud, and a child passing stopped, stared at her, and then said, "Huh?"

"Nothing," Edith said quickly. "Just an omen."

The child stared further, and went off, looking back at her.

Edith was intelligent enough to know that when she asked for an omen and got it, the least she could do was obey it. Reading it again — she stopped, this time, to admire the queer, old-fashioned handwriting, so much like a voice from a sweet and simple past — it occurred to her that since her omen told her *"carnation"* a carnation was obviously indicated. Smiling at herself, although not with so much amusement as she might have felt if this omen had not arrived exactly on schedule, she started down the street, in the general direction of the center of town, looking for a carnation. At this time she made her first discovery about omens: that their requirements are usually much more difficult than they seem to be; fewer carnations were in evidence than one might have expected in early summer. For instance, a florist shop seemed a possible place to look, although it did seem rather like cheating, until Edith, scrutinizing carefully the window display of a mangy-looking shop that advertised itself as a FLORIST SHOP, found that there were no carnations. Roses, yes. Lilies, violets, ferns, horrid-looking daisies. But not carnations. Puzzled, Edith went on. There were paper flowers in the window of a funeral parlor, and they might as well have been carnations as anything else, but Edith thought that perhaps paper flowers were not allowed, particularly since a funeral parlor seemed no place for a self-respecting omen to lead her. Then, as she had begun to despair, and had gone about four blocks, someone said, "Pardon me, but are you Miss Murrain?"

Edith turned; the words were addressed to her. Her mind did not take in the sense of them for a minute, because the man speaking to her was wearing a white carnation in his buttonhole. Edith realized that the omen had said not *"carnations"* but *"carnation,"* and she said, "I'm sorry?"

"Are you Miss Murrain?" the man asked again very politely.

"No, I'm afraid not," said Edith.

"Are you sure?" said the man.

"Yes," said Edith.

"Are *you positive?*" said the man.

Edith stared. "I am not the lady you are looking for," she said as firmly as she could. (Am I? she wondered suddenly.) "I'm sorry," she added when she saw that the man was troubled.

“I wish you were,” he said, and sighed.

“Don’t you know the lady?” Edith asked.

He laughed. “Come and see,” he said. He took her politely by the arm and led her farther down the block to where a group of people were standing around a store window. The store was a grocery, and this was apparently its grand opening day, for bright-colored flags draped the doorway, and signs saying FREE SODA FOR THE LADIES stood upon the sidewalk. The crowd of people standing before the store window separated as Edith and her guide came up to the window.

“See?” said Edith’s guide, and Edith’s mind registered *“sign,”* the second word on her omen.

FIND MISS MURRAIN, the sign entreated, FIND HER, FIND HER, FIND HER. And, in smaller letters: SOMEWHERE IN THIS NEIGHBORHOOD TODAY, MURRAIN BROTHERS, FINE GROCERIES AND DELICATESSEN GOODS, HAVE A LADY FRIEND WHO IS WALKING ALONE, WAITING FOR SOMEONE TO COME UP TO HER AND SAY: “ARE YOU MISS MURRAIN?” IF YOU ASK HER THIS, SHE WILL ANSWER.: “MURRAIN BROTHERS ARE THE FINEST GROCERS IN TOWN.” IF YOU FIND MISS MURRAIN AND BRING HER TO THIS STORE — MURRAIN BROTHERS, FINE GROCERIES AND DELICATESSEN GOODS — WE WILL GIVE YOU ONE HUNDRED DOLLARS IN TRADE. SPECIAL GRAND OPENING OFFER, TODAY ONLY. And, at the bottom of the sign, in very small letters, were the words: SPECIAL HINT: MISS MURRAIN IS WEARING A HAT THE COLOR OF THE BAGS IN WHICH MURRAIN BROTHERS PACK THEIR SPECIAL COFFEE.

“Red,” said her guide when he saw Edith lean forward to read the small letters on the bottom of the sign, “it means red, they pack their special coffee in red bags.”

“I see,” said Edith, who was of course wearing a red hat. She turned and smiled at her guide. “I wish I could help you,” she said.

“So do I,” he said. They made their way out of the crowd again and stood on the sidewalk. “I could use a hundred dollars’ worth of groceries.”

“If I see Miss Murrain, I’ll try to catch her for you,” Edith said.

“Catch her for yourself,” he said seriously. “They mean it about the groceries.” Abruptly he looked at his watch. “Good Lord,” he said, “I’m late.”

“By the way,” Edith said as he turned to go, “if you don’t mind my asking you, why are you wearing the carnation?”

“That?” he said, looking down. “Oh, *that*. Oh, I’m getting married in ten minutes.” He was gone, hurrying madly off down the street.

“Congratulations,” Edith said weakly after him. Bewildered, she stood for a minute. *“Sign,”* she told herself, *“carnation, sign, sign, carnation, carnation, sign, sign, car*—” Realizing that she was beginning to babble, she tightened her lips and reached into her pocket for the slip of paper.

“Carnation,” it said. “The sign. Blue cat.”

“Blue cat?” Edith frowned. “Blue cat? *Blue* cat? Blue *cat?”* She was babbling again. She set her shoulders firmly and stepped positively out toward what she guessed was the nearest traffic artery to the center of town.

“Excuse me, are you Miss Murrain?”

She turned; it was a lady, and Edith was sorry for a minute that she was *not* Miss Murrain — the lady so obviously thought she had collared her hundred dollars’ worth of groceries, and she looked, moreover, as though a hundred dollars’ worth of groceries would not come at all amiss.

“I’m sorry,” Edith said. “I wish I were,” she said.

“You were wearing the hat, is why I asked,” the woman said. She smiled politely, and walked on.

If I go home now, Edith was thinking, Mother will be after me again about Jerry. If I go on wandering, sooner or later I will have to go back and then the whole problem will —

“Are you Miss Murrain?”

“Sorry, I’m not.”

“Just thought I’d ask.”

Or else, Edith thought, if I went back and told her once and for all —

“You Miss Murrain?”

“Sorry.”

“You sure?”

“Positive.”

“O.K.”

Probably the best way would be to put off deciding for a while yet, and maybe somehow —

“It’s Miss Murrain! Are you Miss Murrain, hey?”

“No, I’m sor—”

“It’s Miss Murrain — hey, I caught her, it’s Miss Murrain!”

Looking around, Edith saw with dismay that she was surrounded by a crowd of people. They were mostly women, housewives out doing their morning marketing, several pushing baby carriages, and there were a few men; all of them — men, women, children — were staring at her, and at the stout, red-faced woman who had her by the arm.

“I got her, I got her!”

“Look,” Edith said quietly to the red-faced woman, “I’m terribly sorry, but I’m *not* Miss Murrain. People have been asking me the same—”

“Hundred bucks’ worth of groceries, golly!”

Edith, trying to pull away, found that the red-faced woman had hold of her much as she would have held a rebellious child. “Please,” Edith said urgently, “believe me—”

“George — Maggie — Earl — I got her, look, it’s me caught her, the girl with the groceries!”

“Let *mego,”* Edith said, and pulled harder. “Listen,” she said to the crowd, making her voice as reasonable as she could, “if I were this Miss Murrain, I would have *had* to say so, wouldn’t I? Because I’m *really* not.”

“She’s trying to get away, Missus,” one of the men observed impartially. “If she goes, your groceries go with her.”

“Look,” said the red-faced woman to Edith, shaking her. “You’re not going to get those groceries away from *me*, you understand?”

“But I can’t *get* you any—” Common sense came back to Edith, and she relaxed and said reasonably, “Why don’t you take me along to the grocery? *They* can tell you I’m the wrong person.”

“Take her to the grocery.” The crowd took up the words; they began to move along down the block, and the red-faced woman marched in advance, almost dragging Edith, and shouting right and left, “I got her, I got her, I got the girl with the groceries.”

The grocery was some two blocks away; they had gone only a block or so when they were met by a pack of children coming shrieking away from the grocery.

“Miz Eaton got it,” they were howling, “Miz Eaton got all the groc’ries, Miz Eaton got the groc’ries, Miz Eaton found the girl with the red hat, Miz Eaton…”

The red-faced woman holding Edith stopped, stared, took one deep breath, and then turned to look at Edith, her face, if possible, redder than before.

"You mean to say," she began in a voice obviously restrained to make her imminent wrath the more terrible, *"you mean to say* you told me you were that girl and you *aren't?"* She let go of Edith to put her hands on her hips and in that moment Edith, all dignity lost, turned and ran.

She darted down a side street, thinking for a moment that the red-faced woman was after her, but in a minute, from the sound of voices going up the street she had left, she realized that the red-faced woman had gone on with her following to the grocery, probably to dispute the decision. Breathing fast, Edith slowed down to a walk and began to look out for a place where she could spend one of her nickels on a cup of coffee and a chance to catch her breath. Ahead, she saw a dingy sign that hung over the sidewalk: it read KITTY'S LUNCH. Gratefully she hurried to it and, as she stepped inside, saw that Kitty had, with odd humor, chosen to adorn the window of Kitty's Lunch with a large painted blue cat.

"Blue cat" said Edith to herself. "Kitty."

Not bothering to try to think anymore, she went inside. Kitty's Lunch was nothing more than a long counter with sugar bowls and catsup bottles set at intervals along it, and Kitty herself — presumably — enthroned in vast state on a folding chair at one end of the counter. Edith sat at one of the counter stools and Kitty roused herself much as though Edith had been a mouse, and moved slowly down the counter to serve her, although it did not actually seem possible for there to be enough space behind the counter for Kitty to pass.

"Coffee," said Edith as Kitty almost reached her. "Black coffee, please."

Kitty nodded, and looked Edith up and down.

Edith tried to smile. "If you think I'm that Miss Murrain, I'm not," she said. "They've already found her."

“I’m mighty glad they did,” Kitty said. “What is mismurrain?”

“Never mind,” said Edith gratefully. “Do you know anything about omens?”

“Omens,” said Kitty. “Mismurrain. No.”

“Good,” said Edith. “If you *did* find an omen, would you follow it?”

“I wouldn’t follow a rainbow for a pot of gold,” Kitty said obscurely.

She went with dignity to fetch Edith’s coffee, which she set down before Edith with a queenly gesture.

By now, Edith thought, it had become inevitable. After Kitty had gone back to her chair at the end of the counter, Edith took the slip of paper out of her pocket and consulted it, although she already knew what it said. *“Telephone,”* she said softly to herself, and then more loudly to Kitty, “Telephone?”

Kitty did not look up from her comic book, but gestured with a large thumb at the wall telephone at the end of the counter. It was not in a booth, it was not even remotely private from Kitty or from anyone else who might happen to come in, but the omen had been explicit so far, and Edith, two more of her precious nickels in her hand, hurried down to the end of the counter.

She dialed the number from memory, and waited interminably until they answered.

“Gambel’s Garage.”

“Is Jerry there?” said Edith timidly.

“Wait and I’ll see.” The voice echoed, far away. “Jerry? Jerrrrry? Lady onna phone.”

After another deadly wait, during which Edith could hear her nickels washing away, he said, “Hello?”

“Jerry?” she said. “This is Edith.”

“Edith?” His voice sounded surprised. “Is something wrong?”

“Jerry,” she said weakly. “I’m sorry about keeping you waiting. I mean, I know what to do now. I mean, I guess if you want me to I’ll marry you.”

“Yeah?” She thought hopefully that he sounded rather more pleased than not. “Good,” he said, and then she realized that he had known all the time that someday she would call him like this and tell him.

“Can you come and meet me?” she asked.

“I’m off for lunch in ten minutes. Where?”

“I’m in a blue cat,” she said. “I mean, what does it matter! I mean — Just a minute. Where am I?” she turned to ask Kitty. Kitty lifted her face and gave Edith one long look.

“Corner of Flower Street and East Avenue,” she said. “How long’d it take you to make up your mind?”

“Three years,” said Edith. “Corner of Flower Street and East Avenue,” she said to Jerry.

“Right,” he said. “About twenty minutes, then. Who’s going to take care of your mother?”

“She’ll have to take care of herself,” Edith said. “I need someone to take care of *me*”

“I’ll go along with *that*,” said Kitty from the background.

“Right,” Jerry said.

“And, Jerry,” Edith said. “Listen, will you bring — I mean — the omen says — I mean, do you have — can you get—”

“What?” said Jerry.

“What?” said Kitty.

“A ring,” said Edith helplessly.

“I’ve already got it,” Jerry said.

“What’d he say?” inquired Kitty with interest.

“He says he’s got it,” Edith told her.

“What?” Jerry said.

“Smart man,” Kitty said.

“Goodbye,” Edith said to Jerry, and listened, smiling, to his answer. Then she hung up, made a face at Kitty, and said, “I’m not going to tell you.”

Kitty grinned. “Three years to make up your mind,” she said. “You must be crazy.”

Granny Williams arrived home in style by taxi just as dinner was ready to be served, and just as her daughter had announced for the third time that she was going to call the police right *now*, and just as her son-in-law had said for the twentieth time to give Granny a chance, she had been taking care of herself for eighty-seven years and could hardly get into trouble now.

“Well,” said Granny as her son-in-law and both grandchildren ran forward to take her packages, “what a day *I’ve* had.” She smiled happily at everyone and added, “No surprises, now, till we all sit down.”

“Are you all *right?*” said her daughter. “I was so worried.”

Granny stared. “Of course I’m all right,” she said. “Did you think I was arrested or something?”

When everyone was sitting in comparative quiet at the dinner table with dessert dishes (both grandchildren, in their excitement, had almost refused chocolate pudding) cleared away, and coffee cups set out, Granny leaned back in her chair and said with relish, “Now.” She waved at her grandchildren and added, “You get my packages, but be *careful.”*

Hastily the grandchildren gathered the packages, not at all carefully, and brought them to Granny’s lap. “Now,” she said, drawing out the suspense as long as possible. “Are we all ready?” The grandchildren signified hysterically that they were all ready. Cautiously Granny lifted one package, turned it over and over, and set it down on the table. Her grandchildren, nearly expiring with curiosity, cried at once, “For me? Granny, for me?” Granny shook her head. “You just wait,” she said. Finally she selected another package, poked it experimentally, and then formally handed it to her daughter. “For you,” she said.

No one breathed while her daughter opened the package, with all due care for folding the wrappings, winding pieces of string, drawing out the operation. Finally, incredibly, a box appeared.

“Candy,” said her daughter. “Granny, how *nice* of you!” She showed the box around appreciatively.

“Open it, open it,” shouted the grandchildren.

“After Granny is through, we will all have a piece.”

Next, the son-in-law opened his present. “A tie,” he said with great enthusiasm. “Look, everyone, a beautiful blue and red and orange and green tie!”

The younger grandchild, the little girl who was supposed to look like Granny as a child, received a set of dishes and set immediately to serving everyone a second portion of chocolate pudding upon them. The older grandchild received a cowboy gun.

“Gee, Granny,” he said. “Gee.”

“You see,” Granny explained, regarding her family lovingly, “I went and *lost* my *list*.”

“Too bad,” said her daughter, opening the candy box.

“A shame,” said her son-in-law, regarding his tie dubiously.

“And,” Granny went on, “I had to try to remember what you all wanted.”

“This is what I wanted,” said her older grandchild immediately. “Hands up,” he added to his father.

“And” Granny said to her daughter and son-in-law, “I met the most surprising young man. Right about lunchtime, when I was just going into a restaurant for a cup of tea, he rushed right past me, and nearly knocked me down. It was very rude of him, but he was in a great hurry." Granny stopped and laughed at the expressions on the faces of her daughter and her son-in-law. "He stopped and apologized to me," she went on, "and would you believe it? He said he was going to be married. He said," she continued, sighing romantically, "that after three years of courting his lady had finally consented."

"Amazing," said her son-in-law.

"Charming," said his wife.

"It was positively *sentimental*," said Granny happily.

THE VERY STRANGE HOUSE NEXT DOOR

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I DON'T GOSSIP. If there is anything in this world I loathe, it is gossip. A week or so ago in the store, Dora Powers started to tell me that nasty rumor about the Harris boy again, and I came right out and said to her if she repeated one more word of that story to me I wouldn't speak to her for the rest of my life, and I haven't. It's been a week, and not one word have I said to Dora Powers, and that's what I think of gossip. Tom Harris has always been too easy on that boy anyway; the young fellow needs a good whipping, and he'd stop all this ranting around, and I've said so to Tom Harris a hundred times or more.

If I didn't get so mad when I think about that house next door, I'd almost have to laugh, seeing people in town standing in the store and on corners and dropping their voices to talk about fairies and leprechauns, when every living one of them knows there isn't any such thing and never has been, and them just racking their brains to find new tales to tell. I don't hold with gossip, as I say, even if it's about leprechauns and fairies, and it's my held opinion that Jane Dollar is getting feeble in the mind. The Dollars weren't ever noted for keeping their senses right up to the end, anyway, and Jane's no older than her mother was when she sent a cake to the bake sale and forgot to put the eggs in it. Some said she did it on purpose to get even with the ladies for not asking her to take a booth, but most just said the old lady had lost track of things, and I dare say she could have looked out and seen fairies in her garden if it ever came into her mind. When the Dollars get that age, they'll tell anything, and that's right where Jane Dollar is now, give or take six months.

My name is Addie Spinner, and I live down on Main Street, the last house but one. There's just one house after mine, and then Main Street kind of runs off into the woods — Spinner's Thicket, they call the woods, on account of my grandfather building the first house in the village. Before the crazy people moved in, the house past mine belonged to the Bartons, but they moved away because he got a job in the city, and high time, too, after them living off her sister and her husband for upward of a year.

Well, after the Bartons finally moved out — owing everyone in town, if you want my guess — it wasn't long before the crazy people moved in, and I knew they were crazy right off when I saw that furniture. I already knew they were young folks, and probably not married long, because I saw them when they came to look at the house. Then when I saw the furniture go in I knew there was going to be trouble between me and her.

The moving van got to the house about eight in the morning. Of course, I always have my dishes done and my house swept up long before that, so I took my mending for the poor out on the side porch and really got caught up on a lot I'd been letting slide. It was a hot day, so I just fixed myself a salad for my lunch, and the side porch is a nice cool place to sit and eat on a hot day, so I never missed a thing going into that house.

First, there were the chairs, all modern, with no proper legs and seats, and I always say that a woman who buys herself that flyaway kind of furniture has no proper feeling for her house — for one thing, it's too easy to clean around those little thin legs; you can't get a floor well-swept without a lot of hard work. Then, she had a lot of low tables, and you can't fool me with them — when you see those little low tables, you can always tell there's going to be a lot of drinking liquor going on in that house; those little tables are made for people who give cocktail parties and need a lot of places to put glasses down. Hattie Martin, she has one of those low tables, and the way Martin drinks is a crime. Then, when I saw the barrels going in next door, I was sure. No one just married has that many dishes without a lot of cocktail glasses, and you can't tell me any different.

When I went down to the store later, after they were all moved in, I met Jane Dollar, and I told her about the drinking that was going to go on next door, and she said she wasn't a bit surprised, because the people had a maid. Not someone to come one day a week and do the heavy cleaning — a maid. Lived in the house and everything. I said I hadn't noticed any maid, and Jane said most things if I hadn't noticed them she wouldn't believe they existed in this world, but the Wests' maid was sure enough; she'd been in the store not ten minutes earlier buying a chicken. We didn't think she'd rightly have time enough to cook a chicken before suppertime, but then we decided that probably the chicken was for tomorrow, and tonight the Wests were planning on going over to the inn for dinner and the maid could fix herself an *egg* or something. Jane did say that one trouble with having a maid — Jane never had a maid in her life, and I wouldn't speak to her if she did — was that you never had anything left over. No matter what you planned, you had to get new meat every day.

I looked around for the maid on my way home. The quickest way to get to my house from the store is to take the path that cuts across the back garden of the house next door, and even though I don't use it generally — you don't meet neighbors to pass the time of day with, going along a back path — I thought I'd better be hurrying a little to fix my own supper, so I cut across the Wests' back garden. West, that was their name, and what the maid was called I don't know, because Jane hadn't been able to find out. It was a good thing I did take the path, because there was the maid, right out there in the garden, down on her hands and knees, digging.

"Good evening," I said just as polite as I could. "It's kind of damp to be down on the ground."

"I don't mind," she said. "I like things that grow."

I must say she was a pleasant-speaking woman, although too old, I'd think, for domestic work. The poor thing must have been in sad straits to hire out, and yet here she was just as jolly and round as an apple. I thought maybe she was an old aunt or something, and they took this way of keeping her, so I said, still very polite, "I see you just moved in today?"

"Yes," she said, not really telling me much.

"The family's name is West?"

"Yes."

"You might be Mrs. West's mother?"

"No."

"An aunt, possibly?"

"No."

"Not related at all?"

"No."

"You're just the maid?" I thought afterward that she might not like it mentioned, but once it was out I couldn't take it back.

"Yes." She answered pleasant enough, I will say that for her.

"The work is hard, I expect?"

"No."

"Just the two of them to care for?"

"Yes."

"I'd say you wouldn't like it much."

"It's not bad," she said. "I use magic a lot, of course."

“Magic?” I said. “Does that get your work done sooner?”

“Indeed it does,” she said with not so much as a smile or a wink. “You wouldn’t think, would you, that right now I’m down on my hands and knees making dinner for my family?”

“No,” I said. “I wouldn’t think that.”

“See?” she said. “Here’s our dinner.” And she showed me an acorn, I swear she did, with a mushroom and a scrap of grass in it.

“It hardly looks like enough to go around,” I said, kind of backing away.

She laughed at me, kneeling there on the ground with her acorn, and said, “If there’s any left over, I’ll bring you a dish; you’ll find it wonderfully filling.”

“But what about your chicken?” I said; I was well along the path away from her, and I did want to know why she got the chicken if she didn’t think they were going to eat it.

“Oh, that,” she said. “That’s for my cat.”

Well, who buys a whole chicken for a cat, that shouldn’t have chicken bones anyway? Like I told Jane over the phone as soon as I got home, Mr. Honeywell down at the store ought to refuse to sell it to her, or at least make her take something more fitting, like ground meat, even though neither of us believed for a minute that the cat was really going to get the chicken, or that she even had a cat, come to think of it; crazy people will say anything that comes into their heads.

I know for a fact that no one next door ate chicken that night, though; my kitchen window overlooks their dining room if I stand on a chair, and what they ate for dinner was something steaming in a big brown bowl. I had to laugh, thinking about that acorn, because that was just what the bowl looked like — a big acorn. Probably that was what put the notion in her head. And, sure enough, later she brought over a dish of it and left it on my back steps, me not wanting to open the door late at night with a crazy lady outside, and like I told Jane, I certainly wasn't going to eat any outlandish concoction made by a crazy lady. But I kind of stirred it around with the end of a spoon, and it smelled all right. It had mushrooms in it and beans, but I couldn't tell what else, and Jane and I decided that probably we were right the first time and the chicken was for tomorrow.

I had to promise Jane I'd try to get a look inside to see how they set out that fancy furniture, so next morning I brought back their bowl and marched right up to the front door — mostly around town we go in and out back doors but being as they were new and especially since I wasn't sure how you went about calling when people had a maid, I used the front — and gave a knock. I had gotten up early to make a batch of doughnuts, so I'd have something to put in the bowl when I took it back, so I knew that the people next door were up and about because I saw him leaving for work at seven-thirty. He must have worked in the city, to have to get off so early. Jane thinks he's in an office, because she saw him going toward the depot, and he wasn't running; people who work in offices don't have to get in on the dot, Jane said, although how she would know I couldn't tell you.

It was little Mrs. West who opened the door, and I must say she looked agreeable enough. I thought with the maid to bring her breakfast and all, she might still be lying in bed, the way they do, but she was all dressed in a pink housedress and was wide awake. She didn't ask me in right away, so I kind of moved a little toward the door, and then she stepped back and said wouldn't I come in, and I must say, funny as that furniture is, she had it fixed up nice, with green curtains on the windows. I couldn't tell from my house what the pattern was on those curtains, but once I was inside I could see it was a pattern of green leaves kind of woven in, and the rug, which of course I had seen when they brought it in, was green, too. Some of those big boxes that went in must have held books, because there were a lot of books all put away in bookcases, and before I had a chance to think I said, "My, you must have worked all night to get everything arranged so quick. I didn't see your lights on, though."

"Mallie did it," she said.

"Mallie being the maid?"

She kind of smiled, and then she said, "She's more like a godmother than a maid, really."

I do hate to seem curious, so I just said, "Mallie must keep herself pretty busy. Yesterday she was out digging your garden."

"Yes." It was hard to glean anything out of these people, with their short answers.

"I brought you some doughnuts," I said.

"Thank you." She put the bowl down on one of those little tables — Jane thinks they must hide the wine, because there wasn't a sight of any such thing that I could see — and then she said, "We'll offer them to the cat."

Well, I can tell you I didn't much care for that. "You must have quite a hungry cat," I said to her.

"Yes," she said. "I don't know what we'd do without him. He's Mallie's cat, of course."

"I haven't seen him," I said. If we were going to talk about cats, I figured I could hold my own, having had one cat or another for a matter of sixty years, although it hardly seemed a sensible subject for two ladies to chat over. Like I told Jane, there was a lot she ought to be wanting to know about the village and the people in it and who to go to for hardware and whatnot — I know for a fact I've put a dozen people off Tom Harris' hardware store since he charged me seventeen cents for a pound of nails — and I was just the person to set her straight on the town. But she was going on about the cat. “ — fond of children,” she was saying.

“I expect he’s company for Mallie,” I said.

“Well, he helps her, you know,” she said, and then I began to think maybe she was crazy, too.

“And how does the cat help Mallie?”

“With her magic.”

“I see,” I said, and I started to say goodbye fast, figuring to get home to the telephone, because people around the village certainly ought to be hearing about what was going on. But before I could get to the door, the maid came out of the kitchen and said good morning to me, real polite, and then the maid said to Mrs. West that she was putting together the curtains for the front bedroom, and would Mrs. West like to decide on the pattern? And while I just stood there with my jaw hanging, she held out a handful of cobwebs — and I never did see anyone before or since who was able to hold a cobweb pulled out neat, or anyone who would want to, for that matter — and she had a blue jay’s feather and a curl of blue ribbon, and she asked me how I liked her curtains.

Well, that did for me, and I got out of there and ran all the way to Jane’s house, and, of course, she never believed me. She walked me home just so she could get a look at the outside of the house, and I will be everlastingly shaken if they hadn’t gone and put up curtains in that front bedroom, soft white net with a design of blue that Jane said looked like a blue jay’s feather. Jane said they were the prettiest curtains she ever saw, but they gave me the shivers every time I looked at them.

It wasn’t two days after that I began finding things. Little things, and even some inside my own house. Once there was a basket of grapes on my back steps, and I swear those grapes were never grown around our village.

For one thing, they shone like they were covered with silver dust, and smelled like some foreign perfume. I threw them in the garbage, but I kept a little embroidered handkerchief I found on the table in my front hall, and I've got it still in my dresser drawer.

Once I found a colored thimble on the fence post, and once my cat, Samantha, that I've had for eleven years and more, came in wearing a little green collar and spat at me when I took it off. One day I found a leaf basket on my kitchen table filled with hazelnuts, and it made me downright shaking mad to think of someone's coming in and out of my house without so much as asking, and me never seeing them come or go.

Things like that never happened before the crazy people moved into the house next door, and I was telling Mrs. Acton so, down on the corner one morning, when young Mrs. O'Neil came by and told us that when she was in the store with her baby she met Mallie the maid. The baby was crying because he was having a time with his teething, and Mallie gave him a little green candy to bite on. We thought Mrs. O'Neil was crazy herself to let her baby have candy that came from that family, and said so, and I told them about the drinking that went on, and the furniture getting arranged in the dark, and the digging in the garden, and Mrs. Acton said she certainly hoped they weren't going to think that just because they had a garden they had any claim to be in the Garden Club.

Mrs. Acton is president of the Garden Club. Jane says I ought to be president, if things were done right, on account of having the oldest garden in town, but Mrs. Acton's husband is the doctor, and I don't know what people thought he might do to them when they were sick if Mrs. Acton didn't get to be president. Anyway, you'd think Mrs. Acton had some say about who got into the Garden Club and who didn't, but I had to admit that in this case we'd all vote with her, even though Mrs. O'Neil did tell us the next day that she didn’t think the people could be all crazy, because the baby’s tooth came through that night with no more trouble.

Do you know, all this time that maid came into the store every day, and every day she bought one chicken. Nothing else. Jane took to dropping in the store when she saw the maid going along, and she says the maid never bought but one chicken a day. Once Jane got her nerve up and said to the maid that they must be fond of chicken, and the maid looked straight at her and told her right to her face that they were vegetarians.

“All but the cat, I suppose,” Jane said, being pretty nervy when she gets her nerve up.

“Yes,” the maid said, “all but the cat.”

We finally decided that he must bring food home from the city, although why Mr. Honeywell’s store wasn’t good enough for them, I couldn’t tell you. After the baby’s tooth was better, Tom O’Neil took them over a batch of fresh-picked sweet corn, and they must have liked that, because they sent the baby a furry blue blanket that was so soft that young Mrs. O’Neil said the baby never needed another, winter or summer, and after being so sickly, that baby began to grow and got so healthy, you wouldn’t know it was the same one, even though the O’Neils never should have accepted presents from strangers, not knowing whether the wool might be clean or not.

Then I found out they were dancing next door. Night after night after night, dancing. Sometimes I’d lie there awake until ten, eleven o’clock, listening to that heathen music and wishing I could get up the nerve to go over and give them a piece of my mind. It wasn’t so much the noise keeping me from sleeping — I will say the music was soft and kind of like a lullaby — but people haven’t got any right to live like that. Folks should go to bed at a sensible hour and get up at a sensible hour and spend their days doing good deeds and housework. A wife ought to cook dinner for her husband —

and not out of cans from the city, either — and she ought to run over next door sometimes with a home-baked cake to pass the time of day and keep up with the news. And most of all a wife ought to go to the store herself, where she can meet her neighbors, and not just send the maid.

* * *

Every morning I'd go out and find fairy rings on the grass, and anyone around here will tell you that means an early winter, and here next door they hadn't even thought to get in coal. I watched every day for Adams and his truck, because I knew for a fact that cellar was empty of coal; all I had to do was lean down a little when I was in my garden and I could see right into the cellar, just as swept and clear as though they planned to treat their guests in there. Jane thought they were the kind who went off on a trip somewhere in the winter, shirking responsibilities for facing the snow with their neighbors. The cellar was all you could see, though. They had those green curtains pulled so tight against the windows that even right up close there wasn't a chink to look through from outside, and them inside dancing away. I do wish I could have nerved myself to go right up to that front door and knock some night.

Now, Mary Corn thought I ought to. "You got a right, Addie," she told me one day in the store. "You got every right in the world to make them quiet down at night. You're the nearest neighbor they got, and it's the right thing to do. Tell them they're making a name for themselves around the village."

Well, I couldn't nerve myself, and that's the gracious truth. Every now and then I'd see little Mrs. West walking in the garden, or Mallie the maid coming out of the woods with a basket — gathering acorns, never a doubt of it — but I never so much as nodded my head at them. Down at the store I had to tell Mary Corn that I couldn't do it. "They're foreigners, that's why," I said. "Foreigners of some kind. They don't rightly seem to understand what a person says — it's like they're always answering some other question you didn't ask."

"If they're foreigners," Dora Powers put in, being at the store to pick up some sugar to frost a cake, "it stands to reason there's something wrong to bring them here."

"Well, I won't call on foreigners," Mary said.

"You can't treat them the same as you'd treat regular people," I said. "I went inside the house, remember, although not, as you might say, to pay a call."

So then I had to tell them all over again about the furniture and the drinking — and it stands to reason that anyone who dances all night is going to be drinking, too — and my good doughnuts from my grandmother's recipe going to the cat. And Dora, she thought they were up to no good in the village. Mary said she didn't know anyone who was going to call, not being sure they were proper, and then we had to stop talking because in came Mallie the maid for her chicken.

You would have thought I was the chairman of a committee or something, the way Dora and Mary kept nudging me and winking that I should go over and speak to her, but I wasn't going to make a fool of myself twice, I can tell you. Finally Dora saw there was no use pushing me, so she marched over and stood there until the maid turned around and said, "Good morning."

Dora came right out and said, "There's a lot of people around this village, miss, would like to know a few things."

"I imagine so," the maid said.

"We'd like to know what you're doing in our village," Dora said.

“We thought it would be a nice place to live,” the maid said. You could see that Dora was caught up short on that, because who picks a place to live because it’s nice? People live in our village because they were born here; they don’t just come.

I guess Dora knew we were all waiting for her, because she took a big breath and asked, “And how long do you plan on staying?”

“Oh,” the maid said. “I don’t think we’ll stay very long, after all.”

“Even if they don’t stay,” Mary said later, “they can do a lot of harm while they’re here, setting a bad example for our young folk. Just for instance, I heard that the Harris boy got picked up again by the state police for driving without a license.”

“Tom Harris is too gentle on that boy,” I said. “A boy like that needs whipping and not people living in a house right in town showing him how to drink and dance all night.”

Jane came in right then, and she had heard that all the children in town had taken to dropping by the house next door to bring dandelions and berries from the woods — and from their own fathers’ gardens, too, I’ll be bound — and the children were telling around that the cat next door could talk. They said he told them stories.

Well, that just about did for me, you can imagine. Children have too much freedom nowadays, anyway, without getting nonsense like that into their heads. We asked Annie Lee when she came into the store, and she thought somebody ought to call the police, so it could all be stopped before somebody got hurt. She said, suppose one of those kids got a step too far inside that house — how did we know he’d ever get out again? Well, it wasn’t too pleasant a thought, I can tell you, but trust Annie Lee to be always looking on the black side. I don’t have much dealing with the children as a rule, once they learn they better keep away from my apple trees and my melons, and I can’t say I know one from the next, except for the Martin boy I had to call the police on once for stealing a piece of tin from my front yard, but I can’t say I relished the notion that that cat had his eyes on them. It’s not natural, somehow.

And don’t you know it was the very next day that they stole the littlest Acton boy? Not quite three years old, and Mrs. Acton so busy with her Garden Club she let him run along into the woods with his sister, and first thing anyone knew they got him. Jane phoned and told me. She heard from Dora, who had been right in the store when the Acton girl came running in to find her mother and tell her the baby had wandered away in the woods, and Mallie the maid had been digging around not ten feet from where they saw him last. Jane said Mrs. Acton and Dora and Mary Corn and half a dozen others were heading right over to the house next door, and I better get outside fast before I missed something, and if she got there late to let her know everything that happened. I barely got out my own front door, when down the street they came, maybe ten or twelve mothers, marching along so mad they never had time to be scared.

“Come on, Addie,” Dora said to me. “They’ve finally done it this time.”

I knew Jane would never forgive me if I hung back, so out I went and up the front walk to the house next door. Mrs. Acton was ready to go right up and knock, because she was so mad, but before she had a chance the door opened and there was Mrs. West and the little boy, smiling all over as if nothing had happened.

“Mallie found him in the woods,” Mrs. West said, and Mrs. Acton grabbed the boy away from her; you could tell they had been frightening him by the way he started to cry as soon as he got to his own mother. All he would say was “kitty,” and that put a chill down our backs, you can imagine.

Mrs. Acton was so mad she could hardly talk, but she did manage to say, “You keep away from my children, you hear me?” And Mrs. West looked surprised.

“Mallie found him in the woods,” she said. “We were going to bring him home.”

“We can guess how you were going to bring him home,” Dora shouted, and then Annie Lee piped up from well in the back, “Why don’t you get out of our town?”

“I guess we will,” Mrs. West said. “It’s not the way we thought it was going to be.”

That was nice, wasn’t it? Nothing riles me like people knocking this town, where my grandfather built the first house, and I just spoke up right then and there.

“Foreign ways!” I said. “You’re heathen, wicked people, with your dancing and your maid, and the sooner you leave this town, the better it’s going to be for you. Because I might as well tell you” — and I shook my finger right at her— “that certain people in this town aren’t going to put up with your fancy ways much longer, and you would be well advised — very well advised, I say — to pack up your furniture and your curtains and your maid and cat, and get out of our town before we put you out.”

Jane claims she doesn’t think I really said it, but all the others were there and can testify I did — all but Mrs. Acton, who never had a good word to say for anybody.

Anyway, right then we found out they had given the little boy something, trying to buy his affection, because Mrs. Acton pried it out of his hand, and he was crying all the time. When she held it out, it was hard to believe, but of course with them there’s nothing too low. It was a little gold-colored apple, all shiny and bright, and Mrs. Acton threw it right at the porch floor, as hard as she could, and that little toy shattered into dust. “We don’t want anything from you,” Mrs. Acton said, and as I told Jane afterward, it was terrible to see the look on Mrs. West’s face. For a minute she just stood there looking at us. Then she turned and went back inside and shut the door.

Someone wanted to throw rocks through the windows, but, as I told them, destroying private property is a crime and we might better leave violence to the menfolk, so Mrs. Acton took her little boy home, and I went in and called Jane. Poor Jane; the whole thing had gone off so fast, she hadn’t had time to get her corset on.

I hadn’t any more than gotten Jane on the phone, when I saw through the hall window that a moving van was right there next door, and the men were starting to carry out that fancy furniture. Jane wasn’t surprised when I told her over the phone. “Nobody can get moving that fast,” she said. “They were probably planning to slip out with that little boy.”

“Or maybe the maid did it with magic,” I said, and Jane laughed.

“Listen,” she said, “go and see what else is going on — I’ll hang on the phone.”

There wasn’t anything to see, even from my front porch, except the moving van and the furniture coming out; not a sign of Mrs. West or the maid.

“He hasn’t come home from the city yet,” Jane said. “I can see the street from here. They’ll have news for him tonight.”

That was how they left. I take a lot of the credit for myself, even though Jane tries to make me mad by saying Mrs. Acton did her share. By that night they were gone, bag and baggage, and Jane and I went over the house with a flashlight to see what damage they had left behind. There wasn’t a thing left in that house — not a chicken bone, not an acorn — except for one blue jay's wing upstairs, and that wasn't worth taking home. Jane put it in the incinerator when we came downstairs.

One more thing. My cat, Samantha, had kittens. That may not surprise you, but it sure as judgment surprised me and Samantha, her being over eleven years old and well past her kitten days, the old fool. But you would have laughed to see her dancing around like a young lady cat, just as light-footed and as pleased as if she thought she was doing something no cat ever did before; and those kittens troubled me.

Folks don't dare come right out and say anything to me about my kittens, of course, but they do keep on with that silly talk about fairies and leprechauns. And there's no denying that the kittens are bright yellow, with orange eyes, and much bigger than normal kittens have a right to be. Sometimes I see them all watching me when I go around the kitchen, and it gives me a cold finger down my back. Half the children in town are begging for those kittens— "fairy kittens," they're calling them — but there isn't a grown-up in town would take one.

Jane says there's something downright uncanny about those kittens, but then, I may never speak to her again in all my life. Jane would even gossip about cats, and gossip is one thing I simply cannot endure.

A GREAT VOICE STILLED

First published in Playboy, March 1960

THE HOSPITAL WAITING ROOM was an island of inefficiency in the long echoing and white-painted and silenced stretches of the hospital. In the waiting room there were ashtrays and crackling wicker furniture and uneven brown wooden benches and clearly unswept corners; the business of the hospital did not go on with the intruders waiting restlessly, and with every bed in every wing of the hospital filled, it was perfectly all right with the hospital administration to see the wicker chairs and wooden benches in the waiting room empty and wasting space. Katherine Ashton, who had not wanted to come anywhere near the hospital, who had wanted to stay at home in the apartment on this dark Sunday afternoon, who had wanted to cry a little in private and then dine later in some small unobtrusive restaurant — perhaps the one where they did sweetbreads so nicely — and linger over a melancholy brandy; Katherine Ashton came into the waiting room behind her husband, saying, “I wish we hadn’t come. I tell you I hate hospitals and death scenes and anyway how does anyone know he’s going to die today?”

“You’d always be sorry if you hadn’t come,” Martin said. When he saw that the waiting room was empty, he turned back and looked hopefully up and down the hospital hall. “You think we could go upstairs right now?”

“They won’t *possibly* let us upstairs. Not *possibly*.”

“We got here first,” Martin said reasonably. “As soon as they let anyone go upstairs, it ought to be us, because we certainly got here ahead of the rest.”

“I’m going to feel like a fool,” Katherine said. “Suppose he doesn’t die? Suppose no one else comes?”

“Look.” Martin stopped walking back and forth from the window to the door and came to stand in front of her, as though he were lecturing to one of his classes. “He’s *got* to die. Here Angelí is flying down from Boston. And practically the whole staff of *Dormant Review* up all night working on obituaries and remembrances, and his American publisher already getting together a *Festschrift*, and the wife flying in from Majorca if they weren’t able to stop her. And Weasel calling every major literary critic from here to California to get them here in time. You think the man would have the *gall* to live after that?”

“But when I tried to call the doctor—”

“In my business,” Martin said, “you’ve got to be in the right places at the right times. Like a salesman or something. Just by being here I get a chance to meet Angelí, for instance — how long could I go, otherwise, trying to get to meet Angelí? And if I swing it right *Dormant* could even—”

“Here’s Joan,” Katherine said. “She’s still crying.”

Martin moved swiftly to the doorway. “Joan, dear,” he said. “How *is* he?”

“Not… very well,” Joan said. “Hello, Katherine.”

“Hello, Joan,” Katherine said.

“I finally got hold of the doctor,” Joan said. “I called and called and finally *made* him talk to me. It sounds pretty… black.” She put her hand across her mouth as though she wanted to stop her lips from trembling.

“A matter of hours,” she said.

“My God,” Martin said.

“How awful,” Katherine said.

“Angell’s flying down from Boston, did you hear?” Joan sat tentatively on the edge of a bench. “Anybody upstairs with him?”

“They won’t let anyone go up,” Katherine said.

“Maybe they’re giving him a bath, or something. Or do they bother, if it’s only a matter of…”

“I don’t know,” Katherine said, and Joan sobbed.

“But it’s pretty certain to be today?” Martin asked with a kind of reluctant delicacy.

“You know how doctors talk.” Joan sobbed again. “They had to take me home this morning and give me a sedative, I was crying so. I haven’t had any sleep or anything to eat since yesterday, I was right here all the time until they took me home this morning and gave me a sedative.”

“Very touching,” said Martin. “Katherine and I thought it would look better if there weren’t so many people around, so we haven’t come until today.”

“John Weasel said he’d bring in some sandwiches and stuff later. I plan to stay right here, now, until the end.”

“So do we,” Martin said firmly.

“The Andersons are coming over, and probably those people he was visiting last weekend, they’re probably coming down from Connecticut. And — we all thought it was so sweet — the bar, you know, the one where he had the attack, well, they’re sending over flowers. We all thought it was so sweet.”

“It was nice of them,” Katherine said.

“I only hope Angelí gets here in time. Weasel’s got the Smiths and their car at the airport and he even called the police station to ask for a police escort, but of course you can’t ever make *them* understand. I’m still crying so I can’t stop. I haven’t stopped since yesterday.”

"Someone's coming," Martin said, and Joan sobbed. "Weasel," Martin said. "Weasel, dear old fellow. Any news?"

"I called the doctor. Katherine, hello. Joan, my dear, you shouldn't be here, you really *shouldn't*, you promised me you'd try and get some rest. Now I *am* cross with you."

"I'm sorry." Joan looked up tearfully. "I couldn't bear it, not being near him."

"What a *day* I've had." Weasel sighed and sat down on a bench and let his hands fall wearily. "The *police*, honestly! I told them and *told* them the light of the literary world was going *out* right here, and so could we *please* just get some kind of an escort to bring the country's foremost literary critic over from the airport to hear his last words and close his eyes and whatnot, but I swear, darling, it's exactly like talking to a pack of *prairie* dogs. Calling me 'sir' and asking me who I was, and" — he sat up and slapped his forehead violently— "the *wife*, great Bacchus, don't *ask* me about the wife! Cables to Majorca all day yesterday and phone calls to Washington and clearance on the plane and all those cousins of hers pulling strings just simply *everywhere* and she's arriving with absolutely *no* baggage!"

"You mean his wife *is* coming?" Joan stared, openmouthed.

"Darling, she'll be here practically any *minute;* I kept *pleading* with the woman, I swear I did, positively *entreating* her — no place to put her up, no one free to take care of her, we're *perfectly* capable of making all arrangements this end, and she literally would not listen to a word I said, I swear that that woman would not listen to a blessed word I said. I *knew* you'd be *furious*," he said to Joan.

Joan wailed. "Naturally we'd send her the *body."*

Martin was pacing back and forth again, from the door to the window. "When will they let us go upstairs?" he demanded irritably.

Joan looked at him, surprised. "You think *you're* going upstairs?"

"We were here first," Martin said.

"But you didn't even *know* him."

"Katherine knew him exactly as well as you did," Martin said flatly. "Besides, he had dinner with us Tuesday night."

"Katherine certainly did *not* know him as well as I did," Joan said.

"He did *not* have dinner with you," Weasel said. "Not *Tuesday*. Tuesday he—"

"I certainly did," Katherine said. "If you care for a public comparison—"

Joan opened her mouth to interrupt, then sobbed and turned as more people came into the waiting room. "That's Philips, from *Dormant,'"* Martin said in Katherine's ear. "The woman is Martha something-or-other; she writes those nasty reviews. I don't know the other man." He went forward, so that Weasel would have to introduce him, but more people came in, and he was suddenly involved in a group, talking in lowered voices, asking one another how long it would probably take, telling one another the names of people in the room. Through and around the quiet conversations went the soft half-moan that was Joan's crying.

Katherine, unable to leave the bench where she was sitting, turned and said to a strange man sitting next to her, "Someone told me once how you could train yourself to endure physical torture without yielding."

"Could it have been Neilson?" the man asked. "He did a nice piece on torture."

"You pretend it's happening to someone else," Katherine said. "You withdraw your own mind and you just leave your body behind."

"Did you know *him?"* the man asked, gesturing. "Upstairs?"

"Yes," Katherine said. "I knew him very well."

Somebody seemed to have brought a paper milk carton full of vodka, and somebody else went into the hospital hall and came back with a stack of paper cups. Martin pushed through the crowd to bring Katherine a paper cup with vodka in it, and said, “Angell’s here. He did make it. No one knows anything about the wife. The man in the blue suit by the door is Arthur B. Arthur, and the dark-haired girl next to him is that little kid he married.”

Near Katherine, Weasel was explaining to someone, “ — stopped off in the chapel to pray. He’s thinking of being converted, *anyway*, you know.”

The man next to Katherine leaned over and asked her, “Who’s doing the Memorial Fund?”

“Weasel, probably,” she said.

“Don’t *ask* me,” Weasel said beside her. “Simply don’t ask *me*. Any more dealings with that shrew of a wife, and I will positively be ready to die *myself*. I will simply *have* to get back to Bronxville for a long rest after all this; it’s been perfectly *frightful* ever since Friday morning; I haven’t been home since he had the attack, I came right down from Bronxville and I’ve had to stay in the Andersons’ place over on the West Side and it’s been just *awful”*

From the little group by the door, there was a little rustle of quick, hushed laughter.

“I want Angell to do the Memorial Fund, anyway,” Weasel said. “His name always looks so much *better* on a thing like that.”

Joan was crying loudly now, struggling in the arms of the tall man in the blue suit. “I want to go to him,” she was shouting. Vodka from her paper cup spilled onto the floor of the hospital hall.

“There’s a nurse,” someone said. “They’re not trying to offer her a *drink?*” someone else said. “Be *quiet*, everybody,” Weasel said, struggling to get through to the doorway.

"Is he dead?" the man next to Katherine asked her, "Did the nurse say he was dead?"

"About three minutes ago," someone else said. "About three minutes ago. He died."

"We missed *every* thing?" Weasel's voice rose despairingly. "Because this just *finishes* it, that's all. They promised to *call* us," he said wildly to the nurse. "That's just about the lowest *I've* ever seen."

"You wouldn't let me go to him," Joan said to the nurse; her voice was heartbroken. "You wouldn't let me go to him."

"We weren't even *there*," Weasel said. "This poor child…" He put an arm tenderly around Joan.

"Mrs. Jones was with him," the nurse said.

"What?" Weasel fell back dramatically. "They sneaked her in? No one let me know? She got here?"

"Can we go up now, anyway?" Martin asked.

"Mrs. Jones is with him," the nurse said. "Mrs. Jones will no doubt want to thank all of you at another time. Now…" she gestured, slightly but unmistakably; she was indicating the hall that led to the outside doors of the hospital.

"Well." Weasel tightened his lips. "How about the service?" he said. "I suppose Mrs. Jones wants to run *that*, too? She's never read a *word* of his work, *naturally*. I was planning to read the passage on death from his *Evil Man,"* he explained to Angelí, "you remember: it begins with that marvelous description of the flies? He used to recite it when he was drunk. Mrs. Jones will simply *have* to come down here," he said to the nurse. "How can we make any *arrangements?*"

“Mrs. Jones will no doubt be in touch with you,” the nurse said. She stood back a little, and this time her gesture was a shade more emphatic.

There was a minute of silent hesitation, and then Angell said, “Within the twilight chamber spreads apace the shadow of white Death, and at the door invisible Corruption waits.”

“A great voice has been stilled,” Weasel said reverently.

“My only, truest love,” Joan mourned.

“He writes now with a golden pen.”

“A great writer is a great man writing.”

“It was worth coming down for,” Martin said, coming over to take Katherine’s arm. “I talked to Angelí for a minute, and he said to call him tomorrow.” Impatient now, Martin led Katherine through the crowd to the doorway and out into the hall.

“Goodbye,” the nurse said.

Slowly, a little ahead of the others, who lingered, laughing a little now, gathering around Joan, listening to Weasel, Katherine and Martin went down the hospital hallway. “He might have a spot for me now in that lecture series,” Martin said. He gestured upward. “Now that *he’s* gone, I could do a talk on *his* work. His personal tragedy, maybe.”

“It was hot in there,” Katherine said.

Weasel caught up with them, and said quickly, “We’re all going on to Joan’s. I don’t think she should be alone right now. You two come along?”

“Thanks,” Martin said, “but Katherine’s pretty broken up, too. I’m going to take her directly home.”

Weasel glanced quickly at Katherine and said, “Terribly sad, the whole business, wasn’t it? I nearly *died* when I heard he was gone, and absolutely *no* one there who cared! I mean really *cared*.”

“We paid him what tribute we could,” Martin said.

“The responsibility of the intellectual,” Weasel said vaguely. “Come over to Joan’s later if you can make it?”

He pattered away, back down the hall to Joan and Martin, and Katherine came down the steps of the hospital into the unexpectedly dark afternoon.

“My only, truest love,” Katherine said.

“Hmm?” said Martin. “You ask me something?”

“No,” said Katherine, and laughed.

“Anyplace special you want to go for dinner?” Martin asked.

“Yes,” Katherine said. “That nice little place where they make sweetbreads, I was thinking about it earlier.”

ALL SHE SAID WAS YES

First published in Vogue, November 1962

WHAT CAN YOU DO? Howard and Dorrie are always telling me I’m too sensitive, and let myself get worked up about things, but really, even Howard had to admit that the Lansons’ accident just couldn’t have happened at a worse time. It sounds awful when you come right out and say it, but I’d always rather be frank and open than mealy-mouthed, and even though it was a dreadful thing to happen *anytime*, it really made *me furious* to have our trip to Maine ruined.

We’d lived next door to Don and Helen Lanson for sixteen years, since before our Dorrie and their Vicky were born, and of course, living next door and with the girls growing up together, we’d always been friendly enough, even though you don’t have to get along with people *all* the time, and frankly, some of the crowd the Lansons knew were a little too fancy for us. Besides, they were never secret about things and expected us to be the same, and it bothered me sometimes when I stopped to think that for sixteen years we hadn’t had a day’s privacy; I like friendly neighbors as well as the next one, but it was a little too much, sometimes. I used to tell Howard that Helen Lanson always knew what we were having for dinner, and of course it worked the other way around, too; whenever the Lansons had one of their fights we had to close the windows and go down to the cellar to keep from hearing, and even then Helen Lanson was sure to be over the next morning to cry on my shoulder. I hope the new neighbors are a little more — well — reticent.

Howard and I felt terrible when it happened, naturally. Howard went out with the State Police, and I offered to go over and tell Vicky. It wasn't the kind of thing I relished, you can imagine, but someone had to do it, and I'd known her since she was born. I was thankful that Dorrie was away at camp, because *she* would have been heartbroken, living next door to them all her life. When I went over to ring the doorbell that night I really couldn't think how the child was going to take it; I never did think much of parents going out and leaving a fifteen-year-old girl alone in the house — you read all the time about men breaking into houses where girls are alone — but I supposed Helen always figured Vicky was all right with us home next door; we certainly don't go out nearly every night like the Lansons did.

But then, Vicky was never much of a one for minding things, anyway; I know that she opened the door that night right away, without even asking who it was or making sure it wasn't some man; I never let Dorrie open the door at night unless she knows who is on the other side. Well, I might as well come right out with it — I don't *like* Vicky. Even that night, with all the trouble ahead for her, I couldn't make myself like her. I was terribly sorry for her, certainly, and at the same time all I could keep thinking was what I was going to do when she heard the news. She was so big and clumsy and ugly that I really couldn't face the thought of having to put my arms around her and comfort her — I hated the idea of patting her hand, or stroking her hair, and yet I was the only person to do it. All the way over from our house I had been wondering how I was going to say it, and then when she opened the door and just stood there looking at me — and never a "hello" or anything from her; she just wasn't the kind who offered things, if you know what I mean — I almost lost my courage. Finally I asked her if I could come in, because I had to talk to her, and she only opened the door wider and stood away, and I came in and she closed the door behind me and stood there waiting. Well, I know that house almost as well as I know my own, and so I walked into the living room and sat down and she came along after me and sat down, too, and looked at me.

Well, there was nothing like getting right to it, so I tried to say something gentle first; what I finally settled on was looking very serious and saying, "Vicky, you're going to have to be brave."

I must say she didn't help me much. She just sat there looking at me, and I suddenly thought that maybe all the unusual excitement, with Howard driving off in the middle of the night like that, and all the lights on in our house and my coming over the way I did, might have let on to her that something was wrong, and she might even have guessed already that it had to do with her parents, so the sooner she heard the truth, the better, I thought, and I said, "There's been an accident, Vicky. Corporal Atkins of the State Police phoned us a few minutes ago, because he knew you were alone here and he wanted someone to be with you." It wasn't much of a way to go about it, I know, but I would much rather have sat there talking all around the subject than tell her what I had to say next. I took a deep breath and said, "It's your mother and father, Vicky. There's been an accident."

Well, so far she hadn't said a word, not a single word since I came through the door, and now all she said was, "Yes."

I thought it must be shock, and I was glad that Howard had thought to call Doctor Hart before he left, to come and help me with Vicky, and I began to wonder how long it would be before the doctor came, because I'm simply no good with sick people, and would be sure to do the wrong thing. I was thinking about the doctor, and I said, "They always drove too fast—" and she said, "I know." I sat there waiting for her to cry, or whatever a girl like that does when she finds out her parents have been killed, and then I remembered that she didn’t know yet that they were killed, but only that they had been in an accident, so I took another deep breath and said, “They’re both—” I couldn’t say it, though, just couldn’t bring out the word. Finally I said, “Gone.”

“I know,” she said. So I needn’t have worried.

“We’re so sorry, Vicky,” I said, wondering if now was the time to go over and pat her head.

“Do you think they really believed they were going to die?” she asked me.

“Well, I guess no one ever really *believes*…”I started to say, but she wasn’t listening to me; she was looking down at her hands and shaking her head. “I told them, you know,” she said. “I told my mother a couple of months ago that it was going to happen, the accident and their dying, but she wouldn’t listen to me, no one ever does. She said it was an adolescent fantasy.”

Well, that was Helen Lanson for you, of course. *Adolescent fantasy* is the way she talked, and pretended she was being honest with the child. It wasn’t any of my business, of course, but I can tell you that Dorrie got spanked when she did something wrong, and none of this psychological jargon to make her think it was my fault, either. “I guess everybody told them,” I said to Vicky. “You can’t drive the way they did without asking for trouble. I spoke to Helen about it once myself—”

“That’s when I got over being sad,” she said, as though she thought she ought to excuse herself. “I told her, and she wouldn’t believe me. I even told her I’d have to go and live with Aunt Cynthia in London, England.” She smiled at me. “I’m going to like London, England; I’ll go to a big school there and study hard.”

Well, as far as I knew, Aunt Cynthia in London, England, hadn't even been notified yet, but if this child could sit there coolly not five minutes after hearing that her parents had been killed in an accident and make plans for her future — well, all I could say is that maybe some of Helen Lanson's psychology paid off, in a way she might not like so much, and I just hope that if ever anything happens to me, *my* daughter will have the grace to sit there and shed a tear. Although it's probably kinder to believe that Vicky was in shock.

"It's a terrible thing," I said, wondering how long before the doctor could make it.

"Aunt Cynthia will get here on Tuesday," she said to me. "The first plane will have to turn back because of engine trouble. I'm sorry about your trip to Maine."

I was touched. Here was this girl, after the most terrible disaster that can happen to a child, and she could spare a thought for our trip to Maine. It was certainly just the worst luck in the world for us, but you can't always expect a child to see things from a grown-up's point of view, and even if the news about her parents didn't bring a tear, I was pleased to see that the girl could still feel for somebody. "Try not to worry about it," I told her. Of course we just couldn't take off for Maine the morning after our next-door neighbors had been killed in an accident, but there was no point in Vicky's bothering about that, too. "Please don't be upset," I said.

"You won't be able to go later in the year because it will be too cold at the lodge. You'll have to go somewhere else, but please don't go on a boat. Please?"

"Of course not," I said; I didn't want the doctor to come in and find us talking about my worries, so I said, "You'll come over and stay with us until your aunt comes."

“In Dorrie’s room,” she said.

Well, I hadn’t really planned anything yet, but of course Dorrie’s room was the best place for her; you never know when you’re going to need the guest room for company, and Dorrie would be away at camp for the next two weeks. “We’ll pretend that you’re my little girl for a while,” I said, and wondered if it was the right thing to say — it certainly sounded silly enough — and then thought that after all, I had had as much of a shock as she had, and then I heard the doctor’s car outside and I confess it was a relief. I still don’t think it was natural for a child to sit there and listen to news like that and not even jump.

I left her with the doctor and went upstairs — as I say, I know that house as well as I know my own — and tried to find some things for her to bring over with her; I could come over in the morning and get anything she wanted, of course, so I just took a pair of clean pajamas out of the drawer and one of her good school dresses out of the closet; she was going to have to see a good many people in the next day or so and there was no harm in her looking as neat and clean as I could make her. I got her toothbrush out of the bathroom — and I’m no stickler for housework, but I’d be ashamed to keep a bathroom the way Helen Lanson did — and then I thought that maybe she had some kind of a toy dog or doll or something to comfort her; Dorrie may be fifteen years old, but she still has a little blue lion I gave her when she was small, and you can always tell when Dorrie’s upset about something because she takes her blue lion to bed with her. But in this girl’s room there was nothing. You would have been shocked. Books, of course, and a picture of her mother and father, and a set of paints and a game or so, but nothing… well, soft. I finally lifted her pillow and underneath it was a little notebook with a red cover, like a school notebook or something, and since it was under her pillow I thought it must be something she valued —

I've seen Dorrie's diary under her pillow, like that, and even though of course I've never looked inside it I know how excited she gets if she thinks someone's gotten to it. I thought maybe Vicky might want to keep this little book safe, so I folded it in with the nightgown and a pair of clean socks, and after thinking for a minute (after all, wouldn't I want someone to do the same for Dorrie?) I took the picture of her mother and father and put that in, too. When I went downstairs she was still sitting there and the doctor was sitting with her, and when I came in he looked at me and shrugged, so I suppose he hadn't gotten any more tears from her than I had. I went out into the hall with the doctor and he said he had given her a sedative and I said I was taking her right next door and would put her to sleep in Dorrie's bed. "She doesn't seem to care one way or another," I told him.

"Sometimes it takes a while," he said. "It's a terrible thing; too much, probably, for her mind to take in all at once. I expect that by tomorrow she'll be feeling it more, and I'll stop in and see her in the morning."

Well, I saw that all the lights were turned out and the doors locked and then I took Vicky's things and we went next door and it was a relief to me to be back in my own house, even though I admit I felt a good twinge when I saw our suitcases all packed and standing in the hall. We had planned to get a good early start in the morning, and now here I had to unpack everything again. I asked Vicky if she would like a cup of cocoa and she said yes — I never did see that girl when she wouldn't eat — so I left her in the kitchen with her cocoa and a piece of my good chocolate cake and I went upstairs and fixed up Dorrie's room for her. I took out a lot of Dorrie's things because somehow — and I don't want to sound nasty, but it's true — you couldn't think of that great dull girl sleeping with Dorrie's pretty little pictures and dolls and necklaces and dance souvenirs all around her; she fit in Dorrie's room like Dorrie would fit in a dollhouse. I made the bed all neat, and I put on Dorrie's blue comforter, because it would have to be cleaned anyway before Dorrie came home, and then I brought her upstairs and waited while she got undressed. When I went in to tuck her in I had made up my mind of course that I wasn't going to be hesitant or anything, and I was going to kiss her good night, because after all the girl was alone in the world now, except for the kindness of neighbors who took her in. When I came in she was in bed and I think the doctor's sedative — or my hot cocoa — was affecting her, because she looked sleepy and kind of full, like a big cat that's had a mouse. She looked much too big for Dorrie's bed, I can tell you that. She was trying to be brave, though; when she turned her head on the pillow and looked at me she gave a little smile, and I thought maybe she was getting ready to cry, but she only said, "I *did* tell them. I've known about it for two months."

"I'm sure of it," I said. "Try not to think about it anymore tonight."

"They wouldn't believe me."

"Well, it certainly wasn't your fault, and it won't do you any good to keep brooding on it; right now you've got to sleep."

"I knew all about it," she said.

"Shh," I said. I turned out the light, and went over to kiss her good night and she looked up at me and said, "Don't go in any boats." She had some strange connection in that odd mind between me and boats; she must have mentioned it half a dozen times during those first few days, when her thoughts were so confused and dazed. I suppose she had heard something, or perhaps Helen and Don had said something — maybe one of the last things they said to her; people always remember something like that — and it could have been about me; they talked about us enough, heaven knows. Anyway, I told her not to worry about boats anymore, that everything was going to be all right, and I finally leaned over and gave her a little kiss on that big white forehead and said, “Good night.”

“Good night,” she said. I turned on Dorrie’s night-light in case she should wake up in the night and forget she was in Dorrie’s room and then closed the door and came downstairs to wait for Howard.

When he came in he was feeling pretty awful, so I made him some cocoa and while he had it we sat and talked about our trip to Maine. “There’s certainly no chance of it *now*,” I told him. “The girl’s right upstairs. We can’t do a thing until the aunt comes.”

“They notified the aunt,” Howard said. “Sent a cable from the police station.”

“What makes me hopping mad is having to unpack the bags. And my nice green sweater I bought just for the trip.”

“Well, it wouldn’t look very good if we just took off and left the girl alone.”

“No,” I said. “It’s a terrible thing,” I told him, “a terrible thing to happen *anytime*, of course, but wouldn’t you just *know* they’d go and do it now?”

“No help for it. We’ll have to try and plan something else. Is she asleep?”

“I think she must be. I gave her some cocoa. You know, that’s another thing that bothers me. That girl hasn’t cried a single tear.”

“Kids like that sometimes feel it worse inside.”

“Maybe,” but I didn’t think so. “No early start tomorrow, I guess.”

I really felt like crying, seeing Howard take those suitcases upstairs, but he told me to cheer up. “It’s rotten bad luck,” he said, “but we’ll think of something else.”

There was a lot to do the next day. First, I had to unpack those suitcases and put everything away so it wouldn’t wrinkle. Also, I thought I kind of ought to go over to the Lansons' and straighten up — Helen Lanson always left things in a mess, and I certainly wouldn't have been surprised to find her dinner dishes still dirty in her sink; that girl wouldn't lift a finger to wash them, I know now, after having her in my house. Not one thing did she do. I can't quite picture Helen Lanson picking up after her, so I guess Vicky kept that room of hers at home looking so swept and bare, but in my house she never made Dorrie's bed once, never got out of her chair to take a dish to the kitchen, never offered to dust or vacuum even though half the mess was on her account.

I had to forgive her, of course, because of the sad blow she'd had, but I'd just like to see my Dorrie act like that no matter *what* happened. I mean, even if I was dead it would give me comfort to know that my daughter didn't forget her training, and the nice manners I taught her.

Half the time Vicky never bothered to answer at all when she was spoken to. That morning I asked her what she wanted me to bring her back from her own house and she just looked at me. Maybe there was nothing there she wanted. I just decided the aunt would have to look over everything. Helen Lanson had some lovely china, and a set of wineglasses I would have given my right arm to own; she'd inherited them from her grandmother, and you'd think even a child like Vicky would have some sense of their value, but when I mentioned them and said how much I coveted them, she only stared at me. I straightened things up around the Lansons' house and got some clothes for Vicky, and then locked everything up tight and brought the keys home and set them on the mantel, where I could find them right away when the aunt came. If I had been another kind of person, I could have those wineglasses today and no one would ever have known.

I was pretty sure that along during the day people would be coming in; the Lansons being as popular as they were, it seemed a lot of their friends might drop over to see if Vicky was all right and I wasn't starving her or beating her or something. You'd think with all the friends the Lansons had, someone might have come forward to take the girl so we wouldn't be tied down with her, but of course we were right on the spot when someone was needed, and as Howard said, it still wouldn't look right to go off so soon. The doctor said Vicky was fine; she spent most of the morning up in Dorrie's room reading Dorrie's books, and after lunch I told her to dress nicely and comb her hair and come downstairs to sit. I just wanted her there looking proper if anyone came; lucky she had a dark dress to wear. Mrs. Wright came by early; she lived down the street and had only just heard. She was kind of sniffling, with a handkerchief over her face most of the time, and she patted Vicky's hand and said it was heartbreaking, just heartbreaking, and Vicky looked at her. After a minute or so of this she gave up and followed me out to the kitchen to get a cup of tea and said, "Has she been like this ever since *it* happened?"

"No," I said. "All night she was asleep."

"Has she been crying?"

"Not a single tear."

I got the cups out; one thing about Mrs. Wright, you don't get off easy. Tea and chocolate cake were the least she expected, and I supposed if the Lansons' fancy friends dropped around later it would mean cocktails and potato chips and crackers and olives and whatnot. "It's a heartbreaking thing," Mrs. Wright kept saying, "simply heartbreaking. Were they killed instantly?"

"I suppose so. I don't know anything about it." I knew what she wanted to ask me, but I wasn't going to help her out. It's not good for people to think about such things; I never asked Howard a word about it and he never offered to tell me, because I always think that a person has enough everyday troubles without going looking for the horrible details of what happens to other people. “They hit a truck,” I said. “That’s all I know.”

“Anyway, it will be in the paper tonight. That poor little girl. Who told her? You? How did she take it?”

“About as you’d expect,” I said. I didn’t want Mrs. Wright blaming *me* for the way Vicky acted; she might think I’d broken the news wrong, or something, so I started back into the living room with the tea tray and of course she had to follow me and couldn’t ask any more about it with Vicky sitting right there. She tried to make bright conversation instead, I guess to cheer Vicky a little, although I could have told her to save her breath.

She told about Mrs. Haven at the grocery forgetting her lamb chops and how the grocer had to come down from his dinner and open the store for her and she told about the Actons’ cat getting run over, but she stopped herself in the middle of that and looked at Vicky to see if she had said anything wrong and then she started quickly to tell about her grandson, who just got admitted to medical school.

“He’s going to be a doctor,” she explained.

“He’ll be caught with a girl in his room and expelled pretty soon,” Vicky said suddenly.

“Vicky!” I said. I couldn’t think of anything decent to say; I mean, I couldn’t punish her, her not being my child and all, but I did think I ought to do something, with Mrs. Wright sitting there with her mouth open. “Young ladies should speak politely in company, Vicky,” I said. Dorrie would never have said a thing like that about Mrs. Wright’s grandson.

“I’ll overlook it,” Mrs. Wright said, “considering your present circumstances, Vicky, although you ought not to have that kind of thought with your parents lying there—” She stopped, and took out her handkerchief again, and Vicky stared at the wall, and I thought it would be a pleasure to tan that young lady's hide.

Later some of the Lansons' friends did come, as I expected, and it was cocktails and potato chips and crackers and pickles and everything; we could have had a party of our own, and invited our own friends, for what it cost us to entertain the Lansons' friends, although I must say that one of the men took the Lansons' keys and went over and got a bottle of gin because, he said, it was the least the Lansons would want us to do, and I thought that was probably true. Everyone tried to say something nice to Vicky, but it was hard. I heard one conversation that shocked me, because if I heard Dorrie talking like that to her elders, I would have washed her mouth out with soap. A Mr. Sherman, whom I hadn't met before, was telling her what a fine man her father had been — I suppose he thought he ought to, although anyone who knew Don Lanson knew better — and Vicky came right out and said, in that flat voice of hers, "Your wife finally has the evidence to divorce you." You can imagine how that sounded, right to an old friend of her father's, and he was surprised to hear it, you could tell; I don't think my Dorrie even knows the *word* divorce. Later I heard her telling her father's lawyer that the papers in his office were going to be burned up in a big fire; he had been talking to her about her father's will, and I suppose somehow the idea of a will got through to her — a little thing like that will, sometimes, you know — so she reacted like a spiteful baby. I thought it was extremely rude of her, driving her father's friends out of my house like that, and I was going to tell her so, but there was always someone there talking to her, patting her hand and telling her to be brave. Tell Vicky to be brave — tell the ocean to keep rolling.

Well, it was like that till her aunt came. She was delayed getting here — some trouble with the plane — and so she missed the funeral, but I saw that

Vicky was there in a dark blue dress and black shoes and her hair combed, and all, and never a tear did that child shed. They had a nice attendance, I must say. You would have thought the Lansons were the most popular people in town, but I suppose people thought it was a friendly gesture to Vicky, and of course since Howard and I were kind of in charge, I guess a lot of people came out of courtesy to us. Once during the ceremony Vicky leaned over toward me and whispered, “You see that man over there, the one with the bald head and the gray suit? He stole some money and they’re going to put him in jail,” which I thought a disrespectful and silly remark to make during her parents’ own funeral, particularly since a lot of people thought she was getting overcome and looked to see if I was going to have to take her out.

The day the aunt arrived was the day of the big fire downtown that destroyed almost a whole block of offices, so I didn’t have a chance to introduce her to many of the people who had been dropping in nearly every day. I had Vicky’s clothes all clean and neat — I could hardly send her home dirty, after all — and packed ready to take back. I must say I wasn’t sorry to see that girl turned over to her own relatives; it was hard, having her in Dorrie’s room all the time, and Howard was getting so he could hardly eat, looking at her sitting there at the dinner table every night and stuffing herself. The night before she went to her aunt — they were going to stay next door for a day or so, arranging for things to be sold and to be stored and to be given away, and I must say I had half an idea that the aunt might have thought of me when it came to the wineglasses, Vicky knowing how I wanted them so much, and after all I’d done — the night before she left, when I went in to say good night, she gave me her little red notebook. “This is for you,” she said. “I want you to have it because you’ve been so kind to me.”

Well, it was the only word of thanks I was ever to get. Not one word was ever said about those wineglasses. I knew she prized the little book and thought she was giving me something precious, so I took it. “Stay away from boats,” she said, and I laughed at her, I really had to, and then she told me to take good care of the little book and of course I promised her I would.

“I’ll remember you when I’m in London, England,” she said. “Tell Dorrie to write to me sometimes.”

“I surely will,” I said. Dorrie is the sweetest child in the world, and if she thought it would give Vicky any pleasure to get a letter from her, she’d sit right down. “Now, good night,” I said. I had gotten used to kissing her good night, but I never looked forward to it.

“Good night,” she said, and went right off to sleep, as she always did. Well, they left, and I hear the house has been sold and someone new was coming to live there. I took a look at Vicky’s little red notebook, thinking it might be a little book of poems like Dorrie gave me once, or even pictures of something, but I was disappointed; the child had been amusing herself writing gossipy little paragraphs about her neighbors and her parents’ friends — although what else would you expect, considering the way Don and Helen used to talk about people? — and horror tales about atom bombs and the end of the world, not at all the kind of thing you like to think about a child dwelling on; I wouldn’t have Dorrie thinking about things like that, and I threw the little book in the furnace. She must have been a very lonely child, I thought, to spend her time writing sad little stories. I hope she’s as happy in London as she expected to be, and meanwhile we’ve decided what we’re going to do to make up for our lost trip to Maine. We’ll keep Dorrie out of school for a couple of weeks — she’s always at the top; she can miss a little work — and we’re all going to go on a cruise.

HOME

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* * *

ETHEL SLOANE WAS WHISTLING to herself as she got out of her car and splashed across the sidewalk to the doorway of the hardware store. She was wearing a new raincoat and solid boots, and one day of living in the country had made her weather-wise. “This rain can’t last,” she told the hardware clerk confidently. “This time of year it never lasts.”

The clerk nodded tactfully. One day in the country had been enough for Ethel Sloane to become acquainted with most of the local people; she had been into the hardware store several times— “so many odd things you never expect you’re going to need in an old house” — and into the post office to leave their new address, and into the grocery to make it clear that all the Sloane grocery business was going to come their way, and into the bank and into the gas station and into the little library and even as far as the door of the barbershop (“… and you’ll be seeing my husband Jim Sloane in a day or so!”). Ethel Sloane liked having bought the old Sanderson place, and she liked walking the single street of the village, and most of all she liked knowing that people knew who she was.

“They make you feel at home right away, as though you were born not half a mile from here,” she explained to her husband, Jim.

Privately she thought that the storekeepers in the village might show a little more alacrity in remembering her name; she had probably brought more business to the little stores in the village than any *of* them had seen for a year past. They’re not outgoing people, she told herself reassuringly. It takes a while for them to get over being suspicious; we've been here in the house for only two days.

"First, I want to get the name of a good plumber," she said to the clerk in the hardware store. Ethel Sloane was a great believer in getting information directly from the local people; the plumbers listed in the phone book might be competent enough, but the local people always knew who would suit; Ethel Sloane had no intention of antagonizing the villagers by hiring an unpopular plumber. "And closet hooks," she said. "My husband, Jim, turns out to be just as good a handyman as he is a writer." Always tell them your business, she thought, then they don't have to ask.

"I suppose the best one for plumbing would be Will Watson," the clerk said. "He does most of the plumbing around. You drive down the Sanderson road in this rain?"

"Of course." Ethel Sloane was surprised. "I had all kinds of things to do in the village."

"Creek's pretty high. They say that sometimes when the creek is high—"

"The bridge held our moving truck yesterday, so I guess it will hold my car today. That bridge ought to stand for a while yet." Briefly she wondered whether she might not say "for a spell" instead of "for a while," and then decided that sooner or later it would come naturally. "Anyway, who minds rain? We've got so much to do indoors." She was pleased with "indoors."

"Well," the clerk said, "of course, no one can stop you from driving on the old Sanderson road. If you want to. You'll find people around here mostly leave it alone in the rain, though. Myself, I think it's all just gossip, but then, I don't drive out that way much, anyway."

"It's a little muddy on a day like this," Ethel Sloane said firmly, "and maybe a little scary crossing the bridge when the creek is high, but you've got to expect that kind of thing when you live in the country."

"I wasn't talking about that," the clerk said. "Closet hooks? I wonder, do we have any closet hooks."

In the grocery Ethel Sloane bought mustard and soap and pickles and flour. "All the things I forgot to get yesterday," she explained, laughing.

"You took that road on a day like this?" the grocer asked.

"It's not that bad," she said, surprised again. "I don't mind the rain."

"We don't use that road in this weather," the grocer said. "You might say there's talk about that road."

"It certainly seems to have quite a local reputation," Ethel said, and laughed. "And it's nowhere near as bad as some of the other roads I've seen around here."

"Well, I told you," the grocer said, and shut his mouth.

I've offended him, Ethel thought, I've said I think their roads are bad; these people are so jealous of their countryside.

"I guess our road is pretty muddy," she said almost apologetically. "But I'm really a very careful driver."

"You stay careful," the grocer said. "No matter what you see."

"I'm always careful." Whistling, Ethel Sloane went out and got into her car and turned in the circle in front of the abandoned railway station. Nice little town, she was thinking, and they are beginning to like us already, all so worried about my safe driving. We're the kind of people, Jim and I, who fit in a place like this; we wouldn't belong in the suburbs or some kind of a colony; we're real people. Jim will write, she thought, and I'll get one of these country women to teach me how to make bread. Watson for plumbing.

She was oddly touched when the clerk from the hardware store and then the grocer stepped to their doorways to watch her drive by. They're worrying about me, she thought; they're afraid a city gal can't manage their bad, wicked roads, and I do bet it’s hell in the winter, but I can manage; I’m country now.

Her way led out of the village and then off the highway onto a dirt road that meandered between fields and an occasional farmhouse, then crossed the creek — disturbingly high after all this rain — and turned onto the steep hill that led to the Sanderson house. Ethel Sloane could see the house from the bridge across the creek, although in summer the view would be hidden by trees. It’s a lovely house, she thought with a little catch of pride; I’m so lucky; up there it stands, so proud and remote, waiting for me to come home.

On one side of the hill the Sanderson land had long ago been sold off, and the hillside was dotted with small cottages and a couple of ramshackle farms; the people on that side of the hill used the other, lower, road, and Ethel Sloane was surprised and a little uneasy to perceive that the tire marks on this road and across the bridge were all her own, coming down; no one else seemed to use this road at all. Private, anyway, she thought; maybe they’ve talked everyone else out of using it. She looked up to see the house as she crossed the bridge; my very own house, she thought, and then, well, *our* very own house, she thought, and then she saw that there were two figures standing silently in the rain by the side of the road.

Good heavens, she thought, standing there in this rain, and she stopped the car. “Can I give you a lift?” she called out, rolling down the window. Through the rain she could see that they seemed to be an old woman and a child, and the rain drove down on them. Staring, Ethel Sloane became aware that the child was sick with misery, wet and shivering and crying in the rain, and she said sharply, “Come and get in the car at once; you mustn’t keep that child out in the rain another minute.”

They stared at her, the old woman frowning, listening. Perhaps she is deaf, Ethel thought, and in her good raincoat and solid boots she climbed out of the car and went over to them. Not wanting for any reason in the world to touch either of them, she put her face close to the old woman's and said urgently, "Come, hurry. Get that child into the car, where it's dry. I'll take you wherever you want to go." Then, with real horror, she saw that the child was wrapped in a blanket, and under the blanket he was wearing thin pajamas; with a shiver of fury, Ethel saw that he was barefoot and standing in the mud. "Get in that car at once," she said, and hurried to open the back door. "Get in that car at once, do you hear me?"

Silently the old woman reached her hand down to the child and, his eyes wide and staring past Ethel Sloane, the child moved toward the car, with the old woman following. Ethel looked in disgust at the small bare feet going over the mud and rocks, and she said to the old woman, "You ought to be ashamed; that child is certainly going to be sick."

She waited until they had climbed into the backseat of the car, and then slammed the door and got into her seat again. She glanced up at the mirror, but they were sitting in the corner, where she could not see them, and she turned; the child was huddled against the old woman, and the old woman looked straight ahead, her face heavy with weariness.

"Where are you going?" Ethel asked, her voice rising. "Where shall I take you? That child," she said to the old woman, "has to be gotten indoors and into dry clothes as soon as possible. Where are you going? I'll see that you get there in a hurry."

The old woman opened her mouth, and in a voice of old age beyond consolation said, "We want to go to the Sanderson place."

"To the Sanderson place?" To us? Ethel thought, To see us? This pair? Then she realized that the Sanderson place, to the old local people, probably still included the land where the cottages had been built; they probably still call the whole thing the Sanderson place, she thought, and felt oddly feudal with pride. We're the lords of the manor, she thought, and her voice was more gentle when she asked, "Were you waiting out there for very long in the rain?"

"Yes," the old woman said, her voice remote and despairing. Their lives must be desolate, Ethel thought. Imagine being that old and that tired and standing in the rain for someone to come by.

"Well, we'll soon have you home," she said, and started the car. The wheels slipped and skidded in the mud, but found a purchase, and slowly Ethel felt the car begin to move up the hill. It was very muddy, and the rain was heavier, and the back of the car dragged as though under an intolerable weight. It's as though I had a load of iron, Ethel thought. Poor old lady, it's the weight of years.

"Is the child all right?" she asked, lifting her head; she could not turn to look at them.

"He wants to go home," the old woman said.

"I should think so. Tell him it won't be long. I'll take you right to your door." It's the least I can do, she thought, and maybe go inside with them and see that he's warm enough; those poor bare feet.

Driving up the hill was very difficult, and perhaps the road was a little worse than Ethel had believed; she found that she could not look around or even speak while she was navigating the sharp curves, with the rain driving against the windshield and the wheels slipping in the mud. Once she said, "Nearly at the top," and then had to be silent, holding the wheel tight. When the car gave a final lurch and topped the small last rise that led onto the flat driveway before the Sanderson house, Ethel said, "Made it," and laughed. "Now, which way should I go?"

They're frightened, she thought. I'm sure the child is frightened and I don't blame them; I was a little nervous myself. She said loudly, "We're at the top now, it's all right, we made it. Now where shall I take you?"

When there was still no answer, she turned; the backseat of the car was empty.

"But even if they *could* have gotten out of the car without my noticing," Ethel Sloane said for the tenth time that evening to her husband, "they couldn't have gotten out of sight. I looked and looked." She lifted her hands in an emphatic gesture. "I went all around the top of the hill in the rain looking in all directions and calling them."

"But the car seat was dry," her husband said.

"Well, you're not going to suggest that I imagined it, are you? Because I'm simply not the kind *of person* to dream up an old lady and a sick child. There has to be some *explanation;* I don't imagine things."

"Well…" Jim said, and hesitated.

"Are you sure you didn't see them? They didn't come to the door?"

"Listen…" Jim said, and hesitated again. "Look," he said.

"I have certainly *never* been the kind of person who goes around imagining that she sees old ladies and children. You know me better than that, Jim, you know I don't go around—"

"Well," Jim said. "Look," he said finally, "there *could* be something. A story I heard. I never told you because—"

"Because what?"

"Because you… well—" Jim said.

"Jim." Ethel Sloane set her lips. "I don't like this, Jim. What is there that you haven't told me? Is there really something you know and I don't?"

"It's just a story. I heard it when I came up to look at the house."

"Do you mean you've known something all this time and you've never told me?"

"It's just a story," Jim said helplessly. Then, looking away, he said, "Everyone knows it, but they don't say much, I mean, these things—"

"Jim," Ethel said, "tell me at once."

"It's just that there was a little Sanderson boy stolen or lost or something. They thought a crazy old woman took him. People kept talking about it, but they never knew anything for sure."

"What?" Ethel Sloane stood up and started for the door. "You mean there's a child been stolen and no one told me about it?"

"No," Jim said oddly. "I mean, it happened sixty years ago."

Ethel was still talking about it at breakfast the next morning. "And they've never been found," she told herself happily. "All the people around went searching, and they finally decided the two of them had drowned in the creek, because it was raining then just the way it is now." She glanced with satisfaction at the rain beating against the window of the breakfast room. "Oh, lovely," she said, and sighed, and stretched, and smiled. "Ghosts," she said. "I saw two honest-to-goodness ghosts. No wonder," she said, "no *wonder* the child looked so awful. Awful! Kidnapped, and then drowned. No *wonder.*"

"Listen," Jim said, "if I were you, I'd forget about it. People around here don't like to talk much about it."

"They wouldn't tell me," Ethel said, and laughed again. "Our very own ghosts, and not a soul would tell me. I just won't be satisfied until I get every word of the story."

"That's why I never told you," Jim said miserably.

"Don't be silly. Yesterday everyone I spoke to mentioned my driving on that road, and I bet every one of them was dying to tell me the story. I can't wait to see their faces when they hear."

"No." Jim stared at her. "You simply *can't* go around… *boasting* about it."

"But of course I can! Now we really belong here. I've really seen the local ghosts. And I'm going in this morning and tell everybody, and find out all I can."

"I wish you wouldn't," Jim said.

"I know you wish I wouldn't, but I'm going to. If I listened to you, I'd wait and wait for a good time to mention it and maybe even come to believe I'd dreamed it or something, so I'm going into the village right after breakfast."

"Please, Ethel," Jim said. "Please listen to me. People might not take it the way you think."

"Two ghosts of our very own." Ethel laughed again. "My very own," she said. "I just can't wait to see their faces in the village."

Before she got into the car she opened the back door and looked again at the seat, dry and unmarked. Then, smiling to herself, she got into the driver's seat and, suddenly touched with sick cold, turned around to look. "Why," she said, half whispering, "you're not *still* here, you can't be! Why," she said, "I just looked."

"They were strangers in the house," the old woman said.

The skin on the back of Ethel's neck crawled as though some wet thing walked there; the child stared past her, and the old woman's eyes were flat and dead. "What do you want?" Ethel asked, still whispering.

"We got to go back."

"I'll take you." The rain came hard against the windows of the car, and Ethel Sloane, seeing her own hand tremble as she reached for the car key, told herself, don't be afraid, don't be afraid, they're not real. "I'll take you," she said, gripping the wheel tight and turning the car to face down the hill, "I'll take you," she said, almost babbling, "I'll take you right back, I promise, see if I don't, I promise I'll take you right back where you want to go."

"He wanted to go home," the old woman said. Her voice was very far away.

"I'll take you, I'll take you." The road was even more slippery than before, and Ethel Sloane told herself, drive carefully, don't be afraid, they're not real. "Right where I found you yesterday, the very spot, I'll take you back."

"They were strangers in the house."

Ethel realized that she was driving faster than she should; she felt the disgusting wet cold coming from the backseat pushing her, forcing her to hurry.

"I'll take you back," she said over and over to the old woman and the child.

"When the strangers are gone, we can go home," the old woman said.

Coming to the last turn before the bridge, the wheels slipped, and, pulling at the steering wheel and shouting, "I'll take you back, I'll take you back," Ethel Sloane could hear only the child's horrible laughter as the car turned and skidded toward the high waters of the creek. One wheel slipped and spun in the air, and then, wrenching at the car with all her strength, she pulled it back onto the road and stopped.

Crying, breathless, Ethel put her head down on the steering wheel, weak and exhausted. I was almost killed, she told herself, they almost took me with them. She did not need to look into the backseat of the car; the cold was gone, and she knew the seat was dry and empty.

The clerk in the hardware store looked up and, seeing Ethel Sloane, smiled politely and then, looking again, frowned. “You feeling poorly this morning, Mrs. Sloane?” he asked. “Rain bothering you?”

“I almost had an accident on the road,” Ethel Sloane said.

“On the old Sanderson road?” The clerk’s hands were very still on the counter. “An accident?”

Ethel Sloane opened her mouth and then shut it again. “Yes,” she said at last. “The car skidded.”

“We don’t use that road much,” the clerk said. Ethel started to speak, but stopped herself.

“It’s got a bad name locally, that road,” he said. “What were you needing this morning?”

Ethel thought, and finally said, “Clothespins, I guess I must need clothespins. About the Sanderson road—”

“Yes?” said the clerk, his back to her.

“Nothing,” Ethel said.

“Clothespins,” the clerk said, putting a box on the counter. “By the way, will you and the mister be coming to the P.T.A. social tomorrow night?”

“We certainly will,” said Ethel Sloane.

I. O. U.

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MISS HONORIA ATHENS WAS outraged, discouraged, offended, and stiff in every muscle. Furious, she hobbled back and forth across the tiny living room of the little house that had belonged to her for only three weeks; if she tried to sit down, shooting pains went up her back; if she tried to stand still, her legs ached. Walking up and down gave her at least some means of stamping out her anger, but the desire for revenge was deep within her. “I could have bought a house on the side of a volcano,” she told herself, storming. “I could have found a cottage in the middle of a forest filled with bears; I could have settled down smack in the middle of a superhighway, but *no*” She tried to stamp her foot, and groaned. “I had to pick a really *unpleasant* place to buy my little house,” she thought. “I had to get the one place in town on the shortcut to school!” She raised her hands to her head and groaned as a pain shot across her shoulders.

After forty-one years of teaching school, Miss Honoria Athens had retired, to live happily alone and grow a little garden. Her little house stood on a block of similar little houses, in a town of little houses, and almost everyone had gardens, and almost everyone had children. Miss Athens, who was still actually fond of children after forty-one years of teaching, had been pleased to think of living in a community full of youngsters, with their liveliness and fun. That was before she discovered that the only, the practical, shortcut from her neighborhood to the school led over her back fence, across her backyard, over the front lawn next door, and to the street. As a matter of fact, it led straight through Miss Athens’ garden.

She hobbled out to the kitchen to look once more upon the patch of ground it had taken her all day Saturday and all day Sunday to dig, and smooth, and clear; every twinge in her aching muscles had come from that garden, and she had consoled herself with dreams of vegetables brought to her table in a miracle of split-second timing, so fresh she could still taste the sunshine on them, tomatoes picked in the cool of the evening and eaten right from the vine, carrots and radishes and squash brought into her little kitchen in a rich, plentiful harvest. Now, looking out her kitchen window, Miss Athens wanted to cry. The shortcut to school crossed what would have been the vegetable garden, and the earth Miss Athens had so laboriously prepared yesterday was, today, trampled and muddied beyond belief, by what must have been an army wearing sneakers.

After teaching school for forty-one years, Miss Athens had no reason to put faith in signs reading PRIVATE or NO TRESPASSING or even PLEASE KEEP OUT OF MY GARDEN. She had, too, a pretty good idea of what might happen to her garden in the future if she started carrying tales to parents in order to get the shortcut routed along the sidewalks; she also knew perfectly well that no boy who ever lived would walk sedately along a sidewalk to get anywhere if there was a possibility of getting to the same place by climbing a fence and shuffling through a backyard full of mud. Bitterly, Miss Athens thought of a shotgun loaded with buckshot, or a lion trap.

At three o’clock that afternoon, Miss Athens was in her backyard, ingloriously hiding behind a bush. She watched as a group of half a dozen boys, whistling and shouting, turned across the lawn next door and made for her yard. Because her aching back was still giving her a good deal of trouble, Miss Athens caught only the last boy, just as he was giving himself a boost over the fence; she caught him by the back of his jacket, but, forty-one years of experience behind her, she immediately shifted her grip to his belt and held on.

“Hey?” the boy said, struggling. “Hey?”

“Come down from there,” Miss Athens said.

“Why?” said the boy, but his grip on the top of the fence loosened and he slid slowly to the ground beside Miss Athens. “Let go of me,” the boy said.

“What’s your name?” Miss Athens said.

The boy’s gaze shifted; all of Miss Athens’ actions so far had been aggressive and her voice sounded downright unfriendly. “George Washington,” the boy said.

“All right, George,” Miss Athens said, “why were you trampling my garden?”

“I didn’t know this was anybody’s garden. We *always* come this way. To school,” he explained. “This is the way to school. And I got to go home now. My mother—”

“You may come inside and telephone your mother — her name, I suppose, is Mrs. Washington — and tell her that you will be busy this afternoon. You are going to dig my garden over again.”

“I *can’t,”* the boy said, wriggling. “Let *go* of me.”

“I’m sorry,” Miss Athens said. “I know you weren’t the only one, but you’re the only one I caught. And heaven knows I can’t dig that garden again. So you boys who ruined it will have to fix it.”

“Golly,” the boy said. “I *can’t*. But I’ll tell the other guys. I’m sure some of *them* would help.”

“I’m sure, too,” Miss Athens said. “That’s why I’m holding on to *you*.”

The boy relaxed a little. “Look,” he said, “all right, you say I helped wreck your old garden, so sure, it’s fair I help fix it up again. Only I just can’t *today*. I promise you I’ll come on Saturday, for sure, and work in your garden. Okay?”

Miss Athens thought. “How good is your promise?” she asked at last.

“My promise is *good*. Why, if I promise, I *always* do it. Word of honor, even if I forget.”

“Wait,” Miss Athens said. “I have an idea. Come inside with me.” Half pulling the boy, she took him in through the back door of her little house, holding on to his belt tightly while she searched one-handed through the kitchen drawers for a pencil and a memo pad. “Now,” she said, putting the pad down on the kitchen table, “you write what I say.”

“O.K.” said the boy, looking at her out of the corners of his eyes.

“You write… let me see. Write: I. O. U.”

“What’s that mean?”

“Just what it says. It says ‘I owe you,’ and it’s a promise to pay what you owe me.”

“I.O.U. O.K.”

“I.O.U. two hours’ garden work. And sign it. With your real name, please, George Washington.”

The boy giggled. “Allen Stuart is my *real* name,” he said.

Miss Athens looked over his shoulder at the paper. “Cross your t’s,” she said; she had been a schoolteacher for forty-one years. “Very nice handwriting, Allen. Now, this slip of paper means that you owe me two hours’ work in the garden. When you pay me the work, I give you back the paper and you can tear it up. It’s just a written promise.”

Allen looked at the paper respectfully. “You going to get the other guys to sign papers, too?” he asked.

“When I catch them,” Miss Athens said. “Help yourself from the cookie jar before you go, Allen. Oh, and one more thing: this paper is negotiable.”

"What?"

"That means that I can turn it over to someone. For instance, suppose I met someone — your mother, say — who wanted you to work in *her* garden for two hours, and suppose that person offered me some kind of trade for this paper. I could give that person this paper you have signed and you would then owe the two hours' work to whoever held the paper. You see?"

"Yeah," Allen said uneasily. "Can I go home now?"

"Dad?" Allen Stuart, after his customary manner, hung heavily over the back of his father's chair in order to carry on a casual conversation. "Dad, you know that old lady just moved in down the street? Old lady Athens?"

"Miss Athens?" His father stirred irritably. "Stop breathing down my neck," he said.

Allen moved himself a fraction of an inch farther along the back of the chair. "You know what she did?" he demanded. "You know *what?*"

His father sighed and put down the evening paper. "Well?"

"I met her in the grocery the other day," Mrs. Stuart said. She held up a pair of torn blue jeans and sighed. "No animal would treat its skin the way a twelve-year-old boy treats clothes," she told her husband.

"Dad, you know what?"

"Allen," Mr. Stuart said, "go across the room and sit down in a chair. I cannot talk to you unless I can see you and even then I find it difficult. I—"

"She's got a swell idea. Really *swell*. She was mad at me, see, but when I told her I'd pay for it, she—"

"Pay for what?" said his father.

"Mad at you? Why?" said his mother.

"Oh, never mind *that.*" Allen spoke with some haste. "Just she was mad at me, is all. And I only said 'pay for it' because, I mean, how could anyone pay for a thing like that, anyway? I just meant I'd do the work over—"

"What did you break?" said his mother.

"What did you ruin?" said his father.

"Oh, nothing, *honest*. Just her old garden, and I *said* I was sorry. But she said I could do the work over again and what I'd got to do was sign a paper —"

"Do *what?*" said his father, half rising.

"Just a paper. All it said was that I promised to work for her two hours. I'm going over on Saturday and work in her garden. I owe her, see? Two hours." Allen spoke patiently.

His father sat back, frowning. "Are you sure that was all the paper said?" he asked. "No other promises of any kind? No commitments for your *parents* or anything? No responsibilities assumed? Of course you're a minor, but I don't want to be liable for any contracts."

"An I.O.U," Allen said.

"Wait," said his mother, leaning forward. "Allen, do you mean that in return for something you broke at Miss Athens' house, you wrote a promise to work for her for two hours?"

"Sure," Allen said, pleased at this unusual perception from one whom he regarded as ordinarily almost subnormal in understanding.

"I wonder." Allen's mother was thinking hard. "Would you do the same thing for me? For instance, if you want to go to the movies and your allowance is gone, and you want me to advance you the money to go to the movies, will you then sign one of these I.O.U. things for me? For two hours' work, or perhaps some special job? That broken back step, for instance?"

"I still got money for the movies this week," Allen said, going to the heart of the problem. "But yeah, I guess. I could make a paper promising you something."

"But suppose I advanced you the movie money and then you broke your promise on the I.O.U.?"

"Mom!" Allen was deeply shocked. "That would be *cheating*."

Late on Tuesday afternoon Miss Athens, walking almost normally now, came down the street toward her little house. She had spent a hard day shopping, and she wanted a cup of tea. When she came to her own front walk, she was first startled and then annoyed when she saw a boy come hastily from her backyard, but then she recognized Allen Stuart and she said, "Why, hello, George Washington."

"Hi, Miss Athens. I'll carry your packages." Allen was clearly very pleased with himself. He followed Miss Athens up the walk and brought her packages in and set them down on the kitchen table. Then, turning in suppressed delight, he said, "I came to get that paper back, please."

"Oh, dear." Miss Athens sat down abruptly on a kitchen chair.

"Look," Allen said happily, waving at the kitchen window. Miss Athens got up and looked out. "My *goodness*," she said weakly.

"I been working all afternoon, ever since school," Allen said, "and I bet it looks even *better* than it did before."

"It's certainly very nice." Miss Athens came back and sat down again. "Allen," she said, "this is very embarrassing."

Allen opened his eyes wide. "Something *else* wrong?" he asked.

"Allen," Miss Athens said, "help yourself from the cookie jar. I'm afraid I did something very foolish."

"Why?"

"Well," Miss Athens explained, "I stopped by the grocery on my way home, and — well, I *thought* I had enough money. I distinctly recall thinking this morning that unless I bought too much in the department store

I would have *plenty* for the grocery. I was even going to cash a check. But Mr. Smith said—"

"Did you lose my paper?"

"No," Miss Athens said sadly. "I sold it. I was going to go back and redeem it tomorrow morning," she went on earnestly. "It was only because I ran short of money and I *needed* the tea, and all I had in my pocketbook was your I.O.U. So Mr. Smith said he would take that instead. He saw your name and said he knew you."

"I *bet* he knows me," Allen said darkly. "Last Halloween—"

"What?"

"Nothing," Allen said.

"I'll tell you what I'll do," Miss Athens said. "I want to be fair about this. Since you did the work you promised, and since I lost possession of your paper, the only thing for me to do is pay you back."

"You mean," Allen said very slowly, *"you'll* make *me* a paper saying that *you* will work for *me?"*

Miss Athens smiled. "After all," she said, "I did teach school for forty-one years. I imagine I could cope with most of your work. I can write a very neat, well-thought-out theme, for instance. I can do arithmetic, or spelling, or geography. You ought to be able to find two hours of work for me." She laughed. "It's only fair, after all."

A light of the purest, most disinterested wickedness, a light possible only in the eyes of a twelve-year-old boy presented with an opportunity beyond his wildest anticipations, touched the earnest face and wide, truthful forehead of Allen Stuart. "Well," he said, "I don't know what my mother would say, but if *you* think it's fair, Miss Athens. But only if you're sure you *really* think it's fair."

"I would be a very poor sort of person, Allen, if I asked something of you and then refused to take my turn." Miss Athens took up the pad of paper. "What shall I say? Just 'I.O.U. two hours' selected work'?"

"Oh, yes," Allen said. "Oh, yes, that will be perfectly fine."

"There." Miss Athens signed her name with a flourish and handed the paper to Allen. "All fair and legal," she said.

"Thank *you"* Allen said, picking up the paper with some haste. "Miss Athens, thank you very, *very* much."

And that was how Miss Honoria Athens found herself committed, on her word of honor, to two hours' playing shortstop for the Rockville Rockets baseball team.

Mr. Smith, the grocer, possessed of Allen Stuart's promise to work for two hours upon demand, brought the I.O.U. home to his wife, who took it very seriously. "You see," she explained to her husband, "this is as real as any promise. The little boy has given his word to do the work."

Mr. Smith grinned. "You remember last Halloween?" he asked.

"Was that the same little boy? But you put back the doors of the garage long ago."

"He must be an agile young fellow," Mr. Smith said. "I took this paper only as a kind of a joke — thought it might keep him in line for a while if he knew I had it."

"But I can *use* him." Mrs. Smith was eager. "If he will push a wheelbarrow with rocks in it, I can use this two hours of work from him and make my rock garden, since" — and her voice became reproachful— "I have been three weeks asking *you*—"

"All right," Mr. Smith said, "but just remember, I had to *buy* this paper."

"Indeed?" said Mrs. Smith. "Will you next charge me for groceries out of the store?"

"What will you give me for it?"

Mrs. Smith thought, regarding her husband dubiously. Then, amused, she said, "I will make *you* a little paper. Just like this. Only instead of pushing the wheelbarrow I will promise you a stuffed cabbage with sour cream. I will sign my name on the bottom."

"The big baking dish?" said Mr. Smith.

"The big baking dish."

"Butterball," Mr. Smith said, "you have made yourself a deal."

It might, perhaps, have stopped there if Mrs. Watkins from Willow Street had not come into the grocery store the next morning, collecting for the P.T.A. food sale. Mr. Smith, who ordinarily contributed half a dozen cases of soft drinks to the food sale, took it into his head, this time, to contribute Mrs. Smith's I.O.U. for one big baking dish of stuffed cabbage and sour cream. Mrs. Smith was understandably upset when she heard, and pointed out to Mr. Smith that not everybody was so foolish about what they ate as to prefer Mrs. Smith's stuffed cabbage to good ordinary food, and Mr. Smith would be hopelessly humiliated when everything at the food sale was sold except for Mrs. Smith's stuffed cabbage, left sitting there alone on the table because no one would buy it. Mr. Smith promised to go himself to the food sale and personally buy every scrap of Mrs. Smith's stuffed cabbage, and Mrs. Smith said that if he did, she would never forgive him, because that would *prove* that nobody liked her stuffed cabbage.

Allen Stuart, as it turned out, shortsightedly spent his movie money on a water pistol, which was confiscated almost at once by the seventh-grade teacher, and in order to get to the movies with the rest of his friends on Wednesday night (two cartoons and a serial, in addition to a double feature), he had to sign two further I.O.U.'s for his mother, one promising to help his sixteen-year-old sister with the dishes every night for a week, and the other for an hour's free baby-sitting, which his mother did not need for herself, but which she used as a bribe in a trade with *her* sister, to get a sweater pattern and an I.O.U. — her sister having been captivated by the I.O.U. notion — for help with the hard part of the sleeves.

Mrs. Stuart got home, read over the directions for the sweater, and decided it was too hard for her after all, so she traded the directions and the I.O.U. for help around the sleeves to her daughter, who gave her in exchange an I.O.U. promising to help Allen with his arithmetic homework every night for two weeks. Mr. Stuart, dazzled by the sight of his older daughter bending her bright head over her younger brother's arithmetic, made, of his own free will, an I.O.U. to foot the bill for a steak dinner for four at the Rockville Inn. "It's such a blessed miracle," he explained to his wife, "to see the two of them sitting next to each other in peace and quiet."

Miss Athens, lying in wait morning and afternoon, captured and signed up eleven more twelve-year-old boys.

Frances Stuart was only human, and her golden head was sadly bowed. What girl could live, she wondered, what girl could positively, absolutely *live* when Florence Crain had drawn the name of Jeff Rogers out of the hat for the Grab Bag Dance? Actually, how could anyone *bear* it? It was simply too much. Naturally, no one would dream of hinting that Florence Crain had been peeking, but really, the whole thing was just too *obvious* a coincidence. Frances Stuart believed with all her heart that she would never, just *never*, live through Friday evening, and naturally Florence would wear the black dress, which was *ages* too old for her, and probably look utterly evil in it, and it was just all of it too *much*. For twenty-four hours Frances Stuart contemplated her own sudden death from a broken heart, and consoled herself with the picture of her stricken parents, and even a contrite younger brother bending over her deathbed, while somewhere — perhaps on the bank of a raging river or on a high cliff miles above cruel, jagged rocks — Jeff Rogers breathed her name just once before hurling himself to destruction. For twenty-four hours this was satisfactory. Then Frances Stuart, being not only human but of a certain shrewdness, armed herself with her aunt's sweater pattern, the I.O.U. for helping with the sleeves, her father's I.O.U. for a steak dinner for four at the Rockville Inn, and an unopened bottle of cologne, and made for Florence Crain.

Florence was a hard bargainer, but by throwing in a yellow skirt that was too big, anyway, and a further I.O.U. for two sodas at the drugstore, Frances came off with Jeff Rogers for the Grab Bag Dance, and an I.O.U. from Florence promising the black dress for the first dance of the fall season.

The P.T.A. food sale was held on Wednesday evening, and Mr. Smith got there too late. On Friday morning Miss Athens met Mrs. Stuart and her sister in the grocery, all converging upon Mr. Smith and intent on more of Mrs. Smith's stuffed cabbage and sour cream. "Good morning," Mrs. Stuart said to Miss Athens as she edged toward the counter. "I've been meaning to stop in and say hello. And of course to apologize for Allen's causing you so much trouble."

"No trouble at all," Miss Athens said. "He very kindly helped me with my garden."

"So I heard," Mrs. Stuart said. "Actually, I was wondering if you had any I.O.U.'s you would care to trade. Allen is signed up to the absolute limit of his credit, and I *still* have no one to fix our broken back step. I thought perhaps one of the other boys…"

Miss Athens opened her pocketbook. "As a matter of fact," she said, "*nothing* seems to stop them from using my yard as a shortcut, although they do seem to be *trying* not to step in the garden. I have more promises of help than I can ever use, though it has occurred to me that I could put up a little summer house, or a terrace or something, to use up all these hours of work.” She leafed through a little package of I.O.U.’s signed more or less legibly with the names of various young gentlemen, who still optimistically believed that Miss Athens’ backyard was the shortest way to school. “What kind of boy would you like?” she asked.

“Let me see.” Mrs. Stuart was, in turn, unfolding a little collection of slips of paper. “You have no use for baby-sitters, do you?”

“I can take the baby-sitting ones,” her sister put in. “I have one from my husband promising to put up a television aerial. Or I can trade my own promise to help you with those curtains, Grace.”

“I’m very clumsy with curtains,” Miss Athens said shyly. “I can’t seem to get mine to hang straight.”

“Well,” said Mrs. Stuart’s sister, “I can certainly use a couple of those boys, Miss Athens — I want to build an outdoor playpen for the baby.”

“Fine,” Miss Athens said. “I have four windows in my living room — would three boys at two hours each sound right?”

“Splendid,” Mrs. Stuart’s sister said.

“Wait,” said Mrs. Stuart. “Don’t trade away all your boys, Miss Athens.”

“I get more every day,” Miss Athens said cynically.

“How about dusting?” Mrs. Stuart asked. “My daughter, Frances, has promised half an hour of dusting every day for a week.” She laughed. “Here’s one I don’t suppose you need,” she said. “It’s from Allen, promising to get a haircut every two weeks until fall. It cost me a bag of marbles. How about one promising to substitute for chaperon at the dance Friday night? Or here’s one from the little Atkins girl promising not to give us any of their kittens for one year. Leaf-raking next fall? Snow-shoveling? Allen has been getting desperate. And here’s one from Mrs. Williams promising to make one of those sweet little knitted caps. I got *that* one from Frances, and she got it from the Williams girl in exchange for a home permanent, and the Williams girl got it from *her* mother for doing the family marketing and carrying home the packages. Dear me.” And Mrs. Stuart sighed, regarding her handful of papers.

“I could use the dusting,” Miss Athens said. “Is she careful of old china?”

“She will be,” Mrs. Stuart said. “She’ll be fine after the dance on Friday night.”

Mr. Smith spoke hesitantly. “My wife’s been after me,” he said. “I can’t find time to do things, much, and I thought I heard one of you ladies mention a television aerial.”

“Yes, indeed,” said Mrs. Stuart’s sister.

“Only thing is,” Mr. Smith went on, “I don’t know how to go about trading. What do I offer you in exchange?”

Mrs. Stuart’s sister smiled happily. “Stuffed cabbage with sour cream.”

Miss Athens and Mrs. Stuart stopped for a minute to talk, in front of the grocery, and stepped aside as an unfamiliar young woman approached; she started to go into the grocery, hesitated, and then turned to Mrs. Stuart. “Excuse me,” she said, “but isn’t your name Stuart?”

Mrs. Stuart laughed. “Children are the world’s best newspapers,” she said. “I am Mrs. Stuart, I live directly across the street from you. Your name is Boone, you moved in yesterday, and you have two children, one a little girl about four and the other a baby.”

“A boy,” Mrs. Boone said. “Three months old.” She was pretty and smiling and breathless and clearly in the middle of unpacking: her hair was mussed and she was wearing blue jeans. “I’m ashamed of myself,” she said, gesturing at her clothes, “but we ran out of milk for the baby, and I’ve been trying to get dishes put away, and linen out so I could make the beds, and I can't *find* anything."

Mrs. Stuart nodded sympathetically, but Miss Athens, businesslike, took out her package of I.O.U.'s. "Exactly," she said. "You sound like you could use four or five of my boys."

Mrs. Boone looked puzzled. Then she said, "Why, I have one of those papers." From the pocket of her blue jeans she took Mr. Stuart's I.O.U. promising a steak dinner for four at the Rockville Inn. "I don't understand it at all," Mrs. Boone said. "Yesterday a very pretty dark-haired girl—"

"Florence Crain," said Mrs. Stuart with admirable courtesy.

"Yes, of course. Florence. Mrs. Smith here in the grocery suggested that she might be able to watch the babies for me while I unpacked, and she was really terribly sweet about it, but *you* know how girls are — she came across a necklace of mine, nothing but costume jewelry and of no value at all, and actually I haven't worn it for years, but *she* seemed to think it was just exactly the thing to wear with a black dress she has—"

"I know the black dress," Mrs. Stuart said grimly.

"Much too old for a girl her age, I would think," said Mrs. Boone, accurately interpreting Mrs. Stuart's expression. "I told her I would be delighted to give her the necklace, because she had been so very nice with the babies, but she gave me this paper. She said it was a trade. But I believe it belongs to you."

Helplessly, Mrs. Stuart shook her head. "Not at all," she said. "It belongs to *you*. Would Saturday evening be convenient?"

Every year Mrs. Boone made ginger marmalade from a recipe left her by her great-grandmother. One jar of Mrs. Boone's last-year's ginger marmalade was a more than adequate trade for two hours of baby-sitting by Frances Stuart, on an I.O.U. earned by Mrs. Stuart by putting new curtains in Frances' room. The Boones dined so pleasantly at the Rockville Inn with the Stuarts that they felt enthusiastically that they must reciprocate, and Mrs. Boone and Mrs. Stuart eventually became close enough friends for Mrs. Boone to pass on the recipe for ginger marmalade. Mr. Smith was so pressed by requests for Mrs. Smith's stuffed cabbage with sour cream that he bought half a dozen boys from Miss Athens and used the accumulated labor to build in a small counter across one corner of the grocery, where Mrs. Smith began a little catering service, which expanded in time to such an extent that the Smiths gave up the grocery and took to spending their winters in Florida. Allen Stuart's sternest case of hero worship took an abrupt fall when Jeff Rogers stopped him on the street after school and offered to pay his way into the movies for a week in return for one of Allen's I.O.U.'s, the one from Allen's sister promising to help him with his arithmetic homework every night for two weeks. Bewildered, Allen argued that Jeff did not even take arithmetic, and all that would happen if he had the I.O.U. was that he would have to sit with Allen's crazy old sister every night. Jeff said yes, he knew. When Allen, disgusted, reported this evidence of the disintegration of a fine mind and a good football player to his sister, he was further confused by her gift of a dollar and the promise to *do* his arithmetic homework for two weeks. Murmuring, Allen retreated to the Boones' house to work out an I.O.U. helping Mr. Boone unpack his fishing equipment.

On Saturday afternoon the weather was clear and warm, and the entire town turned out to see Miss Athens, grim-faced, the soul of honor, wearing an undersized gray cap and the number thirteen on her back, select a bat, and walk balefully into the batter's box. The Rockville Rockets won, one to nothing, and everyone in town remembered, forever after, that unbelievable moment when Miss Athens, seeing the first pitch coming at her, shut her eyes and swung.

THE POSSIBILITY OF EVIL

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MISS ADELA STRANGEWORTH STEPPED daintily along Main Street on her way to the grocery. The sun was shining, the air was fresh and clear after the night's heavy rain, and everything in Miss Strangeworth's little town looked washed and bright. Miss Strangeworth took deep breaths, and thought that there was nothing in the world like a fragrant summer day.

She knew everyone in town, of course; she was fond of telling strangers — tourists who sometimes passed through the town and stopped to admire Miss Strangeworth's roses — that she had never spent more than a day outside this town in all her long life. She was seventy-one, Miss Strangeworth told the tourists, with a pretty little dimple showing by her lip, and she sometimes found herself thinking that the town belonged to her. "My grandfather built the first house on Pleasant Street," she would say, opening her blue eyes wide with the wonder of it. "This house, right here. My family has lived here for better than a hundred years. My grandmother planted these roses, and my mother tended them, just as I do. I've watched my town grow; I can remember when Mr. Lewis, Senior, opened the grocery store, and the year the river flooded out the shanties on the low road, and the excitement when some young folks wanted to move the park over to the space in front of where the new post office is today. They wanted to put up a statue of Ethan Allen" — Miss Strangeworth would frown a little and sound stern— "but it should have been a statue of my grandfather. There wouldn't have been a town here at all if it hadn't been for my grandfather and the lumber mill."

Miss Strangeworth never gave away any of her roses, although the tourists often asked her. The roses belonged on Pleasant Street, and it bothered Miss Strangeworth to think of people wanting to carry them away, to take them into strange towns and down strange streets. When the new minister came, and the ladies were gathering flowers to decorate the church, Miss Strangeworth sent over a great basket of gladioli; when she picked the roses at all, she set them in bowls and vases around the inside of the house her grandfather had built.

Walking down Main Street on a summer morning, Miss Strangeworth had to stop every minute or so to say good morning to someone or to ask after someone's health. When she came into the grocery, half a dozen people turned away from the shelves and the counters to wave at her or call out good morning.

"And good morning to you, too, Mr. Lewis," Miss Strangeworth said at last. The Lewis family had been in the town almost as long as the Strangeworths; but the day young Lewis left high school and went to work in the grocery, Miss Strangeworth had stopped calling him Tommy and started calling him Mr. Lewis, and he had stopped calling her Addie and started calling her Miss Strangeworth. They had been in high school together, and had gone to picnics together, and to high school dances and basketball games; but now Mr. Lewis was behind the counter in the grocery, and Miss Strangeworth was living alone in the Strangeworth house on Pleasant Street.

"Good morning," Mr. Lewis said, and added politely, "lovely day."

"It is a very nice day," Miss Strangeworth said as though she had only just decided that it would do after all. "I would like a chop, please, Mr. Lewis, a small, lean veal chop. Are those strawberries from Arthur Parker's garden? They're early this year."

“He brought them in this morning,” Mr. Lewis said.

“I shall have a box,” Miss Strangeworth said. Mr. Lewis looked worried, she thought, and for a minute she hesitated, but then she decided that he surely could not be worried over the strawberries. He looked very tired indeed. He was usually so chipper, Miss Strangeworth thought, and almost commented, but it was far too personal a subject to be introduced to Mr. Lewis, the grocer, so she only said, “And a can of cat food and, I think, a tomato.”

Silently, Mr. Lewis assembled her order on the counter and waited. Miss Strangeworth looked at him curiously and then said, “It’s Tuesday, Mr. Lewis. You forgot to remind me.”

“Did I? Sorry.”

“Imagine your forgetting that I always buy my tea on Tuesday,” Miss Strangeworth said gently. “A quarter pound of tea, please, Mr. Lewis.”

“Is that all, Miss Strangeworth?”

“Yes, thank you, Mr. Lewis. Such a lovely day, isn’t it?”

“Lovely,” Mr. Lewis said.

Miss Strangeworth moved slightly to make room for Mrs. Harper at the counter. “Morning, Adela,” Mrs. Harper said, and Miss Strangeworth said, “Good morning, Martha.”

“Lovely day,” Mrs. Harper said, and Miss Strangeworth said, “Yes, lovely,” and Mr. Lewis, under Mrs. Harper’s glance, nodded.

“Ran out of sugar for my cake frosting,” Mrs. Harper explained. Her hand shook slightly as she opened her pocketbook. Miss Strangeworth wondered, glancing at her quickly, if she had been taking proper care of herself. Martha Harper was not as young as she used to be, Miss Strangeworth thought. She probably could use a good, strong tonic.

“Martha,” she said, “you don’t look well.”

"I'm perfectly all right," Mrs. Harper said shortly. She handed her money to Mr. Lewis, took her change and her sugar, and went out without speaking again. Looking after her, Miss Strangeworth shook her head slightly. Martha definitely did *not* look well.

Carrying her little bag of groceries, Miss Strangeworth came out of the store into the bright sunlight and stopped to smile down on the Crane baby. Don and Helen Crane were really the two most infatuated young parents she had ever known, she thought indulgently, looking at the delicately embroidered baby cap and the lace-edged carriage cover.

"That little girl is going to grow up expecting luxury all her life," she said to Helen Crane.

Helen laughed. "That's the way we want her to feel," she said. "Like a princess."

"A princess can be a lot of trouble sometimes," Miss Strangeworth said dryly. "How old is her highness now?"

"Six months next Tuesday," Helen Crane said, looking down with rapt wonder at her child. "I've been worrying, though, about her. Don't you think she ought to move around more? Try to sit up, for instance?"

"For plain and fancy worrying," Miss Strangeworth said, amused, "give me a new mother every time."

"She just seems — slow," Helen Crane said.

"Nonsense. All babies are different. Some of them develop much more quickly than others."

"That's what my mother says." Helen Crane laughed, looking a little bit ashamed.

"I suppose you've got young Don all upset about the fact that his daughter is already six months old and hasn't yet begun to learn to dance?"

“I haven’t mentioned it to him. I suppose she’s just so precious that I worry about her all the time.”

“Well, apologize to her right now,” Miss Strangeworth said. *“She* is probably worrying about why you keep jumping around all the time.” Smiling to herself and shaking her old head, she went on down the sunny street, stopping once to ask little Billy Moore why he wasn’t out riding in his daddy’s shiny new car, and talking for a few minutes outside the library with Miss Chandler, the librarian, about the new novels to be ordered, and paid for by the annual library appropriation. Miss Chandler seemed absentminded and very much as though she was thinking about something else. Miss Strangeworth noticed that Miss Chandler had not taken much trouble with her hair that morning, and sighed. Miss Strangeworth hated sloppiness.

Many people seemed disturbed recently, Miss Strangeworth thought. Only yesterday the Stewarts’ fifteen-year-old Linda had run crying down her own front walk and all the way to school, not caring who saw her. People around town thought she might have had a fight with the Harris boy, but they showed up together at the soda shop after school as usual, both of them looking grim and bleak. Trouble at home, people concluded, and sighed over the problems of trying to raise kids right these days.

From halfway down the block Miss Strangeworth could catch the heavy accent of her roses, and she moved a little more quickly. The perfume of roses meant home, and home meant the Strangeworth House on Pleasant Street. Miss Strangeworth stopped at her own front gate, as she always did, and looked with deep pleasure at her house, with the red and pink and white roses massed along the narrow lawn, and the rambler going up along the porch; and the neat, the unbelievably trim lines of the house itself, with its slimness and its washed white look. Every window sparkled, every curtain hung stiff and straight, and even the stones of the front walk were swept and clear. People around town wondered how old Miss Strangeworth managed to keep the house looking the way it did, and there was a legend about a tourist once mistaking it for the local museum and going all through the place without finding out about his mistake. But the town was proud of Miss Strangeworth and her roses and her house. They had all grown together. Miss Strangeworth went up her front steps, unlocked her front door with her key, and went into the kitchen to put away her groceries. She debated having a cup of tea and then decided that it was too close to midday dinnertime; she would not have the appetite for her little chop if she had tea now. Instead she went into the light, lovely sitting room, which still glowed from the hands of her mother and her grandmother, who had covered the chairs with bright chintz and hung the curtains. All the furniture was spare and shining, and the round hooked rugs on the floor had been the work of Miss Strangeworth's grandmother and her mother. Miss Strangeworth had put a bowl of her red roses on the low table before the window, and the room was full of their scent.

Miss Strangeworth went to the narrow desk in the corner, and unlocked it with her key. She never knew when she might feel like writing letters, so she kept her notepaper inside, and the desk locked. Miss Strangeworth's usual stationery was heavy and cream-colored, with "Strangeworth House" engraved across the top, but, when she felt like writing her other letters, Miss Strangeworth used a pad of various-colored paper, bought from the local newspaper shop. It was almost a town joke, that colored paper, layered in pink and green and blue and yellow; everyone in town bought it and used it for odd, informal notes and shopping lists. It was usual to remark, upon receiving a note written on a blue page, that so-and-so would be needing a new pad soon — here she was, down to the blue already. Everyone used the matching envelopes for tucking away recipes, or keeping odd little things in, or even to hold cookies in the school lunch boxes. Mr. Lewis sometimes gave them to the children for carrying home penny candy.

Although Miss Strangeworth's desk held a trimmed quill pen, which had belonged to her grandfather, and a gold-frost fountain pen, which had belonged to her father, Miss Strangeworth always used a dull stub of pencil when she wrote her letters, and she printed them in a childish block print. After thinking for a minute, although she had been phrasing the letter in the back of her mind all the way home, she wrote on a pink sheet: *Didn't you ever see an idiot child before? Some people just shouldn't have children, should they?*

She was pleased with the letter. She was fond of doing things exactly right. When she made a mistake, as she sometimes did, or when the letters were not spaced nicely on the page, she had to take the discarded page to the kitchen stove and burn it at once. Miss Strangeworth never delayed when things had to be done.

After thinking for a minute, she decided that she would like to write another letter, perhaps to go to Mrs. Harper, to follow up the ones she had already mailed. She selected a green sheet this time and wrote quickly: *Have you found out yet what they were all laughing about after you left the bridge club on Thursday? Or is the wife really always the last one to know?*

Miss Strangeworth never concerned herself with facts; her letters all dealt with the more negotiable stuff of suspicion. Mr. Lewis would never have imagined for a minute that his grandson might be lifting petty cash from the store register if he had not had one of Miss Strangeworth's letters. Miss Chandler, the librarian, and Linda Stewart's parents would have gone unsuspectingly ahead with their lives, never aware of possible evil lurking nearby, if Miss Strangeworth had not sent letters to open their eyes. Miss

Strangeworth would have been genuinely shocked if there *had* been anything between Linda Stewart and the Harris boy, but, as long as evil existed unchecked in the world, it was Miss Strangeworth's duty to keep her town alert to it. It was far more sensible for Miss Chandler to wonder what Mr. Shelley's first wife had really died of than to take a chance on not knowing. There were so many wicked people in the world and only one Strangeworth left in town. Besides, Miss Strangeworth liked writing her letters.

She addressed an envelope to Don Crane after a moment's thought, wondering curiously if he would show the letter to his wife, and using a pink envelope to match the pink paper. Then she addressed a second envelope, green, to Mrs. Harper. Then an idea came to her and she selected a blue sheet and wrote: *You never know about doctors. Remember they're only human and need money like the rest of us. Suppose the knife slipped accidentally. Would Doctor Burns get his fee and a little extra from that nephew of yours?*

She addressed the blue envelope to old Mrs. Foster, who was having an operation next month. She had thought of writing one more letter, to the head of the school board, asking how a chemistry teacher like Billy Moore's father could afford a new convertible, but all at once she was tired of writing letters. The three she had done would do for one day. She could write more tomorrow; it was not as though they all had to be done at once.

She had been writing her letters — sometimes two or three every day for a week, sometimes no more than one in a month — for the past year. She never got any answers, of course, because she never signed her name. If she had been asked, she would have said that her name, Adela Strangeworth, a name honored in the town for so many years, did not belong on such trash. The town where she lived had to be kept clean and sweet, but people everywhere were lustful and evil and degraded, and needed to be watched; the world was so large, and there was only one Strangeworth left in it. Miss Strangeworth sighed, locked her desk, and put the letters into her big, black leather pocketbook, to be mailed when she took her evening walk.

She broiled her little chop nicely, and had a sliced tomato and good cup of tea ready when she sat down to her midday dinner at the table in her dining room, which could be opened to seat twenty-two, with a second table, if necessary, in the hall. Sitting in the warm sunlight that came through the tall windows of the dining room, seeing her roses massed outside, handling the heavy, old silverware and the fine, translucent china, Miss Strangeworth was pleased; she would not have cared to be doing anything else. People must live graciously, after all, she thought, and sipped her tea. Afterward, when her plate and cup and saucer were washed and dried and put back onto the shelves where they belonged, and her silverware was back in the mahogany silver chest, Miss Strangeworth went up the graceful staircase and into her bedroom, which was the front room overlooking the roses, and had been her mother's and her grandmother's. Their Crown Derby dresser set and furs had been kept here, their fans and silver-backed brushes and their own bowls of roses; Miss Strangeworth kept a bowl of white roses on the bed table.

She drew the shades, took the rose-satin spread from the bed, slipped out of her dress and her shoes, and lay down tiredly. She knew that no doorbell or phone would ring; no one in town would dare to disturb Miss Strangeworth during her afternoon nap. She slept, deep in the rich smell of roses.

After her nap she worked in her garden for a little while, sparing herself because of the heat; then she went in to her supper. She ate asparagus from her own garden, with sweet-butter sauce, and a soft-boiled *egg*, and, while she had her supper, she listened to a late-evening news broadcast and then to a program of classical music on her small radio. After her dishes were done and her kitchen set in order, she took up her hat — Miss Strangeworth's hats were proverbial in the town; people believed that she had inherited them from her mother and her grandmother — and, locking the front door of her house behind her, set off on her evening walk, pocketbook under her arm. She nodded to Linda Stewart's father, who was washing his car in the pleasantly cool evening. She thought that he looked troubled.

There was only one place in town where she could mail her letters, and that was the new post office, shiny with red brick and silver letters. Although Miss Strangeworth had never given the matter any particular thought, she had always made a point of mailing her letters very secretly; it would, of course, not have been wise to let anyone see her mail them. Consequently, she timed her walk so she could reach the post office just as darkness was starting to dim the outlines of the trees and the shapes of people's faces, although no one could ever mistake Miss Strangeworth, with her dainty walk and her rustling skirts.

There was always a group of young people around the post office, the very youngest roller-skating upon its driveway, which went all the way around the building and was the only smooth road in town; and the slightly older ones already knowing how to gather in small groups and chatter and laugh and make great, excited plans for going across the street to the soda shop in a minute or two. Miss Strangeworth had never had any self-consciousness before the children. She did not feel that any of them were staring at her unduly or longing to laugh at her; it would have been most reprehensible for their parents to permit their children to mock Miss Strangeworth of Pleasant Street. Most of the children stood back respectfully as Miss Strangeworth passed, silenced briefly in her presence, and some of the older children greeted her, saying soberly, “Hello, Miss Strangeworth.”

Miss Strangeworth smiled at them and quickly went on. It had been a long time since she had known the name of every child in town. The mail slot was in the door of the post office. The children stood away as Miss Strangeworth approached it, seemingly surprised that anyone should want to use the post office after it had been officially closed up for the night and turned over to the children. Miss Strangeworth stood by the door, opening her black pocketbook to take out the letters, and heard a voice which she knew at once to be Linda Stewart’s. Poor little Linda was crying again, and Miss Strangeworth listened carefully. This was, after all, her town, and these were her people; if one of them was in trouble, she ought to know about it.

“I can’t tell you, Dave,” Linda was saying — so she *was* talking to the Harris boy, as Miss Strangeworth had supposed— “I just *can’t*. It’s just *nasty.”*

“But why won’t your father let me come around anymore? What on earth did I do?”

“I can’t tell you. I just wouldn’t tell you for anything. You’ve got to have a dirty dirty mind for things like that.”

“But something’s happened. You’ve been crying and crying, and your father is all upset. Why can’t I know about it, too? Aren’t I like one of the family?”

“Not anymore, Dave, not anymore. You’re not to come near our house again; my father said so. He said he’d horsewhip you. That’s all I can tell you: You’re not to come near our house anymore.”

“But I didn’t *do* anything.”

"Just the same, my father said…"

Miss Strangeworth sighed and turned away. There was so much evil in people. Even in a charming little town like this one, there was still so much evil in people.

She slipped her letters into the slot, and two of them fell inside. The third caught on the edge and fell outside, onto the ground at Miss Strangeworth's feet. She did not notice it because she was wondering whether a letter to the Harris boy's father might not be of some service in wiping out this potential badness. Wearily Miss Strangeworth turned to go home to her quiet bed in her lovely house, and never heard the Harris boy calling to her to say that she had dropped something.

"Old lady Strangeworth's getting deaf," he said, looking after her and holding in his hand the letter he had picked up.

"Well, who cares?" Linda said. "Who cares anymore, anyway?"

"It's for Don Crane," the Harris boy said, "this letter. She dropped a letter addressed to Don Crane. Might as well take it on over. We pass his house anyway." He laughed. "Maybe it's got a check or something in it and he'd be just as glad to get it tonight instead of tomorrow."

"Catch old lady Strangeworth sending anybody a check," Linda said. "Throw it in the post office. Why do anyone a favor?" She sniffed. "Doesn't seem to me anybody around here cares about us," she said. "Why should we care about them?"

"I'll take it over, anyway," the Harris boy said. "Maybe it's good news for them. Maybe they need something happy tonight, too. Like us."

Sadly, holding hands, they wandered off down the dark street, the Harris boy carrying Miss Strangeworth's pink envelope in his hand.

Miss Strangeworth awakened the next morning with a feeling of intense happiness and, for a minute, wondered why, and then remembered that this morning three people would open her letters. Harsh, perhaps, at first, but wickedness was never easily banished, and a clean heart was a scoured heart. She washed her soft, old face and brushed her teeth, still sound in spite of her seventy-one years, and dressed herself carefully in her sweet, soft clothes and buttoned shoes. Then, going downstairs, reflecting that perhaps a little waffle would be agreeable for breakfast in the sunny dining room, she found the mail on the hall floor, and bent to pick it up. A bill, the morning paper, a letter in a green envelope that looked oddly familiar. Miss Strangeworth stood perfectly still for a minute, looking down at the green envelope with the penciled printing, and thought: It looks like one of my letters. Was one of my letters sent back? No, because no one would know where to send it. How did this get here?

Miss Strangeworth was a Strangeworth of Pleasant Street. Her hand did not shake as she opened the envelope and unfolded the sheet of green paper inside. She began to cry silently for the wickedness of the world when she read the words: *Look out at what used to be your roses*.

THE SMOKING ROOM

HE WAS TALLER THAN I had imagined him. And noisier. Here I was, all by myself, downstairs in the dormitory smoking room with my typewriter, and all of a sudden there was this terrific crash and sort of sizzle, and I turned around and there he was.

“Can’t you be a little quieter?” I said. “I’m trying to work.”

He just stood there, with smoke rolling off his head. “This is as quietly as I can do it,” he said apologetically. “It takes a lot of explosive power, you know.”

“Well, explode somewhere else,” I said. “Men aren’t allowed in here.”

“I know,” he said.

I turned around to get a good look at him. He was still smoking a little, but otherwise he seemed quite a charming young man. The horns were barely noticeable, and he was wearing pointed patent leather shoes that covered his cloven hoofs. He seemed to be waiting for me to make conversation.

“You must be the devil,” I said politely, and added: “I presume.”

“Yes,” he said, pleased. “I *am* the devil.”

“Where’s your tail?” I demanded. He blushed and made a vague gesture with his hand.

“Circumstances…” he murmured. He came over to the table where I was working. “What’re you doing?” he asked.

“I’m writing a paper,” I said.

“Let’s see.” He reached over to the typewriter and I shoved his hand away, getting quite a nasty burn from it, too.

“Mind your own business,” I told him.

He sat down meekly. “Look,” he said, “do you have an extra cigarette?”

I threw the pack over to him and watched him light one with the tip of his finger. My hand was all inflamed where I had touched him, and it hurt.

I held out my hand to him. “You oughtn’t to treat people like that,” I said. “It makes enemies.”

He looked at my hand sympathetically, then murmured over it, and the burn vanished. “That’s better,” I said.

We sat back and smoked for a minute, looking at each other. He was a good-looking guy.

“By the way,” I said finally, “do you mind telling me what you’re here for?”

“This is a college, isn’t it?”

I looked at him for a minute, but he didn’t seem to mean anything nasty, so I said: “You are at present in the smoking room of the largest girls’ dormitory on the campus of State University, and the housemother will raise hell if she finds you here.”

He began to laugh, and I realized that my choice of words had been a little silly, to say the least.

“I’d like to meet this housemother,” he said.

I tried to imagine what *that* would be like, and gave up. “She’s the closest thing to you you’ll find on earth,” I said earnestly.

He raised his eyebrows, and then suddenly seemed to think of something, because he reached into a pocket and pulled out a piece of paper.

“I wonder if you’d mind signing this?” he asked casually.

I picked up the paper. “May I read it first?”

He shrugged. “It isn’t important, but go ahead.”

I read: "'This gives the devil my soul,'" and a space was left blank for my name. "This isn't awfully legal," I said.

He looked anxiously over my shoulder. "Isn't it?" he said. "What's wrong with it?"

"Well, obviously!" I threw the paper down on the table and pointed at it scornfully. "Who's ever going to think that holds in a court of law? No witnesses, a thousand loopholes for a smart lawyer…"

He had picked up the paper and was frowning over it miserably. "It's always been perfectly all right before," he said.

"Well, I'm just surprised at your methods of doing business, that's all. No court would even look at it."

"Look," he said. "We'll make out another contract… one *you* think is all right. I don't want to do this thing wrong, after all."

I thought. "All right," I said. "I'll make one up. Mind you, I'm not awfully sure of the legal terminology, but I think I can manage."

"Go ahead," he said. "If it suits you, it suits me."

I pulled the paper out of the typewriter and found a carbon and two new sheets.

He looked at the carbon suspiciously.

"What's that?"

"I'm making two copies," I told him. "I've got to keep one myself. That makes it binding."

He continued to regard me suspiciously while I worked over the contract.

"How long is this contract good for?" I asked at once.

"Oh, eternity," he said easily.

I finally finished and took the sheets out of the typewriter. Due to the fact that my knowledge of legal documents is restricted to the notices the dean sends out about poor grades, the contract was just a little confused. It read:

I (here a space was left blank for a name), hereinafter to be known as the party of the first part, do hereby sell and consign my soul, hereinafter to be known as the party of the second part, to the custody and careful watchfulness of (here another space was left blank), hereinafter to be known as the party of the third part, who does hereby swear and promise the sum of one dollar in return, also other unnamed considerations, admitting and conceding that it is a fair and just bargain, and no complaints afterward; this agreement to be binding, by mutual consent of the parties concerned, in any court of law, wherever conducted, (signed) (witnessed)

The devil read it twice. “I don’t understand it,” he said.

“It says the same thing as yours did,” I told him, “except that it’s more binding.” I pointed over his shoulder. “You see all those things about the parties of the first and second parts? And about the court of law? That all makes it legal.”

“Well, sign it, then,” he said.

I thought. “We need a witness,” I said. “I’ll go upstairs and get my roommate.”

I left before he could say anything. My roommate was asleep.

“Look, Bobbie,” I said. I shook her. She turned over and said, “Go away.”

“Bobbie,” I said, “you’ve got to come and witness a contract.”

“What the hell,” Bobbie said.

“I’ve got the devil waiting downstairs.”

“Let him wait,” Bobbie said. She had both eyes open but she wouldn’t move. I rolled her out of bed and stood her up. “Come on,” I said. “He’ll get impatient.”

“Signing contracts with the devil,” Bobbie said in disgust. “At three in the morning. How’s a person ever going to get any sleep.”

“Come *on!”* I said.

Bobbie sat down on the edge of her bed. “If he’s been waiting all these thousands of years,” she said, “he can wait until I get some lipstick on.”

By the time I got her downstairs, the devil had smoked four more of my cigarettes. He got up when we entered and bowed very low to Bobbie.

“Charmed,” he said.

Bobbie smiled at him invitingly. “Hello,” she said.

“Come on, you two,” I told them, “I’ve got to get this over with and get back to work.”

“What do I have to do?” Bobbie said, looking at the devil out of the corner of her eye.

“Just sign,” the devil said, taking her arm to lead her over to the table.

Bobbie let out a yell that ought to have waked the housemother and the whole dormitory. The devil backed away and began to apologize, but Bobbie stood there rubbing her arm and glaring.

“Look,” she said belligerently, “I’m not fooling around with any guy sets fire to you when he touches you.” The devil looked at Bobbie’s arm and made the burn go away, but after that Bobbie kept the table between them. I took up the contract.

“I’ll sign first,” I said. I wrote my name quickly in the *second* blank and handed the paper to the devil.

“You have to sign, too,” I said.

“Where?” He looked blankly at the paper. I showed him the first place and handed him my pen. He blushed, and looked from me to Bobbie. “I’m afraid…” he began, “do you mind if…” he shrugged and made an X in the space. “I never learned…” he said apologetically. Bobbie’s jaw dropped and she just stood there until I kicked her in the ankle.

“Sign here,” I said, and she signed in the witness space.

Then the devil and I signed again at the bottom, and signed the duplicate the same way, and I handed him one sheet and kept the other.

“Now,” I said as casually as I could, “I guess I owe you a dollar.”

“What for?” he said.

“Bobbie,” I said rapidly, “run upstairs and borrow a buck from someone.”

“What the hell,” Bobbie said. But she turned around and started up the stairs.

“Well,” said the devil, rubbing his hands, “what can I do for you now?”

I began to polish my nails on my hand. “Let’s see,” I said. “I’ll start out with an A in Chemistry 186, the power to be invisible when I come in after hours, a date with the captain of the football team for the senior ball—”

“Throw in something for me,” said Bobbie, coming through the door.

“Let’s see,” I said, “give her—”

“A date with that blond guy,” said Bobbie, *“you* know.” She handed me a dollar.

“I guess that’s about all,” I said to the devil.

“Except, of course,” Bobbie put in, “except for a couple of hundred thousand dollars.”

“You shall have all those things,” the devil promised eagerly.

“Oh, yes,” I said. “And you get this out of it.” I handed him the dollar.

“What’s this for?” he asked.

I looked at the contract. “That’s for your soul,” I said.

The devil looked at his contract. *“Your* soul,” he said.

"No." I showed him the contract. "Where you signed, it says you give me your soul for the sum of one dollar, also other unnamed considerations. Those would be the cigarettes of mine you smoked."

"And getting me out of bed," Bobbie added.

The devil read the contract again. Then he began to stamp his feet, and flames came out of his mouth. Bobbie and I looked at each other.

"Golly," she said. "What a date *this* guy would be!"

Just then the devil seemed to get a little pale, and he backed up against the wall, staring in back of us. Bobbie and I turned around, and there was the housemother. She stood in the doorway, in a bathrobe, with curlpapers on her hair, and she was an awe-inspiring sight.

She looked at the devil. "Young man," she said, "what are you doing here?"

"Ma'am…" the devil began.

"You're a fire hazard," she snapped.

"Yes'm," the devil said.

"Leave at once," she said ominously, "before I report you to the dean of women."

The devil cast one dreadful look at Bobbie and me, and then tried to vanish in a puff of smoke. All he succeeded in, however, was a weak sizzle, and then he was gone.

"All *right,"* said the housemother. Then she turned to Bobbie and me.

"Well?" she said.

"Look," Bobbie began.

"You see, it was like this—" I said.

"Hmph," said the housemother. "Devils, indeed!" And she went back to bed.

I DON'T KISS STRANGERS

EVERY TIME HE CAME over to where she was sitting he would start to say something and then decide not to; there were too many people around for him to say anything sentimental, and her attitude discouraged whatever humorous comments the situation suggested. Once he sat down next to her and took hold of her hand, but she only smiled at him vaguely and went on staring straight in front of her.

The room was so full of people and there was so much noise and he wanted to get her outside somewhere into the night, but there was nothing to say to her to get her there. He told someone about it, somewhere along in the evening. "You can't just go up to a girl in the middle of a party and say 'come on outside into the air, we gotta say goodbye somehow.'"

But the guy he told about it said only, "For Christ sake take her in the bedroom, it's empty now," and wandered away.

Finally, when the party was good and drunk, and the singing was loud enough to cover most conversations, he went over and sat down next to her again.

"Look," he said, "I'd sort of like to talk to you."

"Sure," she said. "I'm listening."

There wasn't anything to say from there; he thought of reminding her that this was their last evening together, but discarded that as tactless; he also wanted to ask her why their last time together should be spent with the two of them out of joint, but knew he could never get an answer. He said: "I keep looking at you all the time."

“I don’t want to look at you now,” she said very quickly, “I’ve got enough to remember you now.”

“You’ll come see me, won’t you?” He grabbed her hand and tugged at it, trying to make her look at him. “You’ll come be a camp follower, won’t you?”

“Nope,” she said. “I’m going home. To mother.”

“And you’ll spend all day sitting in a nice cool bridge luncheon while I slave away over a hot Garand rifle.”

“Shut up,” she said.

Now was the time, and he said it. “Come away. Let’s get out of here.”

“I don’t want to get too far from the liquor,” she said.

“Just outside for a few minutes.”

“No.” Then she said, “Wait a minute. Come on.” She picked up her drink and a box of cigarettes and waved at him to follow her. She took him into the bathroom and locked the door.

“Here,” she said. “Now we aren’t too far away and there aren’t any people.”

“Suppose someone wants to come in,” he said, sitting on the edge of the bathtub.

“Let them wait. We won’t be long.”

“Such a cheerful place,” he said, looking around. “Dedicated, like our publishing houses, to the least pleasant waste of humanity.”

“Goody,” she said. “We’re going to have a drawing room parting. You must be Noel Coward and go on saying things like that.”

“What’s the matter with you, for God’s sake — you just drunk?”

“No,” she said.

It seemed that now he could say anything that had seemed too tactless or too useless before, so he began: “Darling, it’s our last evening together, and

I don’t want it spoiled …”

“Why should our last evening be any different from any other? I spoiled enough of them before, didn’t I?”

“But I don’t want to keep thinking of you like—”

“Listen,” she said. “This isn’t one of our good times together — didn’t you know that? Can’t you see that there’s a difference between us being in love and having fun, and you being drafted and us being in love?”

“It’s different?” he asked.

“Sure, it’s different. Up to last night everything was the same, but the minute it started being your last day with me it got to be different. And it’s going to be different for a hell of a long time.”

“A year.”

“Stop the crap about a year,” she said. “Even if you do come back you’ll be an ex-soldier. You’ll have all sorts of dreadful things to remember and you’ll be different.”

“Anyone would think you were the one got the draft number,” he said.

“You think I didn’t? I can sit here and say yes, it’ll be a long time before I see you again, and not even intimate what a long time means. How I’ll sit around and read letters. Or find me another guy. I haven’t even got an idea what this new guy looks like. I don’t even know how his voice will sound. That’s what a long time means. And all the things I’ll have to do without you. I can’t even comprehend right now the number of times I’ll get into bed by myself. Or with somebody else — this guy I don’t know. Or how many times I’ll run out of cigarettes without having you to run out and get them.”

“Yeah,” he said, “but which one of us has to lie on his belly in the mud?”

“Which one of us has to readdress your mail?” she said. “Who’s going to have to wind the clock now, or remember to take out the garbage every night?”

“You’ll get used to it.”

“Then I’ll be different too. I’ll be someone who’s living without you, like you’re someone who goes to army camp tomorrow.”

“But why can’t we be happy tonight, at least?” he demanded. “Why the hell do we have to bawl about it? We’re fighting because I’m going away — that’s silly.”

“Nobody’s fighting,” she said, “and nobody’s bawling. You’d like nothing better than a chance to pat me on the back and say ‘there there, it’s only a year,’ but I won’t let you. I won’t even feel bad — just different.”

“But why?”

“Because this saying goodbye is the only thing I’ve got now,” she said. “Because I’ve got to go on doing the same old things forever afterward, that’s why, and nothing stays the same when you’re different.”

“That doesn’t make sense,” he said. “You mean I’m different because I’m going away.”

“Can’t you see?” she said. Then: “Look, I’ll try again. You’re not just the guy I love anymore. You’re the guy I love who’s been drafted. And all I get out of it is this few minutes saying goodbye to you. When you go away I won’t have anything at all except what you leave me. And I don’t want to spend these last few minutes with the guy I love who’s been drafted.”

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I don’t get it.”

“No,” she said. “Well, I’ll write you a letter.”

Someone began to pound on the door, then, and he said, “The party sounds like it’s breaking up.”

“Yeah,” she said. She stood up. “Well…”

He stopped at the door and turned around. “You’re not going to cry, are you?”

“No,” she said.

She walked around him and unlocked the door, and he put out his arms to her, but she turned away.

“No,” she said. “I don’t kiss strangers. You ought to know that by now.”

SUMMER AFTERNOON

ROSABELLE JEMIMA HENDERSON, WHO could open and close her eyes and had real hair that could be curled and braided, lay back comfortably against the pink pillow in her doll stroller. Beside her, Amelia Marian Dawson, who could take real walking steps when her hands were held, and could say Mama and Dada upon request, slept, her long lashes shadowing her delicately colored cheeks under the roof of her doll carriage. On the front steps of the Dawson house, their maternal duties suspended for a minute, Jeannie Dawson and Carrie Henderson bent solemnly over their second-favorite game, which between themselves they called Flower People. Jeannie had fair hair pulled back into a pony tail tied with a pink ribbon, and Carrie had square-cut dark hair and wore a red shirt. Carrie thought that Jeannie's mother was the second-nicest mother in the world, and Carrie's father could make Jeannie laugh until she squeaked, when he made funny faces.

When they played Flower People they made tiny houses of leaves and grass, and the little bells from the bush next to Jeannie's front porch were dainty pink and white ladies. From the low tree around the side of Jeannie's house they gathered green pods which made cradles for the little flower children. Jeannie had a nutshell for a table in her house, and Carrie had a scrap of silver paper for a rug in her house. "My lady is coming to visit your lady," Jeannie said, and minced a pink blossom over to Carrie's house. "How do you do, Mrs. Brown?" the pink lady asked. "I have come to see you for lunch."

“How do you do, Mrs. Smith,” Carrie’s white lady said, flouncing to her own front door. “Will you come in and sit down in my living room with the silver carpet and I will make some lunch for us.”

The pink lady and the white lady sat in leaf chairs and between them Carrie set a rose petal with two bird berries on it. “Will you have some ice cream?” the white lady asked. “And some cake and cookies? I made them myself.”

“Thank you very very much,” the pink lady said. “They are certainly very very delicious.”

“Listen,” Carrie said, white lady poised. “Listen, my mother *did* make some cookies today.”

“Then let’s go over to your house,” Jeannie said.

“We’ll ask her will she give us cookies and milk,” Carrie said.

Leaving the pink and white ladies at lunch, and Rosabelle and Amelia sound asleep by the steps, they moved down the front walk, stopping once to examine a small creature, which Carrie thought was most probably a daddy longlegs and Jeannie thought was almost certainly a baby caterpillar, and then paused again on the sidewalk to wonder if the moving van might possibly be going to stop on their block; when it continued on past them, they went lingeringly up the front walk to Carrie’s house. There was a path through the hedge that stood between the two houses; this was used by Jeannie’s mother and Carrie’s mother and by their fathers, going back and forth, but Carrie and Jeannie used the front walks, because they always had plenty of time.

Carrie’s mother had indeed made cookies, but it was too close to dinnertime for more than one cookie each and so, nibbling carefully around the edges to make the cookies last longer, they came out of Carrie’s house and wandered down the sidewalk again.

“I don’t want to play Flower People anymore,” Jeannie said.

“I don’t want to either,” Carrie said. “We could play hopscotch.”

“Hopscotch is really only about my fifteenth-favorite thing to do,” Jeannie said. “We could play jumprope.”

“Jumproping is only about my hundredth-favorite thing to do. We could play dancing.”

“We could color with crayons.”

“We could climb the walnut tree.”

“We could play dancing.”

Carrie thought. “We could go see Tippie,” she said.

“Yes.” Jeannie nodded so that her long hair flopped over her face. “We can go see Tippie.”

Just of a size, they moved with slow grace along the sidewalk, nibbling at their cookies. “We haven’t been to see Tippie for a very very long time,” Jeannie said.

“Maybe Tippie’s been wishing we could come to see her.”

“Maybe Tippie’s been sad because we never came.”

“It’s been days and days since we went to see Tippie.”

Without planning, they both began to skip on the same step. They did not need to ask each other if skipping might be a good idea just along here, because at this point they always began to skip, and skipped until they came just past the Browns’ driveway, where the sidewalk was broken. Then they walked again, going solemnly single file along the broken place in the sidewalk and then walking again side by side to the corner and around it, past the vacant lot where, one evening, the big boys in the neighborhood had made a Boy Scout campfire and roasted potatoes, and Carrie and Jeannie, watching curiously from the sidewalk, had each been given a toasted marshmallow, which was sticky but nice. The vacant lot belonged to the Browns, but all the big kids in the neighborhood played there, and once the boys had built a kind of hut, and no girls were allowed. Jeannie and Carrie were not allowed to play in the vacant lot because they were small, but they were allowed to walk around the block so long as they did not put one foot, not even one toe, into the street. Even when it rained and the water ran raging down the gutters and the big kids built dams and sailed leaf boats, Jeannie and Carrie were not allowed to put one toe off the sidewalk into the street. This was perfectly fair. When Jeannie and Carrie were big kids they would play in the gutter when it rained and would go to school all day and make snow forts in the vacant lot. While Jeannie and Carrie were small — it was perfectly fair — they could go all around the block, even pushing their doll carriages if they liked, but not put one toe into the street.

Once, along this block past the vacant lot, the Harris boy had given first Carrie and then Jeannie a ride in his skate wagon, and sometimes in the early evening, just after dinner, when the sky was still green and voices sounded strangely far away, Carrie and Jeannie were allowed to walk together around the corner and watch the big kids play kick-the-can in the street, or hide-and-seek around the streetlight, or prisoner’s base. One of the big girls who played prisoner’s base came sometimes to baby-sit for Jeannie or Carrie when their mothers and fathers went out in the evening, and then she would read stories, and cut out paper dolls.

Around the next corner was the part that Carrie and Jeannie did not like so well, but it was where Tippie lived. Through the trees behind these houses they could see the backs of their own houses, where they lived, and it was funny to see your own house from the back, when it couldn’t see you. One of the things that made this street less happy was Mrs. Branson’s garden, which was long and dark and shadowy with big drooping trees, and not at all a good place to play, even when Mrs. Branson did not come out and say she would call the police if children kept running over her lawn.

“I wonder if Tippie’s looking for us,” Jeannie said, skipping again; they always skipped going past Mrs. Branson’s house, because they liked to get past it quickly. “I bet she’s been waiting and waiting and waiting for us to come again.”

“I bet she’s been asking her mother could she call us on the telephone,” Carrie said.

Tippie’s house was on the corner. It would have been shorter to go around the other way, up the other side of the block, but Carrie and Jeannie always went to Tippie’s house along the street with the vacant lot; they always had plenty of time. The other way was the way to go home; after passing Tippie’s house the only place to go was the way home. Besides, from this side they could see Tippie’s window as they went along the street.

“I wonder if she’s there today,” Carrie said, stopping on the sidewalk to look up at the second-floor window. “I can see her dollhouse inside there.”

They looked up anxiously. Sometimes the window caught the sun and then they could not see anything inside, but sometimes, like today, the window shone clean and sparkling in the afternoon light.

“I can see her teddy bear and her giraffe,” Jeannie said.

“I bet she’s got her toy shelf right along under the windowsill,” Carrie said as she had said many times before. “That way, everyone can see her toys and when she comes home she can look right up and see them waiting there for her, her teddy bear and her dollhouse.”

“The Noah’s Ark is gone,” Jeannie said. “I bet she’s playing with her Noah’s Ark today.”

“And the pretty doll in the blue dress is gone. I bet she has her doll and is playing dolls with it, and then she’s going to play with her Noah’s Ark.”

“I wish she’d even wave, or something,” Jeannie said.

“I wish she’d even come to the window and look at us and wave,” Carrie said.

“I wish she’d come outdoors and play sometimes,” Jeannie said.

“Maybe she was disobedient and her mother said she had to stay in her room all day,” Carrie said as she had said many times before.

“Maybe she was sick and her mother said she had to stay in bed till her temperature went down,” Jeannie said as she had said many times before.

“Maybe she has a friend who comes to play with her every afternoon.”

“Maybe she has a baby kitten and can’t leave it all alone.”

“I wish she’d even wave, sometimes,” Carrie said.

“I bet she’s glad when we come to see her, though.”

Sighing, Carrie turned away. “I guess she doesn’t want to play with us today, either.”

They stood for a minute, looking up at the window. “Bye, Tippie,” Jeannie said softly. “Bye, Tippie,” Carrie said.

Then they began to skip, going on along the sidewalk, and skipped around the corner and most of the way down the next street; this was the longest skipping they did, because this street was not interesting at all, just houses with no children unless you counted the Andovers’ little tiny baby which might just be outside in its baby carriage and Jeannie and Carrie could tiptoe up very very softly and peek in, smiling with incredulous delight at the tiny hands and the little pink sleeping face. Today not even the Andovers’ baby was outside, and so they skipped all the way down to the corner and around that corner to Jeannie’s front steps, where the flower ladies still lingered over their dainty lunch, and Rosabelle and Amelia slept on.

“I’m going to ask my mother why Tippie can’t come out and play,” Jeannie said suddenly.

“Then your mother could call her mother on the telephone and say could Tippie come over,” Carrie pointed out. “I’m going to ask *my* mother can Tippie please come to my birthday party.”

“I’m going to ask my mother can Tippie come over tomorrow.”

“I’m going to ask my mother can Tippie come and live with us.” Giggling wildly, they reeled down the sidewalk just as the back door of Carrie’s house opened and Carrie’s mother called, “Carrie? Carrie? Time to come in now.”

Sitting in the kitchen on the high stool beside the counter, Jeannie watched her mother peeling potatoes, and sang quietly to herself. Outside it was getting darker; the leaves were changing color, and soon it would be the end of summer and the big kids would go back to school. In another year Jeannie and Carrie would go to school, would walk off each morning with the big kids, would even, perhaps, carry a book or a pencil box or lunch in a paper bag; “Mommy,” Jeannie said absently, “will Tippie go to school someday?”

“I suppose so. Who is Tippie?”

“The little girl.”

“If she’s a little girl she will certainly go to school. Where does she live?”

“Around the corner. We go to see her all the time, me and Carrie.”

Jeannie’s mother hesitated, frowning. “Another little girl around here?” she asked, and then, worried, “Baby,” she said, “have you and Carrie been crossing the street?”

“No, no, not a toe,” Jeannie said, and giggled. “Tippie lives on *our* block. Around the corner. Past Mrs. Branson’s dark old garden.”

"Which house, baby?"

"On the corner, after Mrs. Branson's garden. We start from our own front walk and we go to the corner and we go around and we go past the vacant lot and then we go around *that* corner and we go past Mrs. Branson's and then on the *next* corner is Tippie's house."

Mrs. Dawson put down the potato she was peeling and came to lean on the counter across from Jeannie; she put out one finger and touched Jeannie's nose and both of them laughed. "Silly small thing," Mrs. Dawson said. "That's the Archers' house."

"And Tippie lives there. We go and look up at the window and we see her playing but she doesn't come outside. We go and watch her."

Mrs. Dawson stopped laughing and came around the end of the counter and gathered Jeannie up off the stool and then sat down with Jeannie in her lap. Jeannie curled herself up and sighed luxuriously. "Baby," Mrs. Dawson said, "did someone talk to you about Mrs. Archer and her little girl? Maybe Helen, when she came to baby-sit?"

"No," Jeannie said, wondering. "But can you call Mrs. Archer and ask her can Tippie come over and play sometime?"

"Baby," Mrs. Dawson said, and stopped. Then she took a breath and asked slowly, "Baby, did you ever hear of people dying?"

"Sure," Jeannie said, surprised. "Great-grandmother died, and Carrie's goldfish."

"Mrs. Archer had a little girl, and she died," Mrs. Dawson said, still speaking very carefully. "You must have heard someone talking about it; it didn't happen very long ago."

"Tippie stays in her room all the time. We watch her put her toys on the windowsill and take them down again. She has a Noah's Ark and a doll in a blue dress and a yellow giraffe."

"Jeannie." Mrs. Dawson gave her a little shake. "There *is* no little girl at the Archers' house. There are no children there at all now," and she held Jeannie tighter. "There are certainly no toys. I know." She hesitated again. "I packed them away myself," she said. "They gave everything away."

"Why did you have to pack the things if they belonged to Mrs. Archer's little girl? Why didn't Mrs. Archer pack them herself?"

"Mrs. Archer wasn't feeling very well. Carrie's mother and Mrs. Brown and I went over to help her."

"That was nice of you." Jeannie wriggled comfortably. "Helping her pack when she didn't feel well."

"But you must promise me something, baby. You must promise me that you will never *never* say anything to Mrs. Archer about pretending to see a little girl—"

Jeannie sat up indignantly. "It's not pretending," she said. "We go all the time and watch Tippie. It's our third-favorite game."

Mrs. Dawson started to speak, and then stopped. Instead, she put her cheek down on Jeannie's bright head. "Why do you call her Tippie?" she asked after a minute.

Jeannie giggled. "We thought sometimes we could see just the tip of her head or the tip of her hand waving, so we called her Tippie. It's a name we made up, Carrie and me."

"I see," Mrs. Dawson said. Then she went on brightly, "You know, young lady, if I don't get my potatoes peeled pretty soon, your daddy will come home and he'll say 'WHERE'S MY DINNER,' and when there isn't any dinner what do you think he'll do?"

"He'll spank us," Jeannie said delightedly. "He'll spank us both."

She slid off her mother's lap and landed on the floor, laughing and sitting. "Mommy," she asked, "would you feel bad if I died like Tippie?"

Mrs. Dawson reached out and touched Jeannie's nose quickly and lightly. "Yes," she said. "I would feel very bad indeed."

"Listen," Jeannie said, scrambling to her feet, "there's Carrie calling me. Why do you suppose she came over again just before dinner?"

Scurrying, she raced through the dining room and through the hall and tugged open the front door. "Hi, Carrie," she said.

"I forgot Rosabelle Jemima," Carrie said. "I had to come and get her so she wouldn't catch cold being outside so late."

"Did you ask your mother could Tippie come over?"

"Yes, but she said no," Carrie said. "Did you?"

"Yes, but she said no. Ask your mother can I come to your house for lunch tomorrow."

"I'll ask her. And you ask your mother can I come to *your* house for lunch tomorrow. Then we can call each other on the telephone and say."

"All right. You can bring Rosabelle Jemima if she doesn't catch cold."

"All right. Goodbye, Jeannie."

"Goodbye, Carrie."

Carrie turned the doll stroller and started off down the walk. "Listen," Jeannie called, "you ask your mother."

"I will. And you ask yours."

"Don't forget."

"You don't forget either."

"Goodbye, Carrie."

"Goodbye, Jeannie."

"See you tomorrow."

"See you tomorrow."

"Goodbye, Rosabelle Jemima."

"Goodbye, Amelia Marian."

“Goodbye.”

“Goodbye.”

INDIANS LIVE IN TENTS

36 Elm St.
Tuesday

Dear Miss Griswold,

This is just a note of thanks, to say that I want you to know how much I certainly appreciate your kindness in letting me have this apartment. Every time I come home at night and look around my own little room-and-a-half I think of you, and I think of how if I didn't speak to Timmy Richards and Timmy Richards hadn't known Eve Martin and Eve Martin hadn't gotten in touch with Bill Ireland and Bill Ireland hadn't known you, then I would still be living out in Staten Island with my sister and her kids, and I remember how grateful I am to you for giving me your apartment. I wish you could see it now. Of course your stuff was good-looking, and I guess I could never make this place look as pretty as you had it, but of course the first thing I had to do was put away all that stuff with the ruffles and the curtains and things, and now I've got my ship models and my college pictures up and it sure looks swell. Whenever you want your stuff, of course, it's right here. I wouldn't touch it for anything.

Well, thanks again, and I sure hope you're happy in your new place. You sure were lucky to get it and whenever you want to send for your furniture I'll send it along to you and then get my furniture from Bill Ireland and he can get his stuff from Timmy Richards and Timmy can get his back from his mother. So thanks again, and yours very sincerely,

Allan Burlingame

101 Eastern Square
Thursday

Dear Mr. Burlingame,

I'm so glad you like my apartment, and of course I'm truly delighted that I was able to pass it along to you. Naturally I'm not even beginning to be settled here yet, so of course can't send for my furniture right away. However, as soon as I get my sublease straightened out, we can fix everything. As you know, I'm having a little trouble with the landlord, because we didn't want to tell him right away about how I was subleasing the place — he wanted it for his aunt or something — so of course it's not really legal yet, my being here. As a result I'd be very grateful if you didn't address your letters such as the last one to me direct. Address them to me care of Tuttle, which is the name of the people I'm subleasing from. Or better still, if you have any problems, telephone. The number is listed under the name of J. T. Maloney, which is the name of the people the Tuttles subleased from, and of course no one liked to have the phone changed because the landlord never really liked having the Tuttles sublease from the Maloneys.

As a matter of fact, it's just me and the telephone here now. I managed to wear two blankets in under my coat when I came in so I can roll up in them at night, and I had my toothbrush in my pocketbook and I've sneaked in a towel and a cake of soap, but otherwise it's sort of empty. The Tuttles took their furniture out piece by piece and put it into the back of their car covered with a rug, and yesterday the bed went and I must say it looked like the janitor was going to catch us taking the springs down the back stairs.

If you know of any way you can sneak some kind of a folding chair up to me, I'd appreciate it.

Yours very truly,

Marian Griswold

36 Elm St.
Monday

Dear Miss Griswold,

Sorry to hear of your roughing it. There is nothing I would like better than turning over all your furniture to you right away, since my friends think it is sort of funny my sleeping in a bed with a pink canopy and keeping my watch and loose change on a dresser with a gauze skirt thing on it. I finally found the telephone under that little doll effect you had, and would call you instead of writing except that the telephone book is holding up one foot of the bathtub and I can't get it out. I also wish you could get some of your clothes out of the closet partly because I could use the hangers and partly because my aunt brought me over a chocolate cake yesterday and when she went to the closet to hang up her coat I had a terrible time explaining to her. Can you think of anything?

Sincerely,

Allan Burlingame

101 Eastern Square
Wednesday

Dear Mr. Burlingame,

I am having enough trouble getting in and out of my apartment myself without trying to carry a dresser with a gauze skirt. If you don't like it, move. I have to go up the stairs one flight at a time, hiding in the shadows on every landing for fear someone should see me and tell the landlord there is someone strange living in the Tuttles' apartment. I gave the janitor five *dollars and I told him I was visiting the Tuttles and they never came out of the apartment because they all had influenza, but I'm pretty sure he knows they moved out and I am living there because I think he saw the living room chairs in the elevator, and I know he saw me moving in the cot, but I told him it was because the Tuttles didn't have enough beds, and then I gave him the five dollars.*

At any rate I have a place to sleep now and I hope to get in a coffeepot tomorrow or the next day. As soon as I tell the landlord that the Tuttles have moved and I am leasing the apartment I will be able to send for my furniture.

Yours very truly,

Marian Griswold

Shax, Asmodeus, Baal, and Co. Realtors

Dear Mrs. Tuttle,

In reference to the apartment 3C at 101 Eastern Square, subleased in your name from Mr. J. T. Maloney, we are sorry to be in a position to inform you that your sublease having expired, we have no choice but to inform you that your sublease on apartment 3C at 101 Eastern Square is no longer valid, and we shall expect to recover said premises on October 1st of this year, that being the date upon when your sublease expires. We are sorry to inform you that if you do not vacate said premises before said date we shall have to service upon you first warning of a notice of eviction.

Yours extremely cordially,

B. H. Shax, Executive Vice President

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101 Eastern Square
Monday

Dear Helen,
This just came. What shall I do?
Desperately,

Marian

95 Martin Lane
Wednesday

Dear Marian,

Hang on, if you can. Because we have trouble enough of our own — it turns out the owner of this apartment can't stand children and just because some old grouch complained about Butchie's tricycle in the halls, and anyway it's their own fault if the old halls are so dark, anyway, the landlord is being real nasty about it. So whatever you do do, don't let go of that apartment — we may be coming back.

Best,

Helen

36 Elm St.
Thursday

Dear Miss Griswold,

I am very sorry to keep bothering you like this, but the lady in the apartment down the hall here says that you owe her a dollar and sixty-five cents for a C.O.D. package which you never paid her, and I tried to give her your new address but she said she wanted the money so I had to give her the dollar sixty-five, which I am afraid left me rather pressed, since the rent here is higher than I was paying my sister when I lived with her. So I would *be grateful if you could send it along. Also the bottom of your bookcase fell out and I tried to put it back but didn't do much of a job on it. And I'm sorry but I burned a hole in the top of your coffee table.*

How are you getting along in your new place? I think I know where I can borrow a car and anytime you want your furniture I'd be glad to bring it over. Just let me know.

Sincerely,

Allan Burlingame

Thurs.

Dear Miss, Landlord came over today and made me let him into 3C to see if it was evicted and so here is your five back because I couldn't keep him out.

Charles E. Murphy (janitor)

Shax, Asmodeus, Baal, and Co. Realtors

Dear Mrs. Tuttle,

Thank you for leaving so promptly after my letter. We must now only trouble you for the amount ($65.75) of last month's rent.

Most extremely cordially,

B. H. Shax

101 Eastern Square
Friday

Dear Mr. Shax,

You were misinformed. The Tuttles have moved, but I have taken over this apartment with their permission. Enclosed is my check for the month's *rent. Every human being has the right to shelter. Indians live in tents, Eskimos live in igloos, dogs live in kennels, and I am living here.*

Sincerely,

Marian Griswold

Shax, Asmodeus, Baal, and Co. Realtors

Dear Miss Griswold,

Enclosed is your check for last month's rent of apartment 3C at 101 Eastern Square because we are returning it. If you are interested in the possibilities of renting a kennel or an igloo, I suggest you consult with some real estate firm that handles that type of business. Our firm handles only apartments, and since you are not the legal resident of the apartment at 101 Eastern Square you cannot pay the rent. Since you believe that you are the legal resident of the apartment you may consider this as first warning of notice to evict.

Most extremely cordially,

B. H. Shax

101 Eastern Square
Wednesday

Dear Mr. Burlingame,

Bring over all my furniture as fast as you can. I intend to stay in this apartment until a gentleman named B. H. Shax comes personally and carries me out into the street, and that is going to be harder than he things, because I am not an easy person to carry down three flights of stairs.

Sincerely,

Marian Griswold

36 Elm St.
Thursday

Dear Bill,

Will you get together my stuff and bring it over as soon as you can? I'm finally getting this dame's stuff out of the place. Thank heaven,

Al

10 Oliver
Friday

Dear Timmy,

Sorry, but I'm afraid I'll be needing my furniture and things. Al wants his back because he is getting rid of the stuff that girl left in his place.

Bill

1249 Jones St.
Saturday

Dear Mom, would you mind sending along as soon as possible the bed and chairs and stuff you said once I could have? On account of the guy who owns the furniture in this apartment wants it. Can I have the little radio too? Will write soon.

Love,

Timmy

101 Eastern Square
Monday

Dear Mr. Shax,

I am enclosing again my check for last month's rent on this apartment. I have spoken to Mrs. Tuttle and she believes that her sublease gives her the right to sub-sublease, although it does not allow her to open a vegetable stand on the sidewall, keep mockingbirds, or advertise clairvoyant readings in the front windows. So you can consider me as having sub-sublet the apartment and I suggest you keep the check.

Sincerely,

Marian Griswold

Shax, Asmodeus, Baal, and Co. Realtors

Dear Miss Griswold,

Enclosed please find your check for $65.75 to cover the rent for one month on apartment 3C at 101 Eastern Square. Since you are not the legal resident of this apartment it would not be legal for us to accept this check. Mrs. Tuttle is mistaken. Her lease gives her every right to keep mockingbirds, but none whatsoever to sub-sublet.

Most extremely cordially,

B. H. Shax

P.S. Please consider this as second warning of notice to evict.

101 Eastern Square
Friday

Dear Mr. Shax,

If I am not the legal resident of the apartment you cannot evict me. You cannot evict Mrs. Tuttle, who is the legal resident of the apartment, because she is not living here. Unless you accept my check you are not going to receive any rent for the apartment at all because you cannot rent it to *anyone else while I am living here because you cannot evict me so they could move in. Mrs. Tuttle will not pay the rent because she is not living here.*

Sincerely,

Marian Griswold

95 Martin Lane
Friday

Marian dear,

I'm really awfully sorry, but I'm afraid we're coming back. To the apartment, I mean. They definitely won't let us stay here with Butchie, and they don't much like the dog, either. We figure there's no use fighting just to keep an old apartment we're not crazy about, so back we come. I'm really terribly sorry about your moving and all, but you do understand, don't you?

Love,

Helen

Shax, Asmodeus, Baal, and Co. Realtors

Dear Miss Griswold,

I am not a hard-hearted man, and even though the real estate business is one of dog-eat-dog you must try to understand that it is only because the real estate business is like that, that we frequently seem to be unpleasant and hard-hearted. I could not sleep nights if I put a young girl out onto the street to starve. I am not really a hard-hearted man, so you may keep the apartment. Will you please forward by return mail your check for last month's rent on apartment 3C at 101 Eastern Square plus your check for next month's rent and a signed statement to the effect that you will not sub-

sub-sublet. I assume that you have no intention of opening a sidewalk vegetable stand, keeping dogs or children, hanging pictures on the walls, making unnecessary noise, leaving garbage in the hall, blocking the stairway or the elevator, putting scratches on the floors, renting rooms for money, or opening any business for profit on the premises. As I say, I am not a hardhearted man, and I could not sleep nights if I had to forcibly evict you.

Most extremely cordially,

B. H. Shax

101 Eastern Square
Tuesday

Dear Mr. Burlingame,

This is a terrible thing to do, but I guess I will have to have my old apartment back, and just as everything was all right here, too. The people I got this one from want it back because they can't stay in their new place with a baby. So don't bring over my furniture. I'll probably be wanting to come back next week sometime.

Sincerely,

Marian Griswold

36 Elm St.
Wednesday

Dear Bill,

Never mind about the stuff. The dame wants the place back.

10 Oliver
Thursday

Dear Timmy,

I won't be needing my furniture for a while yet. Al got kicked out of his apartment by the dame who's coming back.

Bill

1249 Jones St.
Friday

Dear Mom,

It's O.K. about the furniture. Hope you haven't already sent it, because I won't be needing it now. Will write soon.

Love,

Timmy

36 Elm St.
Friday

Dear Felicia,

I am sure you will forgive my taking this method of asking you this question, when you realize how much it means to me, and how whenever I am with you I find it impossible to gather my courage to speak. I know that you have for a long time been aware of my feelings for you, and if by some lucky chance you feel the same way about me, it would certainly be wonderful.

Could you possibly consider becoming my wife? We would have to live with your family for a while until we found an apartment, but as you know, I *have a good job with good prospects and it would be the ambition of my life to support you in a comfortable fashion, and of course for a while we would save money on rent.*

Please let me know at once. You will make me the happiest of men.

Your own,

Allan

95 Martin Lane
Monday

Marian dear,

The most wonderful thing has happened, and just wait till you hear. You know we are being thrown out of this apartment and honestly I was just desperate, but then last Sunday we went out to Connecticut to visit Eve Crawley and her new husband — you remember Eve, don't you? With that amazing hair? — and what do you think? We just by pure blind luck found the most adorable little cottage for sale, and well, to make a long story short, we grabbed all our money on the spot and made a down payment on it, and we removing in next week. What do you think of that? It's got four rooms and of course there's some work to be done around the place — putting in a bathroom and whatnot, and fixing one corner of the roof, but Bill can do that nights when he comes home, because of course he'll have to commute, and there's nearly an acre of ground, and the loveliest old trees, and I'm going to drive him to the station every morning and meet him every night, and then during the day I can do the painting and papering around the house. And it cost only sixteen thousand, with the most miserable down payment, and we can take the rest of our lives to pay off the mortgage, if we want to — the bank was terribly nice about it. Aren't you jealous of us, *living in the country? And of course you'll come and visit us just every chance you get, and we can all have loads of fun getting together and fixing the place up. Must go now — we're signing the last papers this afternoon.*

Love,

Helen

101 Eastern Square
Tuesday

Dear Mr. Burlingame,

If you still want my apartment you can have it. Heaven has just passed a miracle in my favor.

Sincerely,
Marian Griswold

36 Elm St.
Wednesday

Dear Bill…

10 Oliver
Thursday

Dear Timmy….

1249 Jones
Friday

Dear Mom….

16 Arden's Court
Saturday

Dear Allan,

I can't tell you how pleased and flattered and happy I was at your letter, and I guess you knew all the time what I would say when you finally got around to asking me. Of course I will marry you, and I thinly it's wonderful.

Mother and Dad are also very happy at the idea and Dad says that now that their last child is getting married it's time for them to move back to California, where they always wanted to be, anyway. So they are going to let us have this apartment and most of the furniture as a wedding present, and even though twelve rooms might be a little large for us at first, we can always manage to use the space for giving parties and such. Mother says come for dinner tomorrow night and we can talk it over.

Love, from your

Felicia

THE VERY HOT SUN IN BERMUDA

IT WAS THE FIRST false summer of the college year, the time when the lawns first come out green and the sky is first really blue; the apple trees had chosen to occupy themselves with faint pink blossoms; the campus buildings were beginning to look old and dusty and red between the fresh trees and the really blue sky. In another week it might be snowing again, with the sudden treacherous weather that goes with spring dances and precommencement engagement parties, and ends, finally, in a blaze of heat and lethargy, with final exams and the last tortured words of the term paper.

It was Saturday; Katie Collins had spent all morning in the sun, starting the tan on her long legs and smooth back; by fall she would be startlingly brown, and could wear white evening dresses to set it off. Walking across campus, she watched her legs, still a little tan from last year, perhaps faintly reddened by this morning's sun. Ought to have a black bathing suit this year, she was thinking, strapless, two-piece, make the men whistle when I go along the beach. Thinking of the men whistling made her smile while she walked. Hot sun, hot sand; in another month she would be swimming, playing tennis, dancing, sailing; thinking about it made the sun seem hotter already; or green, she reflected, I could get a wicked green bathing suit, green is always good on me.

She was wearing yellow shorts, in honor of the sun, and she felt appropriate to the grass and the trees; walking across campus, it suddenly occurred to her that the next spring, unlike this spring and last spring and the one before that, she would spend somewhere else; married, probably, she thought, I ought to get married right after I graduate; girls like me aren't safe single. She smiled again at the quiet campus. Everyone was studying, or sunbathing, or lying around drinking Cokes; no one was walking outdoors except Katie.

Maybe not go home at all, she decided, just go off somewhere like Bermuda for a honeymoon. It made her laugh to think of herself lying in the very hot sun in Bermuda while some of her friends were still in college.

Tall and long-legged and alone, she walked quickly across the campus to where the grass ended and the ground sloped down to a brook; turning, she followed the brook a little way until she came in sight of a small one-story building set back from the trees along the brook. Then she began to walk more slowly, stopping to look down at the brook, putting her hands in her pockets to saunter along until something far off caught her attention; when she was very close to the building she said, “Hi!” She waited for a minute, and then went over and tapped imperatively on the window next to the door. “Hi,” she said again.

She waited for another minute, and then the key turned and the door opened. “Keep you waiting?” Katie said cheerfully. She walked up to the door and stood against the doorway, smiling. “You been waiting long?” she demanded.

“Please come in,” the man said.

“No one’s around,” Katie said, but she went inside and closed the door behind her. The windows made the studio very light, and on this sunny day there was a rich pale glow in the room that touched the colors on the pictures around the wall, and brightened completely the canvas on the easel, a still life of an apple, a book, and a copper candlestick. Katie walked over to a bench along one wall and sat down, stretching her legs out in front of her. “I’m worn out,” she said. “I ran most of the way.”

“You didn’t look it, coming along the path.”

Katie laughed, regarding her long legs approvingly. “I was teasing you,” she said.

“You didn’t even look at the picture,” he said.

Katie stood up leisurely and came over to look at the still life on the easel. “Gets prettier every day,” she said, “and so do you.” She turned around and looked at him critically. “But you look so sad.” She went over and pulled childishly at the sleeve of his old corduroy jacket, and he looked at her quickly and then back at the picture.

“Why wouldn’t I be sad?” he said. He gestured at the picture. “I’ve been working at it all day.”

“It looks swell,” Katie said. “Honestly, I think it looks fine.”

He rubbed his hand wearily across his long, thin forehead. When he smiled at her, finally, his face seemed more helpless, with a sort of sullen intention at helplessness. He took her hand, and said, “I needed you to come.”

“Well, I’m here,” Katie said. “And the picture’s okay.” She pulled away from him and started to walk around the room, her hands in her pockets. “You’ve changed things around again,” she said. When there was no answer she said sharply, “Peter, wake up! I said you’ve been changing things around again.”

He said, “I thought ‘Mood’ would look better in the center. Stand out more.” He was still standing helplessly in front of the easel, watching her when she walked across to stand in front of the picture he called “Mood.” It was a painting of a girl sitting by a window; she was a very pretty girl with long dark hair down her back; she was wearing a white dress and she was staring at the moon. “It looks swell here,” Katie said. “Just fine.” She began to laugh, not turning around. “Were you late for dinner yesterday?” she asked.

“Not very.”

“Was she sore?”

“Katie,” he said desperately, “for God’s sake, stop walking around and come talk to me.” His voice trailed off weakly. “I don’t know what to do,” he said.

“Poor old Peter,” Katie said. She came over and took his arm, leading him to the bench. “Poor old Peter,” she said again. “She gives you a hell of a time.”

He put his head in his hands, saying shakily, “Sometimes I think I can’t stand it much longer. What am I going to do?”

“Don’t get all upset,” Katie said. Impatient again, she got up and reached into the pocket of her shorts for a cigarette. Lighting it, she walked over to the easel and said to the picture, “Don’t pay any attention to her.”

“I think if she doesn’t leave me alone—” he said.

Katie moved closer to the picture, frowning. “Why is this part blue?” she asked. “You told us in class…”

He lifted his head. “I wanted to see how it would look there. It’s a sort of departure to give a greater effect.” He sighed. “I suppose it looks awful.”

“It’ll do,” Katie said. She moved restlessly away from the picture and along the nearest wall, seeing without interest the familiar pictures one after another, still lifes of vases and books and violins and china cats, portraits of his children, an occasional abstract in vicious reds and yellows, a landscape with a rusty barn, a picture of a beautiful girl with dark hair knee-deep in a moonlit pool, another of a beautiful girl with dark hair gathering roses by moonlight. “I passed her on campus this morning and she wouldn’t speak to me,” Katie said.

He was frowning, staring at an imaginary picture. “It needs *something* there,” he said. “Blue seemed like the thing.”

"I wanted to walk right up to her and slap her face," Katie said. "What a worn-out old hag."

"Don't talk like that," he said.

"Excuse me," Katie said formally. "I forgot she was your wife. What a well-preserved old hag." She laughed, and he smiled reluctantly. "Cheer up," she went on, "don't let her make you miserable." Her tour of the room brought her back to the easel, and she said, "It's a *swell* picture, honestly."

"I made it as good as I could for you," he said. "I only wish I weren't a third-rate artist." He waited for a minute. "If I could make it better, I would," he said.

Katie dropped her cigarette on the floor and put her shoe on it. "I don't want to make her mad, though," she said. "She could get me thrown out of college if she got mad enough."

"She's waiting for you to graduate." He stood up wearily and went over to the easel, looking at the picture while he felt out for the brushes and palette beside it. "She says that after a few weeks I'll never see you again."

"She better not make any kind of a fuss," Katie said.

He began to paint cautiously. "I've let her go on thinking that I won't see you again."

"I certainly wish you could come out to the beach," Katie said.

"I don't know." He pursed up his lips doubtfully. "She may go away somewhere with the children."

Katie said quickly, "But of course there's my family and all my friends. Maybe I could meet you in New York or someplace."

"New York would be easy," he said, turning around to her. "I told you I could manage New York."

"I'll see how things come out," Katie said. Going to the window near the door, she said, "This weather is driving me crazy. Let's go outside for a while, go wading in the brook.”

“Too many people around on a day like this,” he said. “I don’t want her to get any more suspicious than she already is.”

“Oh, Lord,” Katie said. “Were you ever in Bermuda?” She tapped her fingers irritably on the window glass. “I’d like to go to Bermuda.”

“Come away from the window,” he said. “You’re not supposed to be here.”

Katie stamped her feet walking to the bench; she sat down, pulling up her legs and wrapping her arms around them. “How nearly finished are you?”

“Another couple of days.”

“Plenty of time,” Katie said. “I don’t have to have it till May fifteenth.”

“I’ll spend some time working it over,” he said. “I’m not satisfied at all.”

“I am,” Katie said. “As long as I graduate. They don’t expect me to be a genius.” She yawned, and stood up. “I’m going.”

He turned away from the easel, surprised. “I thought you’d stay awhile.”

“I stayed awhile,” Katie said. “I’m no help to you while you’re painting, anyway.” She stopped with one hand on the door and kissed one finger to him. “You work nice and hard,” she said, “and I’ll see you in class Monday.”

He said desperately, “Katie, listen,” and she hesitated, the door just open. “Can’t you tell me something to say to her?” He stood without moving, looking at her eagerly, his shoulders weak. “Think of *some*thing” he said.

“Let me see.” Katie stood in the doorway, chewing her lip. “Tell her,” she said finally, “you tell her that I wouldn’t hurt her for the world.” She smiled and waved her hand. “Bye,” she said, and slipped out the door, closing it gently behind her. Before she was more than a few steps away, she heard the key turn in the lock.

As though anyone cared, she thought, going along beside the brook; next spring I could be in Paris. As she started across the campus she thought suddenly, why not a poppy-red bathing suit? and laughed out loud. Boy, she said to herself, they could see me coming a mile away.

NIGHTMARE

IT WAS ONE OF those spring mornings in March; the sky between the buildings was bright and blue and the city air, warmed by motors and a million breaths, had a freshness and a sense of excitement that can come only from a breeze starting somewhere in the country, far away, and moving into the city while everyone is asleep, to freshen the air for morning. Miss Toni Morgan, going from the subway to her office, settled a soft, sweet smile on her face and let it stay there while her sharp tapping feet went swiftly along the pavement. She was wearing a royal blue hat with a waggish red feather in it, and her suit was blue and her topcoat a red and gray tweed, and her shoes were thin and pointed and ungraceful when she walked; they were dark blue, with the faintest line of red edging the sole. She carried a blue pocketbook with her initials in gold, and she wore dark blue gloves with red buttons. Her topcoat swirled around her as she turned in through the door of the tall office building, and when she entered her office sixty floors above, she took her topcoat off lovingly and hung it precisely in the closet, with her hat and gloves on the shelf above; she was precise about everything, so that it was exactly nine o'clock when she sat down at her desk, consulted her memorandum pad, tore the top leaf from the calendar, straightened her shoulders, and adjusted her smile. When her employer arrived at nine-thirty, he found her typing busily, so that she was able to look up and smile and say, "Good morning, Mr. Lang," and smile again.

At nine-forty Miss Fishman, the young lady who worked at the desk corresponding to Miss Morgan's, on the other side of the room, phoned in to say that she was ill and would not be in to work that day. At twelve-thirty Miss Morgan went out to lunch alone, because Miss Fishman was not there. She had a bacon, tomato, and lettuce sandwich and a cup of tea in the drugstore downstairs, and came back early because there was a letter she wanted to finish. During her lunch hour she noticed nothing unusual, nothing that had not happened every day of the six years she had been working for Mr. Lang.

At two-twenty by the office clock Mr. Lang came back from lunch; he said, “Any calls, Miss Morgan?” as he came through the door, and Miss Morgan smiled at him and said, “No calls, Mr. Lang.” Mr. Lang went into his private office, and there were no calls until three-oh-five, when Mr. Lang came out of his office carrying a large package wrapped in brown paper and tied with an ordinary strong cord.

“Miss Fishman here?” he asked.

“She’s ill,” Miss Morgan said, smiling. “She won’t be in today.”

“Damn,” Mr. Lang said. He looked around hopefully. Miss Fishman’s desk was neatly empty; everything was in perfect order and Miss Morgan sat smiling at him. “I’ve got to get this package delivered,” he said. “Very important.” He looked at Miss Morgan as though he had never seen her before. “Would it be asking too much?” he asked.

Miss Morgan looked at him courteously for a minute before she understood. Then she said, “Not at all,” with an extremely clear inflection, and stirred to rise from her desk.

“Good,” Mr. Lang said heartily. “The address is on the label. Way over on the other side of town. Downtown. You won’t have any trouble. Take you about” — he consulted his watch— “about an hour, I’d say, all told, there and back. Give the package directly to Mr. Shax. No secretaries. If he’s out, wait. If he’s not there, go to his home. Call me if you’re going to be more than an hour. Damn Miss Fishman," he added, and went back into his office.

All up and down the hall, in offices directed and controlled by Mr. Lang, there were people alert and eager to run errands for him. Miss Morgan and Miss Fishman were only the receptionists, the outer bulwark of Mr. Lang's defense. Miss Morgan looked apprehensively at the closed door of Mr. Lang's office as she went to the closet to get her coat. Mr. Lang was being left defenseless, but it was spring outside she had her red topcoat, and Miss Fishman had probably run off under cover of illness to the wide green fields and buttercups of the country. Miss Morgan settled her blue hat by the mirror on the inside of the closet door, slid luxuriously into her red topcoat, and picked up her pocketbook and gloves, and put her hand through the string of the package. It was unexpectedly light. Going toward the elevator, she found that she could carry it easily with the same hand that held her pocketbook, although its bulk would be awkward on the bus. She glanced at the address: "Mr. Ray Shax," and a street she had never heard of.

Once in the street in the spring afternoon, she decided to ask at the newspaper stand for the street; the little men in newspaper stands seem to know everything. This one was particularly nice to her, probably because it was spring. He took out a little red book that was a guide to New York, and searched through its columns until he found the street.

"You ought to take the bus on the corner," he said. "Going across town. Then get a bus going downtown until you get to the street. Then you'll have to walk, most likely. Probably a warehouse."

"Probably," Miss Morgan agreed absently. She was staring behind him, at a poster on the inside of the newspaper stand. "Find Miss X," the poster said in screaming red letters, "Find Miss X. Find Miss X. Find Miss X." The words were repeated over and over, each line smaller and in a different color; the bottom line was barely visible. “What’s that Miss X thing?” Miss Morgan asked the newspaper man. He turned and looked over his shoulder and shrugged. “One of them contest things,” he said.

Miss Morgan started for the bus. Probably because the poster had caught her eye, she was quicker to hear the sound truck; a voice was blaring from it: “Find Miss X! Win a mink coat valued at twelve thousand dollars, a trip to Tahiti; find Miss X.”

Tahiti, Miss Morgan thought, on a day like this. She went swiftly down the sidewalk, and the sound truck progressed along the street, shouting, “Miss X, find Miss X. She is walking in the city, she is walking alone; find Miss X. Step up to the girl who is Miss X, and say ‘You are Miss X,’ and win a complete repainting and decorating job on your house, win these fabulous prizes.”

There was no bus in sight and Miss Morgan waited on the corner for a minute before thinking, I have time to walk a ways in this lovely weather. Her topcoat swinging around her, she began to walk across town to catch a bus at the next corner.

The sound truck turned the corner in back of her; it was going very slowly, and she outdistanced it in a minute or so. She could hear, far away, the announcer’s voice saying, “… and all your cosmetics for a year.”

Now that she was aware of it, she noticed that there were “Find Miss X” posters on every lamppost; they were all like the one in the newsstand, with the words running smaller and smaller and in different colors. She was walking along a busy street, and she lingered past the shopwindows, looking at jewelry and custom-made shoes. She saw a hat something like her own, in a window of a store so expensive that only the hat lay in the window, soft against a fold of orange silk. Mine is almost the same, she thought as she turned away, and it cost only four ninety-eight. Because she lingered, the sound truck caught up with her; she heard it from a distance, forcing its way through the taxis and trucks in the street, its loudspeaker blaring music, something military. Then the announcer's voice began again: "Find Miss X, find Miss X. Win fifty thousand dollars in cash; Miss X is walking the streets of the city today, alone. She is wearing a blue hat with a red feather, a reddish tweed topcoat, and blue shoes. She is carrying a blue pocketbook and a large package. Listen carefully. Miss X is carrying a large package. Find Miss X, find Miss X. Walk right up to her and say 'You are Miss X,' and win a new home in any city in the world, with a town car and chauffeur, win all these magnificent prizes."

Any city in the world, Miss Morgan thought, I'd pick New York. Buy me a home in New York, mister, I'd sell it for enough to buy all the rest of your prizes.

Carrying a package, she thought suddenly, *I'm* carrying a package. She tried to ease the package around so she could carry it in her arms, but it was too bulky. Then she took it by the string and swung it as close to her side as she could; must be a thousand people in New York right now carrying large packages, she thought; no one will bother me. She could see the corner ahead where her bus would stop, and she wondered if she wanted to walk another block.

"Say 'You are Miss X,'" the sound truck screamed, "and win one of these gorgeous prizes. Your private yacht, completely fitted. A pearl necklace fit for a queen. Miss X is walking the streets of the city, completely alone. She is wearing a blue hat with a red feather, blue gloves, and dark blue shoes."

Good heavens, Miss Morgan thought; she stopped and looked down at her shoes; she was certainly wearing her blue ones. She turned and glared angrily at the sound truck. It was painted white, and had “Find Miss X” written on the side in great red letters.

“Find Miss X,” the sound truck said.

Miss Morgan began to hurry. She reached the corner and mixed with the crowd of people waiting to get on the bus, but there were too many and the bus doors were shut in her face. She looked anxiously down the long block, but there were no other buses coming, and she began to walk hastily, going toward the next corner. I could take a taxi, she thought. That clown in the sound truck, he’ll lose his job. With her free hand she reached up and felt that her hat was perched at the correct angle and her hair neat. I hope he *does* lose his job, she thought. What a thing to do! She could not help glancing over her shoulder to see what had become of the sound truck, and was shocked to find it creeping silently almost next to her, going along beside her in the street. When she looked around, the sound truck shouted, “Find Miss X, find Miss X.”

“Listen,” Miss Morgan told herself. She stopped and looked around, but the people going by were moving busily without noticing her. Even a man who almost crashed into her when she stopped suddenly said only “Excuse me,” and went on by without a backward look. The sound truck was stopped by traffic, up against the curb, and Miss Morgan went over to it and knocked on the window until the driver turned around.

“I want to speak to you,” Miss Morgan said ominously. The driver reached over and opened the door.

“You want something?” he asked wearily.

“I want to know why this truck is following me down the street,” Miss Morgan said; since she did not know the truck driver, and would certainly never see him again, she was possessed of great courage. She made her voice very sharp and said, “What are you trying to do?”

“Me?” the truck driver said. “Look, lady, I’m not following anybody. I got a route I gotta go. See?” He held up a dirty scrap of paper, and Miss Morgan could see that it was marked in pencil, a series of lines numbered like streets, although she was too far away to see what the numbers were. “I go where it tells me,” the truck driver said insistently. “See?”

“Well,” Miss Morgan said, her voice losing conviction, “what do you mean, talking about people dressed like me? Blue hats, and so on?”

“Don’t ask me,” the truck driver said. “People hire this truck, I drive where they say. I don’t have nothing to do with what happens back there.” He waved his hand toward the back of the truck, which was separated from him by a partition behind the driver’s seat. The traffic ahead of him started and he said quickly, “You want to know, you ask back there. Me, I don’t hear it with the windows all shut.” He closed the door, and the truck moved slowly away. Miss Morgan stood on the curb, staring at it, and the loudspeaker began, “Miss X is walking alone in the city.”

The nerve of him, Miss Morgan thought, reverting to a culture securely hidden beneath six years of working for Mr. Lang, the goddamn nerve of him. She began to walk defiantly along the street, now slightly behind the sound truck. Serve them right, she thought, if anyone says to me, “Are you Miss What’s-her-name?” I’ll say “Why, yes, I am, here’s your million dollars and you can go—”

“Reddish tweed topcoat,” the sound truck roared, “blue shoes, blue hat.” The corner Miss Morgan was approaching was a hub corner, where traffic moved heavily and quickly, where crowds of people stood waiting to cross the street, where the traffic lights changed often. Suppose I wait on the corner, Miss Morgan thought, the truck will have to go on. She stopped on the corner near the sign “bus stop,” and fixed her face in the blank expression of a bus rider, waiting for the sound truck to go on. As it turned the corner it shouted back at her, “Find Miss X, find Miss X, she may be standing next to you now.”

Miss Morgan looked around nervously, and found she was standing next to a poster that began “Find Miss X, find Miss X,” but went on to say, “Miss X will be walking the streets of New York TODAY. She will be wearing blue — a blue hat, a blue suit, blue shoes, blue gloves. Her coat will be red and gray tweed. SHE WILL BE CARRYING A LARGE PACKAGE. Find Miss X, and claim the prizes.”

Good Lord, Miss Morgan thought, good Lord. A horrible idea crossed her mind: Could they sue her, take her into court, put her in jail for dressing like Miss X? What would Mr. Lang say? She realized that she could never prove that she wore these clothes innocently, without criminal knowledge; as a matter of fact, she remembered that that morning, out in Woodside, while she was drinking her coffee, her mother had said, “You won’t be warm enough; the paper says it’s going to turn cold later. Wear your heavy coat at least.” How would Miss Morgan ever be able to explain to the police that the spring weather had caught her, made her take her new coat instead of her old one? How could she prove anything? Cold fear caught Miss Morgan, and she began to walk quickly, away from the poster. Now she realized that there were posters everywhere: on the lampposts, on the sides of the buildings, blown up huge against the wall of a high building. I’ve got to do something right away, she thought, no time to get back home and change.

Trying to do so unobtrusively, she slid off her blue gloves and rolled them up and put them into her pocketbook. The pocketbook itself she put down behind the package. She buttoned her coat to hide the blue suit, and thought, I’ll go into a ladies’ room somewhere and take the feather out of my hat; if they know I tried to look different, they can’t blame me. Ahead of her on the sidewalk she saw a young man with a microphone; he was wearing a blue suit and she thought humorously, put a blue hat on him and he'd do, when she realized that he was trying to stop people and talk about Miss X.

"Are you Miss X?" he was saying. "Sorry, lady, red topcoat, you know, and carrying a package. Are you Miss X?" People were walking wider to avoid him, and he called to ladies passing, and sometimes they looked at him curiously. Now and then, apparently, he would catch hold of someone and try to ask them questions, but usually the women passed him without looking, and the men glanced at him once, and then away. He's going to catch me, Miss Morgan thought in panic, he's going to speak to *me*. She could see him looking through the crowds while he said into the microphone, loudly enough so that anyone passing could hear, "Miss X is due to come down this street, folks, and it's about time for Miss X to be passing by here. She'll be along any minute, folks, and maybe you'll be the one who walks up to her and says 'Are you Miss X?' and then you'll get those beautiful awards, folks, the golden tea service, and the library of ten thousand of the world's greatest books, folks, ten thousand books, and fifty thousand dollars. All you have to do is find Miss X, folks, just find the one girl who is walking around this city alone, and all you have to do is say 'You are Miss X,' folks, and the prizes are yours. And I'll tell you, folks, Miss X is now wearing her coat buttoned up so you can't see her blue suit, and she's taken off her gloves. It's getting colder, folks, let's find Miss X before her hands get cold without her gloves."

He's going to speak to me, Miss Morgan thought, and she slipped over to the curb and signaled wildly for a taxi. "Taxi," she called, raising her voice shrilly, "taxi!" Over her own voice she could hear the man with the microphone saying, "Find Miss X, folks, find Miss X." When no taxi would stop, Miss Morgan hurried to the other side of the sidewalk, next to the buildings, and tried to slip past the man at the microphone. He saw her, and his eyes jeered at her as she went by. “Find Miss X, folks,” he said, “find the poor girl before her hands get cold.”

I must be crazy, Miss Morgan thought. I’m just getting self-conscious because I’m tired of walking. I’ll definitely get a taxi on the next corner.

“Find Miss X,” the sound truck shouted from the curb next to her.

“She’s gone past here now,” the man with the microphone said behind her, “she’s passed us now, folks, but she’s gone on down the street, find Miss X, folks.”

“Blue hat,” the sound truck said, “blue shoes, carrying a large package.” Miss Morgan went frantically out into the street, not looking where she was going, crossed directly in front of the sound truck, and reached the other side, to meet a man wearing a huge cardboard poster saying “Miss X, Miss X, find Miss X. CARRYING A LARGE PACKAGE. Blue shoes, blue hat, red and gray tweed coat, CARRYING A LARGE PACKAGE.” The man was distributing leaflets right and left, and people let them fall to the ground without taking them. Miss Morgan stepped on one of the leaflets and “Find Miss X” glared up at her from the ground under her foot.

She was going past a millinery shop, when she had a sudden idea; moving quickly, she went inside, into the quiet. There were no posters in there, and Miss Morgan smiled gratefully at the quiet-looking woman who came forward to her. They don’t do much business in *here*, Miss Morgan thought, they’re so eager for customers, they come out right away. Her well-bred voice came back to her; “I beg your pardon,” she said daintily, “but would it be possible, do you think, for you to let me have either a hat bag or a hatbox?”

“A hatbox?” the woman said vaguely. “You mean, empty?”

"I'd be willing to purchase it, of *course,"* Miss Morgan said, and laughed lightly. "It just so happens," she said, "that I have decided to carry my hat in this beautiful weather, and one feels so foolish going down the street *carrying* a hat. So I thought a bag… or a hatbox…"

The woman's eyes lowered to the package Miss Morgan was carrying. "Another package?" she asked.

Miss Morgan made a nervous gesture of putting the package behind her, and said, her voice a little sharper, "Really, it doesn't seem like such a *strange* thing to *ask*. A hatbox or a bag."

"Well…" the woman said. She turned to the back of the shop and went to a counter behind which were stacked piles of hatboxes. "You see," she said, "I'm alone in the shop right now, and around here very often people come in just to make nuisances of themselves. There've been at least two burglaries in the neighborhood since we've been here, you know," she added, looking uneasily at Miss Morgan.

"Really?" Miss Morgan said, her voice casual. "And how long, may I ask, have you been here?"

"Well…" the woman said. "Seventeen years." She took down a hatbox, and then, suddenly struck with an idea, said, "Would you like to look at some hats while you're here?"

Miss Morgan started to say no, and then her eye was caught by a red and gray caplike hat, and she said with mild interest, "I might just try *that* one on, if I might."

"Indeed, yes," the woman said. She reached up and took the hat off the figure that held it. "This is one of our best numbers," she said, and Miss Morgan sat down in front of a mirror while the woman tried the hat on her.

"It's lovely on you," the woman said, and Miss Morgan nodded. "It's just the red in my coat," she said, pleased.

“You really ought to wear a red hat with that coat,” the woman said.

Miss Morgan thought suddenly, what would Mr. Lang say if he knew I was in here trying on hats when I’m supposed to be going on his errands. “How much is it?” she asked hastily.

“Well…” the woman said. “Eight ninety-five.”

“It’s *far* too much for this hat,” Miss Morgan said. “I’ll just take the box.”

“That’s eight ninety-five *with* the box,” the woman said unpleasantly.

Helplessly, Miss Morgan stared from the woman to the mirror to the package she had put down on the counter. There was a ten-dollar bill in her pocketbook. “All right,” she said finally. “Put my old hat in a box and I’ll wear this one.”

“You’ll never be sorry you bought that hat,” the woman said. She picked up Miss Morgan’s blue hat and set it inside a box. While she was tying the box she said cheerfully, “For a minute I was afraid you were one of the sort comes into a shop like this for no good. *You* know what I mean. Do you know, we’ve had two burglaries in the neighborhood since we’ve been here?”

Miss Morgan took the hatbox out of her hand and handed her the ten-dollar bill. “I’m in rather a hurry,” Miss Morgan said. The woman disappeared behind a curtain at the back of the shop and came back after a minute with the change. Miss Morgan put the change in her pocketbook; I won’t have enough for a taxi there and back, she thought.

Wearing the new hat, and carrying the hatbox and her pocketbook and the package, she left the shop, while the woman stared curiously after her. Miss Morgan found that she was a block and a half away from her bus stop, so she started again for it, and she was nearly on the corner before the sound truck came out of a side street, blaring, “Find Miss X, find Miss X, win a Thoroughbred horse and a castle on the Rhine.”

Miss Morgan settled herself comfortably inside her coat. She had only to cross the street to get to her bus stop, and the bus was coming; she could see it a block away. She stopped to get the fare out of her pocketbook, shifting the package and the hatbox to do so, when the sound truck went slowly past her, shouting, “Miss X has changed her clothes now, but she is still walking alone through the streets of the city, find Miss X! Miss X is now wearing a gray and red hat, and is carrying *two* packages; don’t forget, *two* packages.”

Miss Morgan dropped her pocketbook and the hatbox, and stopped to pick up the small articles that had rolled out of her pocketbook, hiding her face. Her lipstick was in the gutter, her compact lay shattered, her cigarettes had fallen out of the case and rolled wide. She gathered them together as well as she could and turned and began to walk back the way she had come. When she came to a drugstore she went inside and to the phones. By the clock in the drugstore she had been gone just an hour and was only three or four blocks away from her office. Hastily, her hatbox and the package on the floor of the phone booth, she dialed her office number. A familiar voice answered — Miss Martin in the back room, Miss Walpole? — and Miss Morgan said, “Mr. Lang, please?”

“Who is calling, please?”

“This is Toni Morgan. I’ve got to speak to Mr. Lang right away, please.”

“He’s busy on another call. Will you wait, please?”

Miss Morgan waited; through the dirty glass of the phone booth she could see, dimly, the line of the soda fountain, the busy clerk, the office girls sitting on the high stools.

“Hello?” Miss Morgan said impatiently. “Hello, hello?”

"Who did you wish to speak to, please?" the voice said — it might have been Miss Kittredge, in accounting.

"Mr. Lang, please," Miss Morgan said urgently. "It's important."

"Just a moment, please." There was silence, and Miss Morgan waited. After a few minutes impatience seized her again and she hung up and found another nickel and dialed the number again. A different voice, a man's voice this time, one Miss Morgan did not know, answered.

"Mr. Lang, please," Miss Morgan said.

"Who's calling, please?"

"This is Miss Morgan, I must speak to Mr. Lang at once."

"Just a moment, please," the man said.

Miss Morgan waited, and then said, "Hello? Hello? What *is* the matter here?"

"Hello?" the man said.

"Is Mr. Lang there?" Miss Morgan said. "Let me speak to him at once."

"He's busy on another call. Will you wait?"

He's answering my other call, Miss Morgan thought wildly, and hung up. Carrying the package and the hatbox, she went out again into the street. The sound truck was gone and everything was quiet except for the "Find Miss X" posters on all the lampposts. They all described Miss X as wearing a red and gray cap and carrying two packages. One of the prizes, she noticed, was a bulletproof car, another was a life membership in the stock exchange.

She decided that whatever else, she must get as far from the neighborhood as she could, and when a taxi stopped providentially to let off passengers at the curb next to her, she stepped in, and gave the driver the address on the package. Then she leaned back, her hatbox and the package on the seat next to her, and lit one of the cigarettes she had rescued when her pocketbook fell. I've been dreaming, she told herself, this has all been so silly. The thing she most regretted was losing her presence enough, first, to speak so to the driver of the sound truck, and then to drop her pocketbook and make herself conspicuous stooping to pick everything up on the street corner. As the taxi drove downtown she noticed the posters on every lamppost, and smiled. Poor Miss X, she thought, I wonder if they *will* find her?

“I’ll have to stop here, lady,” the taxi driver said, turning around.

“Where are we?” Miss Morgan said.

“Times Square,” the driver said. “No cars getting through downtown on account of the parade.”

He opened the door and held out his hand for her money. Unable to think of anything else to do, Miss Morgan paid him and gathered her hatbox and package together and stepped out of the taxi. The street ahead was roped off and policemen were guarding the ropes. Miss Morgan tried to get through the crowd of people, but there were too many of them and she was forced to stand still. While she was wondering what to do, she heard the sound of a band and realized that the parade was approaching. Just then the policeman guarding the curb opened the ropes to let traffic cross the street for the last time before the parade, and all the people who had been standing with Miss Morgan crossed to the other side and all the people who had been on the other side crossed to stand on Miss Morgan’s side, turning in order to cross again on the side street at right angles to the way they had crossed before, but the policemen and the crowds held them back and they waited, impatient for the next crossing. Miss Morgan had been forced to the curb and now she could see the parade coming downtown. The band was leading the parade; twelve drum majorettes in scarlet jackets and skirts and wearing silver boots and carrying silver batons marched six abreast down the street, stepping high and flinging their batons into the air in unison; following them was the band, all dressed in scarlet, and on each of the big drums was written a huge X in scarlet. Following the band were twelve heralds dressed in black velvet, blowing on silver trumpets, and they were followed by a man dressed in black velvet on a white horse with red plumes on its head; the man was shouting, “Find Miss X, find Miss X, find Miss X.”

Then followed a float preceded by two girls in scarlet who carried a banner inscribed in red, “Win magnificent prizes,” and the float represented, in miniature, a full symphony orchestra; all the performers were children in tiny dress suits, and the leader, who was very tiny, stood on a small platform on the float and led the orchestra in a small rendition of “Afternoon of a Faun”; following this float was one bearing a new refrigerator, fifty times larger than life, with the door swinging open to show its shelves stocked with food. Then a float bearing a model of an airplane, with twelve lovely girls dressed as clouds. Then a float holding a golden barrel full of enormous dollar bills, with a grinning mannequin who dipped into the barrel, brought up a handful of the great dollar bills, and ate them, then dipped into the barrel again.

Following this float were all the Manhattan troops of Boy Scouts; they marched in perfect line, their leaders going along beside and calling occasionally, “Keep it up, men, keep that step even.”

At this point the side street was allowed open for cross traffic, and all the people standing near Miss Morgan crossed immediately, while all the people on the other side crossed also. Miss Morgan went along with the people she had been standing with, and once on the other side, all these people continued walking downtown until they reached the next corner and were stopped. The parade had halted here, and Miss Morgan found that she had caught up with the float representing the giant refrigerator. Farther back, the Boy Scouts had fallen out of their even lines, and were pushing and laughing. One of the children on the orchestra float was crying. While the parade halted, Miss Morgan and all the people she stood with were allowed to cross through the parade to the other side of the avenue. Once there, they waited to cross the next side street.

The parade started again. The Boy Scouts came even with Miss Morgan, their lines straightening, and then the cause of the delay became known; twelve elephants, draped in blue, moved ponderously down the street; on the head of each was a girl wearing blue, with a great plume of blue feathers on her head; the girls swayed and rocked with the motion of the elephants. Another band followed, this one dressed in blue and gold, but the big drums still said X in blue. A new banner followed, reading “Find Miss X,” with twelve more heralds dressed in white, blowing on gold trumpets, and a man on a black horse who shouted through a megaphone, “Miss X is walking the streets of the city, she is watching the parade. Look around you, folks.”

Then came a line of twelve girls, arm in arm, each one dressed as Miss X, with a red and gray hat, a red and gray tweed topcoat, and blue shoes. They were followed by twelve men each carrying two packages, the large brown package Miss Morgan was carrying, and the hatbox. They were all singing, a song of which Miss Morgan caught only the words “Find Miss X, get all those checks.”

Leaning far out over the curb, Miss Morgan could see that the parade continued for blocks; she could see green and orange and purple, and far far away, yellow. Miss Morgan pulled uneasily at the sleeve of the woman next to her. “What’s the parade for?” she asked, and the woman looked at her.

“Can’t hear you,” the woman said. She was a little woman, and had a pleasant face, and Miss Morgan smiled, and raised her voice to say, “I said, how long is this parade going to last?”

"What parade?" she asked. *"That* one?" She nodded at the street. "I haven't any idea, miss. I'm trying to get to Macy's."

"Do you know anything about this Miss X?" Miss Morgan said daringly.

The woman laughed. "It was over the radio," she said. "Someone's going to get a lot of prizes. You have to do some kind of a puzzle or something."

"What's it for?" Miss Morgan asked.

"Advertising," the woman said, surprised.

"Are *you* looking for Miss X?" Miss Morgan asked daringly.

The woman laughed again. "I'm no good at that sort of thing," she said. "Someone in the company of the people putting it on always wins those things, anyway."

Just then they were allowed to cross again, and Miss Morgan and the woman hurried across, and on down the next block. Walking beside the woman, Miss Morgan said finally, "I think I'm the Miss X they're talking about, but I don't know why."

The woman looked at her and said, "Don't ask *me"* and then disappeared into the crowd of people ahead.

Out in the street a prominent cowboy movie star was going by on horseback, waving his hat.

Miss Morgan retreated along a quiet side street until she was far away from the crowds and the parade; she was lost, too far away from her office to get back without finding another taxi, and miles away from the address on the package. She saw a shoe repair shop, and struck by a sudden idea, went inside and sat down in one of the booths. The repair man came up to her and she handed him her shoes.

"Shine?" he said, looking at the shoes.

"Yes," Miss Morgan said. "Shine." She leaned back in the booth, her eyes shut. She was vaguely aware that the repair man had gone into the back of the shop, that she was alone, when she heard a footstep and looked up to see a man in a blue suit coming toward her.

"Are you Miss X?" the man in the blue suit asked her.

Miss Morgan opened her mouth, and then said, "Yes," tiredly.

"I've been looking all over for you," the man said. "How'd you get away from the sound truck?"

"I don't know," Miss Morgan said. "I ran."

"Listen," the man said, "this town's no good. No one spotted you." He opened the door of the booth and waited for Miss Morgan to come.

"My shoes," Miss Morgan said, and the man waved his hand impatiently. "You don't need shoes," he said. "The car's right outside."

He looked at Miss Morgan with yellow cat eyes and said, "Come on, hurry up."

She stood up and he took her arm and said, "We'll have to do it again tomorrow in Chicago, this town stinks."

That night, falling asleep in the big hotel, Miss Morgan thought briefly of Mr. Lang and the undelivered package she had left, along with her hatbox, in the shoe repair shop. Smiling, she pulled the satin quilt up to her chin and fell asleep.

DINNER FOR A GENTLEMAN

IT IS NOT POSSIBLE, I frequently think, to walk down the street as fast as you can and kick yourself at the same time. You can stop, of course, and try if you really *want* to, but, I mean, you're apt to look a little foolish, and foolish, if you're me, is what you generally look too much of already.

I mean, every time I try to show off I get caught; that's what it boils down to. Every time I get into one of those conversations where I don't really know what I'm talking about, but I pretend I do, first thing I know there I am saying something I've got to back up with proof, and then, I mean, where am I? Well, *this* day, at any rate, I was walking down the street wishing I could kick myself, with both arms full of bags of groceries and a great dismal cloud of foreboding located somewhere around the back of my neck. So all right, Hugh Talley was a cook. So I mean, I could have left it at that, couldn't I? I hadn't needed to say anything, not a word; I hadn't even needed to listen. But no. So here I was, going down the street, going home to cook dinner for Hugh Talley, just because I wanted to show off, and if I thought I looked foolish now, what was going to happen in about an hour when Hugh Talley sat himself down at the little table in my apartment all grinning and ready for dinner? I mean, I could have *kicked* myself.

I'm not stupid; I know it sounds like I am, and I suppose not many people would get caught all the time the way I do. But I've noticed that Hugh Talley has that effect on a lot of people — he's so *very* handsome, in that man-to-man sort of way that's horribly effective in the movies, and just pretty awful when you meet it day after day in the office. He makes the other men in the office look pale and sort of shabby. He has a good sunlamp tan and he plays golf and he eats robustly and, more than anything else, Talley loves to put on a silly apron and get out in the kitchen and show the womenfolk how to cook. There is no woman in the world, Talley is fond of saying, who knows how to cook a steak the way a *man* likes it. Or spaghetti. Or fried chicken. Women — and you should see the look of pained disgust on Talley's face when he says it — take good meat and cover it with gooey sauces. *That*, not to put too fine a point on it, is Hugh Talley.

And me? Well, I don't play golf, and even though I've got a good healthy appetite, my tan tends to build up sort of spottily during the summer and disappear with the first frost. I'm like a thousand other girls in the city — I've got a job I like, and I used to share my apartment with another girl, but she got married and so now I live alone, and someday I'll probably get married to some nice fellow and have two children (a boy first, I think, and then a girl) and I'm strong and healthy and I have nice legs and my hair is naturally curly. And, like a thousand other girls, I *do* hate to have a man — any man — tell me anything in that faintly patronizing voice men use sometimes that begins: "The trouble with women…"

Except that of all the girls who had ever tried to make Hugh Talley eat his words with their cooking, I guess I'm the first one who ever tried it without first learning how to cook.

You see what I mean?

I'd skipped out of the office early that day to do my shopping for dinner and then get home and hunt up a cookbook. I knew there was one in my apartment somewhere; my roommate and I got it long ago to find out how to make fudge. When I got home and let myself into the apartment I went right over to the bookcase without putting my packages down and looked, and there it was, looking just as new as when we bought it. Right then a voice spoke up from in back of me:

“Dimity Baxter!” it said.

Well, I jumped, and I dropped my packages, and I turned around, and there was this little old lady standing there smiling at me, and while I stood there, still half bent down in front of the bookcase with my mouth open, she put her knitting down and came over and started to pick up the groceries, which had fallen to the floor.

“Let me just get these put away,” she said. “What were you planning for dessert? Lemon pie?”

“What?” I said, and at that it was more than I thought I could say.

“Just ran over to see if I couldn’t give you a hand,” she said. She started for the kitchen, her arms full of packages.

“But listen—” I said.

“Your hired man let me in,” she said, and sniffed. “Said he figured he could trust me.”

Automatically, I had gathered together some of the stuff on the floor and followed her out into the kitchen with it. “My hired man?” I said stupidly. “You mean the super?”

“Super,” she said. “He figured he could *trust* me. Call me Mallie,” she added.

“Mallie,” I said.

“From upstate,” she said. “Guess you could call me an old friend of your mother’s,” and she laughed.

Well, it *was* rather too much. Not that my mother isn’t the nicest person in the world, and this little lady was a lot like her, but somehow my mother and her friends just simply don’t *look* right in a business girl’s apartment, if you know what I mean. Mallie just sort of glanced around the little kitchenette there, and I could see her face when she saw the cup and saucer I’d left in the sink that morning (I *can* make coffee, after all, with hot water and one of those concentrates) and when she looked around still more and saw that I had only a couple of saucepans, and the rolling pin and mixing bowls were all that sort of small-sized, cute kind of stuff they turn out for people who don't cook much, and when she opened the cupboard door and I could see her looking at the two cans of soup and the can of sardines that were all that was in there, and *those* were left over from when I had a roommate — well, it was all pretty embarrassing, and I felt more like a fool than ever.

So, naturally, I had to go and be rude to her, because I felt like such a fool myself. "Will you excuse me," I said to her with that sort of deadly politeness you use when you really wish you weren't saying what you *are* saying— "Will you please excuse me if I go right ahead with my work? I'm having a guest for dinner and I really must hurry."

Well, that was not exactly the way I'd figured it might be. That is, to go right ahead with this dinner I was going to cook, while Mallie sat in the kitchen and watched me. She sort of belonged in a kitchen, if you know what I mean. She looked as though she could find the right shelf by instinct, and knew exactly how to pick things up to use them best, and she sort of melted comfortably into a corner between the sink and the stove. I mean, definitely not the sort of person to bring out a cookbook in front of.

All I could do, though, was say "Well…" sort of helplessly, and go on back into the living room and get the cookbook. "Got to make sure I do everything right," I said lamely to Mallie when I came back, and she nodded cheerfully over her knitting.

My first problem, and the one that weighed most heavily on my mind, was that lemon pie. I remembered too distinctly telling Hugh Talley in an absolutely insufferable tone that unless he could make a lemon pie he really wasn't much of a cook. I thought when I was telling him that, probably a lemon pie was easier than apple, or cherry, or something like that. Only one crust, you know.

I was fairly sure that Mallie was watching me out of the corner of her eye when I turned to the index of the cookbook and ran my finger casually down the list until I came to Lemon Meringue Pie. I turned to the page, trying hard to look as though I made a lemon pie every day of my life and just intended to refresh my memory a little. I read the recipe twice. I had been right; it *was* easy. All I had to do…

“Wash your hands first,” Mallie said sharply.

I jumped, and then I went over to the sink and washed my hands. I was beginning to realize that when this Mallie said something as though she meant it, first you jumped, and then you did what she told you to do. After I had washed my hands and tied a bathtowel around my waist for an apron, I went to the bags of groceries I had brought home and took out the flour, the shortening, the lemons, the eggs, the condensed milk, the gelatin, the vanilla, the cream — all the things I had bought because it seemed to me that they might go into a lemon pie. “Now,” I said gaily.

The first thing that happened was that I spilled the flour. I didn’t have a measuring cup, of course, so while I tried to guess how much flour I needed I dropped the bag and it broke on the floor, but there was enough on the table for me to use. The recipe said I could use more flour if necessary, anyway. But the pie crust I was making never did come out exactly as I thought I remembered it ought to. Somehow, one minute it was all crumbs when I tried to roll it out, and the next minute, when I finally picked it up and kneaded it between my hands until it got solid, it was hard as a rock and wouldn’t roll at all. Finally, after about four tries, I got the crust rolled into the right shape for the pie plate, although it got rolled too thin some places and I had to sort of piece it together and pinch it to make the edges stick, and even then it was pretty thick some places. “It won’t matter when the filling’s in,” I told myself. Finally I put it into the oven and turned around and looked at Mallie.

“Well,” I said with some satisfaction, *“that’s* done.”

Mallie hadn’t said anything while I was making the pie crust. Once I had turned around to look at her because I wondered for a minute if maybe she hadn’t been laughing at me — it was when the ball of dough I was working with had bounced out of my hands and across the table — but she had her head down over her knitting. The back of her neck and her ears were bright red, and she sounded like she was coughing, but I decided not to say anything if *she* didn’t. She’d been nice enough to pick up the pieces of the mixing bowl when it fell on the floor.

When I put the pie in the oven and turned around to look at her she smiled at me innocently. “Better get those potatoes on,” she said.

“I *know,”* I said. “Don’t worry about *me.”*

I went back to the index of the cookbook. I really ought to start right in on the pie filling, but maybe if Mallie thought that the potatoes were next… Potatoes, Baked. I turned to the page and saw with dismay that the time given for potatoes, baked, was fifty minutes. And Hugh Talley would be here in forty-five minutes, allowing that he was five minutes late. “He’ll have to wait,” I told the clock grimly, and dived for the potatoes.

“Wouldn’t of thought *anyone* could mess up a baked potato,” Mallie observed to her knitting.

I glared at her, but I was moving too fast to answer. By then I was squeezing the lemons for the pie filling; when I was on about my eighth lemon the squeezer skidded across the table and took a nosedive onto the floor, and I had to finish the lemons by hand, and add a little canned lemon juice to get what I figured was a cupful. Then when I tried to beat the eggs I all of a sudden remembered the pie crust, and when I rushed to get it out of the oven, the eggbeater tipped over the bowl with the eggs in and *they* went down. But it didn't really matter because the pie crust was burned black anyway. I just stood in front of the stove with the pie dish in my hand.

"You put it in, in back of the potatoes," Mallie said softly. "Then with the potatoes in front, you forgot it."

"Never *mind,"* I snarled at her. "I'll buy a lemon pie."

"Buy a lemon *pie?"* Mallie said as though I had suggested stealing one off a windowsill.

"Never *mind,"* I said again.

I had planned to make biscuits, too, but the oven was getting so full and the time was getting so short that I gave up the idea. It was fifteen minutes before Hugh Talley was due to arrive — allowing that he was ten minutes late — and then I remembered vaguely that I had planned to have lamb chops, too.

"Lamb chops," I said. "Lamb chops."

"Lamb chops," Mallie said soothingly.

Could she be laughing at me? I looked at her again, and she looked back at me with those wide, friendly eyes.

"Lamb chops," I said doggedly. I searched among the litter of papers on the table and found the package of lamb chops. I knew they were to be fried, but the only frying pan I could find was too small for more than two, and knowing Hugh Talley's famous appetite, I had bought six. I would just have to fry them two at a time. I glanced suspiciously at Mallie; she had her eyes shut, briefly, and her lips moved. I thought she was saying "lamb chops" to herself.

There was absolutely no place in the kitchen to put down the package of lamb chops, so I held it in my hand while I turned the pages of the cookbook. It was also very hard to read the cookbook because by now the lemon pie filling had soaked through the pages and there was so much flour on my hands that it made a sort of paste. The page that told about lamb chops was also the page that told about lemon meringue pie, and was thoroughly stuck to the next one. I had to put the lamb chops down to separate the pages, and the only place I could find was the windowsill, and I had opened the window to let the odor of burning pie crust out, and, anyway, I suddenly smelled something else burning, and when I leaped to see what it was I joggled the package of lamb chops on the windowsill, and there I was. Mallie came over to the window beside me and looked out.

"Well," she said, "your lamb chops, down there on the sidewalk. From here," she added severely, "they don't look like first cut lamb chops, either."

I opened the oven door to see what was burning and found that the potatoes were still baking nicely, and so was my potholder, which I had left inside.

"That does it," I said with admirable restraint. I stood up and pushed my hair back with my floury paw. "That does it," I said again, without quite so much restraint. "I'll make him pay for this," I said. "I'll teach him to go tormenting nice girls with his old cooking. I'll fry the leaves of the cookbook one by one—" I was going on, but Mallie stopped me.

"You just calm down," she said. And, once again, I did what she told me to. I stopped yelling and looked around the kitchen. The sink was piled high with dirty dishes. I had set the broken lemon squeezer on top of the pile of dishes in the sink because I couldn't find anywhere else to put it, and half a lemon sat precariously on top of *that*. The mixing bowls were in the sink, too, except the one I broke. For some reason I had used four mixing bowls and a saucepan for that pie filling. On the table was a mess of eggshells and the wrappings from the food and the cookbook, sitting smack in the middle of the pool of pie filling. I had forgotten to turn on the heat under the coffeepot, which sat, cold and reproachful, next to the broken bag of flour, which, for some reason, I had set on the stove. There wasn't enough flour left in the bag, though, to worry about; it was mostly on the floor. The potholder was cooked to a turn. The doorbell rang.

I stared at the footprints in the flour on the floor. "Did I really walk that much?" I asked Mallie a little bit hysterically.

Mallie set down her knitting at last, and rose. "You go along now," she said. "You change into your blue dress; I pressed it this afternoon while I was waiting for you. You take a quick shower and get dressed, and *I'll* take care of your young man."

"But," I began helplessly. I waved one arm at the kitchen, and the doorbell rang again. "What shall I do?" I said.

"I just *told* you what to do," Mallie said sharply. "You run along and get dressed."

Well, I already knew what to do when Mallie spoke like that. There was no further question of hesitation or disobedience. I found myself heading for the shower and the blue dress. Just as I closed the bedroom door, I heard Mallie's voice saying, "… old friend of Dimity's mother. Just stopped in to say hello."

I confess frankly that I took an unreasonably long time over that shower. With anyone else, I suppose I could just have admitted honestly that I'd made a mess of things and talked big and then couldn't perform, but with Hugh Talley, that sort of admission was harder. He'd never forget it, for one thing. And he'd never let *me* forget it, for another. I thought of Hugh Talley's red face and complacent smile once when I was just ready to step out of the shower, and then I stepped back into the shower again and stayed there awhile longer. Go ahead, Dimity, I kept telling myself, go ahead, face up to it.

I felt somewhat better when I was dressed and had the smoke out of my hair and the flour out from under my fingernails. I felt a little bit cheerful — almost, as a matter of fact, as though someday, perhaps in ten years or so, living in some town maybe five hundred miles from Hugh Talley, this day might begin to seem less important to me, even, perhaps, funny.

I gathered all my pride together just inside the bedroom door, and I put my head as high as it would get with the stiff neck I had gotten from bending over that stove, and I straightened my shoulders, and finally I opened the door and I marched bravely out into the living room and up to Hugh Talley, where he was sitting in the only comfortable chair with his feet up on the hassock.

“Sorry to keep you waiting, Hugh,” I said with my brave smile, “but as a matter of fact, I might just as well admit—”

“Dimity,” Mallie said sharply, “best run into the kitchen and look to that pie.”

“I might as well admit,” I went on, “that after all I said—”

“I looked in on it a minute ago,” Mallie said, “and it wants to come out of the oven right now. *Right* now,” she insisted, and then added sweetly, “Of course, that’s only what I think, of course. Dimity knows best.”

It began to sink into my mind, what she had said. I was so wound up for my courageous speech to Hugh Talley that it took a minute or so before I even realized that Mallie was speaking to me. Anyway, I turned around and looked at her and she gave me a prodigious wink, and waved toward the kitchen with her hand. Then, when I turned back to stare at Hugh Talley, I saw something I also had not noticed before. The little table in the living room was set for dinner for two. The tablecloth was shining, the glasses were glittering, the silverware was reflecting the light of the two tall candles set in the center of the table. It looked pretty.

Mallie said, “I’ve got to run along in a minute, but first I’d like to see how your pie came out, Dimity.”

It occurred to me, now, that she wanted me to go into the kitchen. So I went and she followed me. Hugh Talley said as we left, “Hope Dimity didn’t put on too much style for *me*. I wasn’t expecting much, you know.” And he laughed in an unpleasant sort of way.

I stood in the kitchen doorway. I could have sworn that when I left it a short time before there had been dirty dishes in the sink, flour on the floor, and no dinner worth speaking of in the stove. Now, however, the kitchen was spotless — a good deal cleaner, I blush to say, than it had ever been before. Everything had been put away. It seemed likely that the floor had been scrubbed.

“What?” I said — my usual intelligent remark when astonished.

“If you don’t shut your mouth soon,” Mallie said tartly, “I won’t be answerable for what falls into it.”

“But—” I said — another intelligent comment of mine.

“No time for silly questions,” Mallie said. “You listen to me, Dimity Baxter. For a while there I figured I’d let you work along on things yourself, and then come through and say right out you were wrong. But I’ll tell you something. I don’t like that young man in there one bit. First thing he says to me when he sits down, ‘Did Dimity really make this dinner herself?’ Now, I don’t call that fair at all, so I said to him, ‘She spent all afternoon in the kitchen,’ and of course *that* was true.” She looked me up and down reflectively. “Blue’s a good color for you,” she said, and then went on. “That’s the sort of young man you have to edge around the truth with. So don't you tell him anything, you hear? And for heaven's sake, get that pie out of the oven."

I opened the oven and took out the pie, noticing dully as I did so that the meringue was perfect, and little flakes of the crust fell off the edges. "Pie," I said.

"What else would it be if I called it a pie?" Mallie demanded. "Don't you ever have that young man here for dinner again, you hear?"

"I won't," I told her fervently.

"I borrowed your piggy bank, by the way," Mallie said.

"The piggy bank?" I said. "But there was only *six*—"

"Never you mind," Mallie said. "Those lamb chops were a bad cut, anyway. Now, here's a cookbook for you instead of that old one I threw out, and maybe someday I'll run in and say hello again."

Briefly, quickly, she kissed me on the cheek, a swift brush of soft old lips, and then the front door closed softly and I was standing in the middle of my clean kitchen with dinner smelling good and a cookbook in my hand.

"Hey!" It was Hugh Talley calling me from the living room. "When do we eat?"

I moved numbly toward the stove. I lifted the napkin off one of the dishes keeping warm; it was hot biscuits, light and brown and not like anything I had seen for quite a while. Another dish held the baked potatoes; a third dish held the chops. There was the pie. And there was, I discovered, a salad in the refrigerator.

There was nothing for me to do but start carrying it in to Hugh Talley, which I did.

Sitting at the table, Hugh Talley looked down comfortably at his plate. "Doesn't look bad," he said. He had taken three biscuits, remarking that they were probably like lead. He had taken a baked potato, with the comment that it looked a little bit hard. He had served himself two chops, noting as he did so that for a wonder they weren't covered with some kind of fancy sauce. When he helped himself to salad, he observed that the salad dressing probably contained whipped cream. But he had supplied himself nicely just the same. I just sat and stared at my own plate; it certainly *looked* like food.

"You know," Talley said with his mouth full, "these biscuits are really pretty good." He swallowed, and gestured with the piece of biscuit still in his hand. He had plenty of butter on it, I noticed. "You know," he said again, "I'll bet there's a trick or two about biscuits you haven't caught on to yet. I bet you just use any old flour to make them — isn't that so?" I nodded — what else could I do? "Well," he said, consuming the piece of biscuit in his hand, "that's allllll wrong. That's the way all women cook. Just take any old flour and use it for everything. But now, you take a *real* cook—" He gestured largely, and ended his gesture over the plate of biscuits. He hesitated, and then took another. "You take a real cook, *he* knows about flour. Why, when I want to make biscuits I go to a special little flour place I know of, way downtown, and I say to them, 'Listen,' I say, 'I don't want any of your ordinary flour, I want that *special* flour you keep for Hugh Talley.' And by golly, that's what I get."

"What's what you get?" I asked him, but he didn't hear me.

"Same thing with applesauce," Hugh Talley said. "You take applesauce — I bet you put cinnamon in it?" I nodded again; I supposed I did put cinnamon in it. "Well," Talley said, "I guess about *everyone* puts cinnamon, or some such thing, in applesauce — but not Hugh Talley." He shook his head violently and had another biscuit. "What you want to do — that is, what a *real* cook would do is get some of this special seasoning they have at a little place I know of; it's not like cinnamon, exactly, has more of a flavor, you might say. I go down there whenever I want to make *real* applesauce, and I say to them—”

I tasted a biscuit. It tasted real and more than real; it tasted like biscuits I remembered from the time I was about twelve and eating was practically all I lived for. It tasted, as a matter of fact, perfectly fine.

“And you take chops,” Hugh Talley was going on; how he could eat so much and talk so much and do both together without stopping made me wonder For a minute, and the sweet thought that he might choke himself to death occurred to me. “Pork chops, you know,” he said, “you have to treat a good pork chop right or it just simply tastes like any other pork chop. Now, *I* always take *my* pork chops, and I marinate them. Now, most people will tell you that marinating pork chops is all wrong, but not Hugh Talley.” He shook his head positively. “The trouble is, most people think that by marinating pork chops I just mean simply marinating them, but no *real* cook would do *that*. Not,” he said, “to a pork chop. You want to take a special combination of French dressing — not the French dressing you *buy*, of course.” He stopped and looked at me aggressively, and I nodded again, because I was, by now, just nodding every time he stopped. “Naturally not,” he said. “So you take French dressing, and you add this special—”

Pork chops? I thought suddenly. Pork chops? I looked down at my plate, took a taste. I was certain that I had bought lamb chops. Then I remembered the lamb chops down on the sidewalk and Mallie saying “I borrowed your piggy bank, by the way.”

“Excuse me,” I said hastily. I ran into the kitchen; the piggy bank was gone and the six cents it had contained lay on the shelf.

“Where’s that lemon pie I heard so much about?” I heard Talley shouting from the dining room.

It didn't seem possible, after the dinner he had put away, but I picked up the pie and started in with it. As I entered the room, he began again. "Now, you take lobster," he said. "Most people, they don't cook lobster right." He watched approvingly while I brought over the pie. As I was about to set it down, he took a deep breath and began, "The trouble with women—"

I couldn't help it. Nobody could have helped it. Even *Mallie* couldn't have helped it, and I almost think she would have approved.

I thought it was terribly funny, and I'm afraid I began to laugh. Hugh Talley wiped the lemon pie off his face and glared at me. Then he stood up, brushing meringue From his sleeves and shaking crust off his hair, and he tried to catch his breath, and then, with his face red and his eyes glaring, he tried to think of something to say, something cutting enough, I suppose, to sound furious through a faceful of lemon pie.

"You — you — woman cook!" he shouted finally.

I heard the door slam behind him and I thought: small credit to me; I only threw the pie — Mallie baked it. And it seemed to me that perhaps Mallie had baked that pie for only one purpose, and that purpose had just been served.

I figured right then that there was one thing I really owed to Mallie and I'd better get started on it right away, and deal with the mess on the floor later. Anybody could clean up a mess, but Dimity Baxter was going to set herself out to learn to cook, and with no more nonsense about it, either.

I went into the kitchen and got the cookbook Mallie had left for me and came back and sat down in the comfortable chair Hugh Talley had so recently vacated. The cookbook was patterned in blue and white checks, and had "Dimity Baxter" written across the front in gold letters. Inside, on the flyleaf, it said "To Dimity from Mallie." And it had positively the strangest table of contents I had ever seen. It started with "Dinner for Mr.

Arthur Clyde Brookson," a name I had never heard before, although, reading it, I said it over once or twice and liked the sound of it, oddly. Instructions for the dinner, which began on page one, started off: "Now, don't you get all flustered, Dimity. No need to worry about *this* dinner — he's going to like it, whatever you cook. Probably won't eat anything, anyway, either of you."

I turned back to the table of contents. Another item caught my eye. It read: "Luncheon for mother-in-law and two friends." I blinked, and giggled.

Another listing was "Dinner to be served to daughter's young man," and still another was "Family dinner, to serve fifteen." Also, "Dinner for husband's employer, and wife." That one made me laugh out loud.

Then one listing caught my eye, and, unable to resist, I turned to it. It was called: "First dinner of married life," and the instructions began: "Dimity, you take off that yellow organdy apron and put on the good practical one your mother sent you. Save the yellow one to serve dinner in. And don't let him get the idea he doesn't have to help do dishes."

There was only one thing I could think of to do, and, after a minute, I knew how to do it. I went out into the kitchen and said softly, "Thanks, Mallie."

PARTY OF BOYS

MY OLDER SON, LAURIE, has a birthday early in October, so on good years he goes with his father to New York for the World Series; years when Brooklyn loses the pennant Laurie just has a birthday party at home. Toward the end of last summer, when it began to seem depressingly clear that Laurie would celebrate his twelfth birthday far away from Ebbets Field, he began a loving and detailed plan for the properest and gayest manner of celebrating a boy's only twelfth birthday. He began by proposing, as the only reasonable foundation upon which a happy birthday might be built, that both his younger sisters spend that weekend with their grandmother in California. I said that the distance between Vermont, where we live, and California, made this idea untenable, but that I would guarantee that both girls would spend the entire day visiting friends locally. Laurie then suggested that he invite eighteen friends and they play baseball on the side lawn. I said the side lawn was not an athletic field, and anyway I would not feed eighteen of his friends unless they ate in the barn. Laurie sighed, and offered to compromise on twelve, and volleyball. I said that the side lawn was not an athletic field, and besides I was fairly sure it was going to rain. Laurie thought for a minute and then asked with enormous courtesy whether it would be all right if he just asked Robert over for the afternoon, and they could play chess?

I told him that our dining room could hold eight twelve-year-old boys comfortably, provided they didn't run footraces or fence with the table knives — or perhaps, I suggested, he might like to have an evening party, with a little supper? In that case, I pointed out, I could make lots of sandwiches and a nice fruit punch, and he could invite as many as half a dozen boys and half a dozen gir — At that point Laurie left the room, remarking poignantly that sometimes he got to thinking that everyone in the world but him was crazy.

He finally decided that a Saturday afternoon movie was the thing, with supper afterward, and he invited his seven closest friends, all of whom could be depended upon to bring sensible presents, such as the latest popular records, and chemical retorts, and Tarzan books, which are very much in demand in Laurie’s set. It was particularly specified in the invitations that formal dress was not expected. The guests arrived by bicycle, neatly wrapped packages dangling from the handlebars. The packages were put on the dining room table, to be opened at supper, the bicycles were lined up by our back porch, and Laurie and his seven friends wrestled one another happily into my car, to be driven into town to see “The Mad Fiend from the Lost Planet,” and “Pride of the Rancho Grande,” and “Tattooed by the Ape Men,” and two serials and a cartoon, not to mention the news-reel and the coming attractions. I had cashed a check in the morning, and given Laurie enough money to pay eight admissions into the movie, with popcorn and a candy bar apiece, and I was to pick them up again after the movie.

My younger son, Barry, who is not quite three and regards his brother’s friends with vast admiration as a superior order of being, infinitely tall and wise and able to fix any number of small toys, accompanied us to town, peering worshipfully over the car seat at the birthday party, which had crushed itself mercilessly into the back half of my station wagon. Barry and I had plenty of room in the front seat, since no party member was prepared to admit himself effeminate enough to sit with us. The eight of them seemed considerably jammed together in back — every now and then a wildly waving foot, or an arm upraised in protest, showed in the rearview mirror — and I kept wondering all the way into town if they were not all secretly hoping that I would run into something.

"Chees," came a voice from the back, which I was able to identify as Stuart's, "chees, I sure would hate to miss this week's serial. Remember — they were caught by the A-rabs?"

"Yeah, well, listen?" Oliver insisted. "You know they're going to get away?"

"Well, if it was you was that guy, well, now, what would *you* do?"

"But hey, he *lied*, din't he?"

"Yeah, but only because they said they were gonna shoot. I mean, what would *you* do? *Not* give up or something?"

"But sure, hey, because gosh—"

"But he *did*. You were there — he *did."*

"Well, if it was me, I mean that guy there, I wouldn't of."

"Hey, you guys." It was Laurie, reminiscent. "Hey, remember *last* week? We sure heard from *that* usher, boy."

"Boys," I said. "Remember, no fighting. Behave like—"

"Jeeps," Laurie said. "I forgot you were here."

"I'm not," I said testily. "Barry is driving."

"I am driving," Barry confirmed. "I am right now turning on the wipeshield winders."

"Yeah, but." The conversation continued after a cautious pause. "Suppose it *was* you. Would you?"

"Well." This was Tommy, considering. "It's like if you took something din't belong to you. You wouldn't just *give* it back, would you, if you *meant* to take it? Just because they said?"

"No," said several voices at once. "But," Willie said, "suppose you *had* to? I mean, with the cops and all?"

"Well, *then"* someone said. "If it was the cops."

"But he *didn't."* Two or three of them spoke at once. "And that *girl,"* said someone.

There was a brief, disapproving silence. Then Joey's voice rose. "If it was *me,"* Joey said, "if it was *me*, I'da done what was right."

"Yeah, you would." "Well, you sweet thing." "I believe *that."*

I stopped the car in front of the theater. "Now, look, Laurie," I said. "Be careful with that money, and don't go running around town, and I'll be back at four-thirty and don't fill up on junk because dinner will be—"

"Sure, Ma, sure," Laurie said. "My old lady," he remarked generally. "She's tipped."

I bit my lip. "Have a nice time," I said.

"Yeah." They climbed out one after another, great feet stumbling, shoving and pushing; they had to go out the door next to Barry, and each one, struggling through, patted Barry on the head as he passed. Barry chuckled, I beamed nervously, trying to memorize hats and jackets to ensure returning our guests in the approximate order they came, and Laurie ordered everyone around. "Hey, wait," he kept saying.

"Be careful," I said involuntarily.

Laurie looked at me. "You're *tipped,"* he said.

They crossed the street like the legions of Mars coming out of their flying saucer; halfway across, Laurie hesitated, thought, and turned back.

"Hey," he said, coming to the car window, "I almost forgot. Get some old piece of junk for Joey, will you? Model car or something?"

"For Joey?"

"It's his birthday, too. Hey, wait up." And he turned and raced back across the street while I was still saying, "But why didn't you tell me? I would have—"

I craned my neck out the car window, still asking, and watched them go into the movie, snatching at one another and clearly heading for the popcorn counter. Then, telling myself firmly that they would all probably grow up to be nice boys someday, I dug into my change purse for a penny for the parking meter, gathered Barry out of the car, and headed, still telling myself about how they would surely, surely be nice boys someday, for the toy shop and a piece of junk for Joey.

With the delayed reaction that I believe to be common to all mothers, I still feel toward Joey a mingled irritation and tolerance; he is six inches taller than the other boys and used to beat Laurie up every morning on the way to school. Although he is now a completely accepted member of Laurie's group of friends, I cannot lose the uneasy feeling that, crossed, Joey is always apt to heave a rock at something, even though he always calls me "Ma'am," and is one of the few boys who remembers to take off his hat when he comes into the house. I am not altogether successful at concealing my nervousness, so I make a great point of smiling largely at Joey when he comes into the house (he is, after all, two inches taller than I) and at P.T.A. meetings Oliver's mother and Tommy's mother and Willie's mother and I tell one another that a boy like Joey is, after all, someone who needs *sympathy*, not punishment; that kind of mischief making, we tell one another, is only because Joey feels insecure. Joey lives with his grandmother because his parents are dead, and the day Joey's older brother went off to reform school Willie's mother called me and we told each other that if Joey would be made to feel that he was, after all, an accepted member of the group, he might yet grow up to be a credit to his old grandmother. We have all made a point of being very earnest about this, and of course no one can actually prove that it was Joey who dumped the cement into the school furnace, but all the same I could not help feeling slightly wild-eyed at the idea that Joey had birthdays like other children.

However, if Joey was not to receive an irrevocable setback in the process of reformation, I knew I had better get into action right away, so I settled Barry down next to a toy tractor and went into the toy shop phone booth and called Willie's mother. She thought immediately that something had gone wrong with the birthday party and all the boys were coming over to her house, and I had to reassure her and then tell her that I had just heard that poor Joey had a birthday today, too, and none of us had known about it. She said good Lord, what a time to find out, and what was I planning to do, the poor child? I said I guessed I had no choice, the poor child, but to pick up a gift and an extra cake, since the one I had at home plainly said Happy Birthday to Laurie, and it would be next to impossible to add a postscript in pink icing which would include Joey. She said wait a minute, she was going to ice a cake for the church bake sale, and why didn't she decorate it for Joey instead? She could give the bake sale the apple pie and pick up something for dessert when she dropped the cake off at my house. I said gratefully that that would just about save my life, because I had enough extra candles, and Joey would never know that his birthday celebration was a last-minute affair. She said the poor kid, she hated to see a kid go without a party on his birthday, and she was sure Helen and Sylvia and Jean would be just sick when they knew, so why not call them, and she'd leave the cake on the kitchen table.

Encouraged, I called Oliver's mother and said did she know it was Joey's birthday today, too, and she said that did it, that was all she needed on a day like this was turning out to be, and what on earth could we do? I said that I had just dropped the boys off at the movie, and was still in town, and if she wanted some small remembrance for Joey I would be glad to pick up something.

"Oh, fine, then," she said. "Get him a book, maybe."

"A book?" I said. "For Joey?"

"Oh, Lord," she said. "A knife, then, and say it's from Oliver and I'll settle with you when I see you."

I said I'd also get a nice card and sign it "Oliver" and she asked if the boys were all safely in the movie and I said well anyway they were *in*, and she said she was glad it was me feeding them tonight and not her.

Then I called Tommy's mother, and *she* said that if I got a chance to get into the Boy's Shop I might pick up a light sweater or half a dozen pairs of socks, because it was her opinion that the poor child had absolutely *no* clothes. That seemed like such a good idea that I suggested it to Stuart's mother, who said what a time to find out, and all the boys always needed blue jeans anyway, and I could charge it to her account in the Boy's Shop if I was beginning to run short of ready cash.

By the time I headed home, then, I had made six phone calls and had seven birthday presents for Joey and a cowboy suit for Barry, which I had somehow gotten myself talked into buying. The cake was sitting on the kitchen table when I got home, and it was a handsome thing, half again as large as Laurie's, and reading "A very happy birthday to Joey."

Fortunately the boys were having spaghetti for dinner and I had made it in the morning, so all I really had to do was butter lots of bread and make a plain salad. ("None of that junk you put on salads," Laurie had said explicitly. "Just lettuce and sliced tomatoes and radishes, and no marshmallows or pineapple or junk." "I never put marshmallows in a salad in my life," I said indignantly. "Well, can't ever tell when you're going to start," Laurie said pessimistically.) I set the table with care ("Now, look, don't try to hand out little baskets of *candy* or something"), using plain paper napkins, ordinary glassware, my good silver, and my plain dark blue plates, hoping that Laurie would not regard the blue as an attempt at decorating the birthday table. With a certain cynical satisfaction I set a silver dish of salted nuts at each end of the table, a gesture I ordinarily make only at Thanksgiving, when the whole family is assembled. Laurie had conceded that it might not embarrass his friends overmuch if each one found a small favor at his place; he suggested beanshooters or water pistols, but I substituted yo-yos.

Barry had been cordially invited to take a seat next to the birthday boy, and to participate fully in the dinner festivities. My husband had assured us fervently that he had no intention of coming out of the study, and I had been told sternly that all I had to do was put dinner on the table and not make a pest of myself. ("At Jimmie's party, his old lady was always hanging around," Laurie said. "Chees!" "Please do not refer to people's mothers as old ladies," I said. "Jimmie's mother is not much older than—" "Tipped," Laurie said, sighing.) Entertainment at dinner was to be provided by one of those little cardboard games where everyone punches out a slip of paper describing a trick or stunt to do, and — although I was not, naturally, informed of this, if indeed it was planned ahead of time — by throwing tomatoes. Altogether, as planned, a wholly satisfying and nicely calculated birthday supper, provided I didn't lose one of the boys in the movies or drop the cake.

At four-thirty I was parked in front of the movie in a space marked "No Parking," and at four thirty-five the boys began to emerge, one by one, blinking and discarding candy papers. Each one patted Barry on the head as he climbed into the car, and I made nervous estimates about hats, jackets, and the policeman on the corner. When Laurie got in I turned, counted, and said, "Is everyone here? Stuart?"

"Here," said a voice from the mass in the back of the station wagon.

"Joey?" I said, peering.

"Yeah?"

"Oliver's not here," someone said, and several voices added, "No, Oliver, Oliver's not here, where's Ollie?"

"He went back for his shoe," Willie said.

"What happened to his shoe?" I asked, turning. "His *shoe?"*

"Oh, *Ma"* Laurie said, and there was a deep silence in the back of the car.

"Look," I said at last, "someone better go and get him. Because that policeman—"

"Here he comes," Laurie said. "Hurry *up*, Ollie, you think the old lady *wants* to get arrested? Besides, we got to get back and *eat*, for heaven's sake."

"Ice cream," Barry confided, smiling broadly over the back of the seat. "Ice cream, Laurie."

Once Oliver was in the car I counted twice more, announced that anyone not now in the car would probably have to walk, and headed home. Barry sang, "Ice cream, ice cream," softly to himself, and after a minute someone in the back said, "Hey, you *remember* that guy?"

"Gosh," someone said, and someone else said, "Boy," with a sigh.

"And those guys with the space guns—"

"And the octopus—"

"And in the serial—"

"Ice cream, ice cream," Barry sang.

"And when the cops were searching the house—"

"And the master brain—"

"And boy, was that usher *sore."*

I relaxed. Get dinner on the table, light the candles, make a fair attempt at getting sixteen hands washed. I felt a strong glow of satisfaction, too, remembering the presents and cake for Joey. "Ice cream and cake and ice cream," Barry sang.

Laurie sat at one end of the table and Joey at the other. The boys crowded around while the presents were opened; one or two of them looked mildly surprised to find that they had given presents to Joey, but no one said anything. I stood discreetly in the kitchen doorway, appreciating the rare pleasure of a task well done; Joey was deeply gratified, and went so far as to try on the sweater he had received from Tommy. Later, when the spaghetti was going around and Robert was doing a stunt that required that he imitate a fat lady getting into a telephone booth with an armful of packages, Joey left the table and came into the kitchen, where I was buttering more bread. "Thanks very much," he said awkwardly.

"Many happy returns," I said, wondering that I had ever been wary of this pleasant boy.

"Thanks, ma'am," he said again; he went back to the table and I went on buttering bread; Willie was trying to pat his head and rub his stomach, and Barry's voice rose anxiously, inquiring where was the ice cream.

I persuaded my husband out of the study to carry Laurie's cake, and I carried Joey's.

"Happy birthday," everyone sang, "happy birthday to Laurie and Joey."

"Happy birthday," Barry sang individually, "happy and ice cream."

I went back into the study with my husband, unaware that it was almost time for the tomato throwing to begin. "Who's that other boy?" my husband asked.

"It's little Joey. He's really getting on so well, now that he's got friends and he plays baseball now and—"

"That the kid shot out the post office window?"

" — And Mrs. Moore says it's wonderful the way he's settled down to his schoolwork with a little encouragement—"

"Turned the Henleys' cat into the chicken house?"

"You would have been touched to see him opening those presents."

"I understand," my husband said, "that if he tries to walk down Pleasant Street, old man Martin's going to be waiting for him with a shotgun."

"Of course," I said, "if you don't believe that a little kindness and patience—"

"Just make sure you count the silverware," my husband said.

Barry opened the study door. "When is supper?" he asked. "Come and see all the tomatoes on Laurie."

Later, disregarding the tomatoes and shreds of lettuce and bread and thin lines of spaghetti and torn paper and nuts and scraps of ribbon and the overturned chairs, I stood at the back door with Laurie, waving goodbye to his guests. "Thank you for a very nice time and for all the presents and cake," Joey said.

"You're very welcome," I said.

"See ya, Joe," Laurie said. "Gosh," he added to me as the last bike pulled away, "gosh, that Joey sure gets all the luck."

"I'm glad you told me," I said. "I would have felt awful if we hadn't known it was his birthday, too."

"Yeah, but you know what he's *getting*? His uncle's taking him out to the racetrack tonight, and Joey gets to bet on every single race. Gosh." I began to laugh, and Laurie turned and looked at me curiously. "Something funny?" he inquired.

“Nothing,” I said. “I’m just tipped, I guess.”

“What?”

“Tipped,” I said. “Don’t tell your father.”

Laurie looked at me for a minute and then he shook his head hopelessly, and reached out and patted me approvingly on the shoulder. “Pretty dingy party, anyway,” he said. “Come on, old lady, let’s start cleaning up this mess.”

JACK THE RIPPER

THE MAN HESITATED ON the corner under the traffic light, then started off down the side street, walking slowly and watching the few people who passed him. It was long past midnight, and the streets were as nearly deserted as they ever get; as the man went down the dark street he stopped for a minute, thinking he saw a dead girl on the sidewalk. She was nearly against the wall of a building; a few feet beyond her was the small sign of a bar, and seeing that, the man started to walk on, and then turned back to the girl.

She was so drunk that when he shook her and tried to sit her up she sagged backward, her eyes half closed and her hands rolling on the sidewalk. The man stood and looked at her for a minute, and then turned again and went down to the bar. When he opened the door and went in he saw that the place was nearly empty, with only a group of three or four sailors at the farther end of the bar, and the bartender with them, talking and laughing. There was one man standing at the bar near the doorway, and after looking around for a minute, the man who had come in walked over and stood at the end of the bar.

“Listen,” he said, “there’s a girl lying out on the street outside.”

The man farther down the bar looked at him quietly.

“I just happened to be passing down this way,” the man who had just come in went on more urgently, “and I saw her, and I think something had better be done. She can’t stay out there.” The man farther down the bar went on looking. “She isn’t but about seventeen.”

“There’s a phone out back,” the man standing down the bar said. “Call the mayor.”

The bartender came easily down to the end of the bar, the smile leaving his face as he came. When he got to the end of the bar, beside the man who had just come in, he stood unsmiling, waiting.

“Listen,” the man said again, “there’s a girl sixteen, seventeen lying outside in the street. We better get her inside.”

“Call the mayor,” the man down the bar said, “his number’s in the book.”

“I was just walking by,” the man said, “and she was lying there.”

“I know,” the bartender said.

“Mention my name,” the man down the bar said. “Tell him I told you to call.”

“I saw that she was nice and comfortable,” the bartender said, “and I put her pocketbook beside her, all nice and convenient.” He smiled tenderly. “I hope you didn’t disturb her,” he said.

The man raised his voice slightly. “She can’t keep on lying there,” he said. “You’re not going to say you intend to leave her there?”

“He’ll remember me all right,” the man down the bar said, nodding. “He won’t forget me in a hurry.”

“She likes it there,” the bartender said. “Sleeps there nearly every night.”

“But a girl fifteen, sixteen!” the man cried.

The bartender’s voice became harder; he put both hands on the edge of the bar and leaned over toward the man. “Anytime she likes,” he said, “she can get up and go home. She doesn’t have to stay there. Let her get up and walk home.”

“Not in any sort of a hurry he won’t,” the man down the bar said.

“Comes in here every night and gets drunk,” the bartender went on. “I let her have a beer now and then without money, do you want I should rent her a room, too?" He leaned back again and his voice softened. "Sleeps like a baby, don't she?" He turned around abruptly and walked back down the bar to the sailors. "Another drunk," he said to them.

The man turned to the door and opened it, still hesitating. Then he went out. "Don't forget to tell him what I told you," the man down the bar called after him.

When he got back to the girl he saw that she still lay in the same position, face against the sidewalk, with her knees against the wall. Her pocketbook lay on the sidewalk beside her, and the man picked it up and opened it. There was no money; there was a lipstick from the five and ten, and a key, a comb, and a little notebook. The man put everything back except the notebook; he opened it and found, on the first page, the girl's name and address. When he turned the first page he found a list of about twenty bars, with addresses and, in some cases, names of the bartenders. A few pages later he found another list, this time of sailors, each name followed by the name of a ship, and a date, apparently the date of the last time the ship was in New York. The entries were written in a big, childish writing, with uncrossed T's and an occasional misspelling. Toward the end of the notebook, a picture had been put between the pages. It showed the girl with two sailors, one on each side, their heads together, and all three smiling. The girl in the picture looked pleased and unattractive; lying on the ground, she seemed thin and almost lovely. The man put the picture back into the notebook and the notebook back into the pocketbook, and then, carrying the pocketbook, walked down to the corner and waved down a taxi. With the taxi waiting, he went back to the girl, lifted her, and put her in, and then got in after her. The girl was sprawled out on the seat, and the man had to sit on a corner to give her room. He gave the driver the address he had seen in the notebook, and the driver, after raising his eyes once to the mirror to look at the man, shrugged and drove off.

The house was in a bad neighborhood, old and dirty, and the driver, stopping the taxi, said: “This is it, mister.” He turned and looked at the girl, and added doubtfully, “Do I help you?”

The man pulled the girl out of the taxi by taking hold of her legs and dragging her until he could put her feet on the ground, and then taking her by the waist and swinging her over his shoulder. He held her over his shoulder while he took change from his pocket to pay the driver, and then, still holding her by the legs, he went into the house.

The hall was lighted by gaslights, and the stairway was incredibly narrow and steep. The man knocked on the first door, first with his knuckles, and then, grimly, with the girl’s shoes, swinging her legs back and forth.

From somewhere on the other side of the door, a woman’s voice asked, “What is it?” and finally the door opened a crack and the woman put her face out. It was too dark for the man to see what she looked like, but she said: “Who is it? Rose? She lives on the sixth floor. Last door on the right.” The door closed again. The man surveyed the stairway and thought. There was no room in the hallway to put the girl down, so he tightened his grip on her legs and started up the stairs. He stopped for breath on every landing, but by the time he reached the sixth floor he was breathing heavily and moving slowly, putting both feet on each step. He leaned against the wall at the top for a minute, trying to shift the girl’s weight, and then went down to the last door on the right. Putting the girl down on the floor, he opened her pocketbook and took out the key and opened the door. It was too dark in the hall to see what was in the room, so he lighted a match and went in, trying to find some light. After lighting three matches he found a candle, which he lit and set on the dresser in its own wax. The room was large enough for a cot and the dresser; on the back of the door were three hooks, on which were hanging a torn silk kimono and a pair of dirty stockings. The bed had a blanket on it, over the mattress, and a dirty, uncovered pillow. On the dresser were a few bobby pins and a package of matches. The man opened the four dresser drawers; all of them were empty except for the top one, which contained a bottle opener and a couple of beer bottle caps. When he had examined the room, the man went outside, where he had left the girl, and picked her up under the arms and dragged her into the room. He dumped her onto the bed and threw the blanket over her. He opened her pocketbook and took out the notebook, glancing through it until he found the picture, which he put in his pocket. He put the key on the dresser and the pocketbook beside it, and then, just before blowing out the candle, took out his knife. It had a polished bone handle, and a long and incredibly sharp blade.

He took a taxi on the corner near the tenement, giving the driver an address in the east seventies, and was home in a few minutes. When he got out of the elevator in his apartment house he stopped for a minute, looked at his hands and down at his shoes, and carefully took a piece of lint off his sleeve. He let himself into his apartment with his key, and walked softly into the bedroom. When he turned on the light his wife stirred in her bed, and then opened her eyes. “What time is it?” she murmured.

“Late,” he said. He went over and kissed her.

“What kept you so long?” she asked.

“I stopped and had a few drinks after the meeting,” he said. He went over to the dresser to put down his keys, and looked at his wife’s picture in the tall plastic frame. Reaching in his pocket, he found the picture of the girl with the two sailors and thought for a minute; then he went to his wife’s dressing table, and with her plastic-handled nail scissors cut the two sailors out of the picture, leaving the girl alone. This fragment of picture he put into the lower corner of the frame holding his wife's picture. He lighted a cigarette and stood looking at it.

"Aren't you coming to bed?" his wife asked sleepily.

"No," he said. "Believe I'll take a bath."

THE HONEYMOON OF MRS. SMITH (VERSION 1)

WHEN SHE CAME INTO the grocery she was sure that she had interrupted a conversation about herself and her husband. The grocer, leaning across the counter to speak confidentially to a customer, straightened up abruptly and signaled with his eyes, and suddenly everyone in the store, clerks and customers, found reason to interest themselves stubbornly in food displays or grocery lists, or shopping bags. Wherever she looked it seemed that she had all but caught a swift, eager glance that dropped as she turned, and then the grocer said loudly and clearly, “Afternoon, Mrs. Smith,” and a slow sigh, almost imperceptible, swept through the store.

“Good afternoon,” Mrs. Smith said.

“What’ll it be for you today?” he asked, moving his hands nervously on the counter. “Big weekend order?” They were phrases he used with nearly all his customers, even shoppers so new as little Mrs. Smith, but when he spoke to Mrs. Smith his voice came out with an unusual heartiness, and he coughed, embarrassed.

“I don’t need very much,” Mrs. Smith said. “My husband thought we might be going away for the weekend.” Again that long sigh went through the store; she had a clear sense of people moving closer, listening to every word she spoke. “A loaf of bread,” she said. “A half pint of cream. A little can of peas.” She looked down steadily at the list she had made a few minutes ago in her apartment; at first, a few days ago, she had wandered around the store as the other women did, but now that she knew their moving away from her and their side glances were deliberate and directed at her, she stood directly before the counter and read her order to the grocer. How silly they all are, she thought, and said, “And a quarter pound of butter, and three lamb chops.” One, she wanted to say to their faces, one lamb chop for me, and two for my husband. For my husband, she wanted to tell them, turning to look at them one by one, because even an old maid of thirty-eight can *sometimes* find herself a man to protect her and be fond of her; it’s just as well, she remembered ruefully, that they don’t know how we met.

“Coffee?” said the grocer. “Tea?”

“A pound of coffee,” she said, smiling at him. “I love coffee. I could drink coffee all day long, if I let myself.”

“A *whole* pound?” the grocer said, startled.

“Yes.” She took tight hold of the edge of the counter so that she would not stumble over the words. “My husband,” she said, “is not fond of coffee. But I love it.”

Again, although she was ready for it, she heard that distant sigh, and again the waiting silence. What do they want me to *do*, she wondered — pretend I’m a widow? The butcher, who had heard her order, came silently across the store and put down the wrapped package of lamb chops, gave her one quick look over his shoulder, and hurried back to the meat counter on the other side of the store. “Thank you,” Mrs. Smith said, and the grocer began a fierce rattling of paper bags to open one for her order. One good thing about being so conspicuous, Mrs. Smith was thinking, I never have to *wait* anywhere; all these women were here ahead of me, and yet I have my groceries and —

The grocer leaned toward her suddenly. “Mrs. Smith,” he said, “I guess it’s not my place to speak, but around here people try to be neighborly and sooner or later someone’s got to let you know—” He stopped, helpless, and the silence was immense. “Won’t anybody tell her?” the grocer demanded, and no one moved or spoke.

Mrs. Smith laughed shyly. “You don’t need to tell me anything,” she said. “I know I’m kind of new at things like keeping house and I suppose I’ll make all kinds of foolish mistakes” — she hesitated, hearing again that expectant sigh— “but you’ve all been so kind,” she said, “and I’m grateful to you for wanting to help me.”

“Oh, my goodness,” said the grocer. He gestured widely around the store; “Won’t *anyone”* he said, and still there was no sound.

“Well,” Mrs. Smith said uncertainly. “Thank you very much.” She gave a little smile toward the other women, and took up her bag of groceries. “I expect we’ll be back on Monday,” she told the grocer. “Have a nice weekend.”

The grocer stared at her with his mouth open, and Mrs. Smith turned to the door. As she closed it behind her she heard the grocer saying wildly, “You all just *stand* there—” Funny people, Mrs. Smith thought; city neighborhoods are really just like small towns, always edgy about new people. And I’m a new person, she thought happily; after thirty-eight years I’ve turned into a new person. Mrs. Charles Smith, she thought; I suppose I embarrass them because I’m a little foolish about it.

It was not really new to her, this attitude of odd surprise she encountered everywhere; as a matter of fact, the first person to show it had been herself, Helen Bertram, when Charles Smith, looking nervously down at the rice cookie by his teacup, had said, almost stammering, “I don’t suppose you’ve ever thought about… getting married, have you?” Surprise, Mrs. Smith reflected now, had very likely been the outstanding emotion showing on her face, surprise and then, quickly, incredulous happiness; it’s lucky he never looked at me that minute, Mrs. Smith thought now, and almost laughed.

Mrs. Charles Smith. She realized then that she had stopped in front of a dress shop and to anyone passing might seem to be regarding wistfully a display of black lace nightgowns; good heavens, she thought, backing away and blushing; I hope no one saw me *then;* imagine such things at *my* age.

"I hope you won't think me forward," he had said to her on that golden morning now two weeks and three days past, "I hope you won't think me forward if I open a conversation with you?"

She had thought him unbelievably forward, had been astonished, had for a moment almost drawn her black shawl around her and moved coldly away, and then at last, changing her life, she had smiled back and said, "No, of course not."

"It is such a lovely day," he said.

"Lovely," she said.

"And the sea air is refreshing."

"Most refreshing."

And that night at dinner, in a restaurant on the pier, he had told her, soberly, about his wife who had died, about the little house now closed up and abandoned after fifteen years of married life, about the kindly employers who had sent him on a month's leave of absence to indulge his grief. "But a man gets very lonely, I find," he told her, and she nodded, sorrowful, and yet envious of the wife who had had at least those fifteen years. She told him, then, about her father and her long, lonely years keeping house, never getting any younger, and the insurance money that would be just enough, if she took care, to provide for her modestly; "At least," she said bravely, "I won't have to go out and try to find a… *job*, or anything like that."

"You must be very lonely, too," he said, and gave her hand a quick, shy pat.

Even the napkins in the restaurant on the pier smelled of fish, and the table had a faint salty grain. “That’s really why I spoke to you, I guess,” he said. “I knew I was being forward, but I guess I just thought that maybe you were all alone, too.”

“I’m very glad,” she said timidly. “That you spoke to me, that is.”

“My wife,” he said, “my *former* wife — Janet, that is — *she* would have been very angry. I guess I was afraid you would be angry, too. *She* would have gotten up and walked away.”

Remembering how nearly she had come to getting up and walking away, Helen Bertram, so soon to be Mrs. Charles Smith, gave a little laugh and said, “I would call that silly. People who are all alone have every right to be friends with one another.”

And then, three days later, they had taken tea together at a Chinese tea shop, and, looking uncomfortably down at his rice cookie, he had asked her if she ever thought about getting married. Now, turning in through the doorway of the apartment house where they were to live until the house was ready, little Mrs. Smith wondered, as she had so many times in the past few days, how it could happen that the lives of two people might be wholly changed by a chance, by the combination of a lovely day and the sea air, by a sudden sympathetic word, and the awareness of an unexpected comfort to be found in a shared melancholy — although, Mrs. Smith told herself conscientiously, she had not really been so *terribly* sad these past few days. She remembered with some tenderness the first wife, the lost Janet, and again, as she had before during these past few days, she made a small promise to Janet that Mr. Smith should not be less happy in his second wife than he had been in his first.

Mr. Smith had their little apartment on the third floor, and it was a long climb for Mrs. Smith, who was not getting any younger, and particularly with a bag of groceries. She stopped to rest on the second floor landing, and then remembered too late that Mrs. Armstrong lived on the second floor and that Mrs. Armstrong had already shown almost excessive interest in being neighborly; coming down, on her way to the store, Mrs. Smith had hurried past Mrs. Armstrong's door and heard it open behind her, and now it opened again and she was fairly caught.

"Mrs. Smith, is that you?"

"Good afternoon," Mrs. Smith called over her shoulder, moving with some haste toward the stairs.

"Wait a minute, I'm coming." The lock on Mrs. Armstrong's door snapped, and the door closed behind her. Mrs. Armstrong came hastily, a little out of breath, along the hallway and to the stairs where Mrs. Smith waited. "Thought I'd miss you," Mrs. Armstrong said. "I was waiting for you to come back. Where you been — shopping?"

Since Mrs. Smith was carrying her bag of groceries she had only to nod, and attempt to back on up the stairs, but Mrs. Armstrong followed her resolutely. "Well, I thought you'd never get back," Mrs. Armstrong said, panting. "I said to Ed that I wasn't going to let another day go by, not *one more day*, without having it out with you. *You* know, *you'd* do as much for *me*. Being your nearest neighbor and all."

She followed Mrs. Smith onto the third floor landing and waited, holding her side and breathing heavily while Mrs. Smith unlocked the door of the little apartment where she and Mr. Smith were living until Mr. Smith's little house was ready for them; Mrs. Armstrong was the first outsider to penetrate the little apartment, and Mrs. Smith realized nervously that she was not, after all, very well equipped to receive guests; they had unpacked so little, and lived so sketchily from day to day, waiting for the house, that the apartment seemed bare, and without warmth. "We're not really moved in yet," Mrs. Smith said apologetically, gesturing at the inadequate furnishings. "Actually, we're staying here only until—"

"Of course, you poor poor dear. I guess he told you to stay away from your neighbors?"

"No," said Mrs. Smith, surprised. "I've always been very slow about making friends, and so I suppose I—"

"You poor *poor* dear. But it's going to be all right now. I'm almighty glad I made up my mind to talk to you."

Mrs. Smith put her bag of groceries down on the kitchen table and came back into the living room to hang her coat in the hall closet, next to the unfamiliar raincoat that belonged to Mr. Smith, and it amused her, in spite of Mrs. Armstrong, to think of sharing her closet with someone else; later, when her clothes were fully unpacked in Mr. Smith's house, she would have a closet of her own, the cedar-lined closet, Mr. Smith had explained, that had once held the clothes of the first Mrs. Smith.

Mrs. Armstrong had moved busily into the kitchen, and was unpacking the groceries. "Didn't get much, did you?" she asked. "Shall I put on some coffee for us? Or do you expect *him* back?"

"He won't be back until dinnertime," Mrs. Smith said, trying to be friendly. "Thank you, I would like some coffee. And I bought very little at the grocery because we expect to be away tomorrow; we are going to do some work in our house, which has been empty for quite a while." There, she thought, now I have told her everything and perhaps we can sit down and drink coffee and talk about the weather until it is time for her to go.

"Going away *tomorrow?"* said Mrs. Armstrong, and her face was, alarmingly, white. *"Tomorrow?"* She sat down heavily on a kitchen chair, staring.

“Mr. Smith has a house about fifteen miles out of the city. It has been empty for several months.” Mrs. Smith came into the kitchen and sat down, wondering how much detail Mrs. Armstrong might feel her due from a new bride. “We have taken this apartment for a few weeks so that we will have a chance to fix up the house before we move in. The cellar—”

“The cellar,” Mrs. Armstrong repeated in a whisper.

“The cellar needs a new floor. While Mr. Smith puts down a new floor in the cellar I am going to wash windows, and scrub—”

“You poor poor dear,” Mrs. Armstrong said.

“I hardly think I need sympathy, Mrs. Armstrong.” Mrs. Smith made her voice a little sharper; all of this sounded like implied criticism of her husband, and Mrs. Smith had a stern view of the obligations of a wife, particularly one who had been rescued from loneliness and unhappiness at what was surely the very last moment. “Mr. Smith has been married before, certainly, but I hardly think that his former wife—”

“His former wife,” Mrs. Armstrong said. “Sure. All six of them.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“Why do you think everyone around here has been wondering and talking and some of us thought we ought to go to the police but of course they always take such a dim view if you’re wrong? You think people around here are *blind?”*

“I think the people around here have been very thoughtful, and I certainly appreciate—”

“It’s been in the papers,” Mrs. Armstrong said desperately, “didn’t you know it’s been in the papers?”

“I do not read newspapers, Mrs. Armstrong. Mr. Smith and I agree on that, I am thankful to say. Newspapers, radio, all forms of mass—”

"Maybe," Mrs. Armstrong said heavily, "maybe it wouldn't hurt you this once — wouldn't *hurt* you, listen to me! — just to glance a little at a clipping I got here. Just look at the picture, maybe."

Mrs. Smith, a little amused, looked down briefly at the clipping Mrs. Armstrong took from her apron pocket. Sensationalism, Mrs. Smith was thinking; how these people do thrive on it. "Very interesting," Mrs. Smith said politely.

"How about the picture?" said Mrs. Armstrong. "That look like anyone you know?"

"Hardly, Mrs. Armstrong. I do not have acquaintances who put their pictures into the newspapers."

"Well." Mrs. Armstrong sat back and sighed deeply. "You know what this fellow did, this fellow in the paper?"

"I confess I did not read it."

Mrs. Armstrong picked up the clipping and looked at it again. "Six wives," she said. "Drowned them in the bathtub and they found them buried in the cellar. Six."

Mrs. Smith laughed aloud. "I know this fascinates *you"* she began, but Mrs. Armstrong interrupted her.

"They got this picture because a neighbor just happened to take a snapshot of him going into the cottage. *The* cottage. Afterward, after they found… dug up the cellar… they got this snapshot and enlarged it. It's supposed to be a *very* good likeness."

"Mrs. Armstrong, *really*, I—"

"Now, this fellow is still loose somewhere, and they don't know where. A wife slayer. He drowns them in the bathtub and then buries—"

The coffee boiled, and Mrs. Smith moved thankfully over to the stove, set the coffee aside, and turned to take out cups and saucers. I won't offer her a second cup of coffee, Mrs. Smith was thinking, as soon as she finishes her first I'll start to pick up, and if she keeps on telling me these vulgar horrors I shall positively turn her out of the house; in any case, Mrs. Smith was thinking, I shall be very cold to her when we meet next; she is not at all the kind of acquaintance Mr. Smith would like me to have — suppose she considered herself a close enough friend to come calling when we are in our new house? What, Mrs. Smith wondered, and smiled to herself, what would dear Janet think, at such a person in her house? "Sugar?" said Mrs. Smith politely.

Mrs. Armstrong had been drumming her fingers impatiently upon the table. "Look, dearie," she said as soon as Mrs. Smith turned around. "I'm not trying to be nosy, but *please* try to look at it our way. We — and that's all of us, all of us around this neighborhood, because we all saw the picture and we're all just about agreed and there's even some, as I say, wants to go to the police — we have kind of gotten to like you. You're hard to make friends with, I must say, but even so there's not a harsh word going around about you. And if we're wrong, we'll be the first to say so."

"It's very kind of all of you to think so well of me. I *am a* very shy person, although I try not to be."

"Did he make you take out insurance?" Mrs. Armstrong asked bluntly.

Mrs. Smith was puzzled. "He? You mean Mr. Smith?"

"I mean Mr. Smith."

"Why… yes. I mean, don't most married people? It's the least we could do for one another," Mrs. Smith said, repeating what Mr. Smith had told her, "to make sure that if anything happened to one of us, the other would be provided for. Money, of course, could never make up for the loss of a treasured companion, but we are neither of us as young as we used—"

“I don’t want to frighten you,” Mrs. Armstrong said. “If all of us around here should turn out to be wrong, as I say, we’d be the first to come forward handsomely and say so. How did you come to meet him?”

“Really,” said Mrs. Smith, blushing deeply. “I hardly think—”

“Has he said anything funny? Anything that might make you suspicious?”

“Mr. Smith was married before,” Mrs. Smith explained patiently. “He was married to a splendid, upright woman, and he told me so himself. We have discussed the situation thoroughly, and I assure you that I have no intention of trying to take her place. Mr. Smith and I were both very lonely people, and we can hardly expect our marriage to resemble that of a pair of twenty-year-olds. I have no reason to suspect that Mr. Smith has acted suspiciously or dishonorably toward me in any fashion.”

“Have you searched his things?”

“Mrs. Armstrong!”

“The least you could do is find out whether he has a knife or a gun… but no. He doesn’t do it that way, does he?” She shivered. “I don’t know but what I’d prefer a knife,” she said. “There’s bathtubs *every* where.”

Mrs. Smith spoke as politely as she could manage. “Mrs. Armstrong,” she said, “I assure you, emphatically, that I have absolutely no interest in sordid crime. I am not, of course, attempting to criticize your pleasure in murder and sudden death, but it is simply not a subject that appeals to me. Suppose we talk about something else while we finish our coffee?”

“I don’t think I want any coffee,” Mrs. Armstrong said almost sullenly. She got up from her chair. “Well,” she said darkly, “just don’t ever say I didn’t warn you.”

Mrs. Smith laughed, privately pleased that her visitor was leaving so delightfully soon. “Living in a city sometimes makes you dwell on horrible things," she said. "I'm glad that we'll be out in the country soon."

Mrs. Armstrong stopped in the doorway and held out her hands eloquently. "*Look*," she said, "all I can say is if you need any help — *any* help, *anytime* — just open your mouth and scream, see? Because my Ed will be up as fast as he can come. All you have to do is scream, or stamp on the floor, or if you can get away, make it downstairs to our place. One of us is sure to be there. Just remember — all you have to do is scream."

"Thank you," Mrs. Smith said. "I'll be sure to call on you if I need anything."

Mrs. Armstrong started to close the door behind her, and then opened it again and said in a voice which she tried to make humorous, "Just don't take any baths," and closed the door. Her voice trailed up from the stairs. "Thanks for the coffee," she said.

Mrs. Smith sighed with relief, and went into the kitchen to clean up the coffee cups. After she had washed and dried the two cups and saucers she took a clean cup for herself and filled it with coffee and went to sit by the living room window. Looking out and down onto the dark and dirty street below, she fell once more into her state of quiet happiness; three weeks ago, she told herself, I was miserable and without a friend in the world. Father was gone, and there I sat, all alone and — she skipped hastily over the thought — even wondering what it would be like to walk out into the sea and just keep walking on and on, and then he sat down beside me; "I hope you won't think me forward," he said. Mrs. Smith gave a little secret laugh, and sipped her coffee.

She was broiling the lamb chops when the sound of her husband's key in the door brought her out of the kitchen and into the living room. They were still a little awkward with each other, so that Mrs. Smith did not quite dare to run to the door to greet him, and was touched when he came inside and nearly across the room to kiss her gently on the forehead. “How’s my wife?” he asked.

“I missed you all day,” she said. “Did your business go well?”

“Yes,” he said. “I think I’ve settled everything.”

“I just realized,” she said, hurrying into the kitchen, “that I don’t even know whether you *like* lamb chops; I hope you do.”

“A particular favorite of mine,” he said. He came into the kitchen and sat down in the chair Mrs. Armstrong had used earlier. “Anything particular happen today?”

“No.” Mrs. Smith, concentrating deeply, regarded the little dinner table set, now, with odds and ends; when she had her house she would have matched dishes and silverware. “The woman downstairs came up for a while,” she said.

There was a minute’s silence. Then, “What did she want?” Mr. Smith asked indifferently.

Mrs. Smith carefully served the lamb chops and the peas, and put a baked potato on Mr. Smith’s plate. “Just to gossip,” she said; “we had coffee, and she chattered on and on till I thought she’d never leave.”

“About what? I mean, what could someone like that have to say to *you?”*

“I didn’t listen, really; I was just wishing she would leave. She’s one of those people who loves gory details of murders, and I almost thought I would never be able to drink my coffee, the way she was talking.”

“Anything in particular?”

“The plot of some movie she’d seen, I think,” Mrs. Smith said vaguely. “Is the lamb chop all right?”

“Fine.” Mr. Smith attacked his second lamb chop. “You’re a fine cook,” he said, as though surprised. “Imagine your being a fine cook in addition to everything else.”

Mrs. Smith giggled. *“What* else, silly?” she said. “I thought you married me only to keep house for you.”

“Speaking of keeping house,” Mr. Smith said. He swallowed his mouthful of lamb chop and set down his fork. “I was thinking,” he said, “we’d be better off and save a lot of time if we went down tonight, right after dinner, instead of waiting till tomorrow.”

“I’d like to,” Mrs. Smith said shyly. “I can’t wait to see it.”

“Just get right in the car and take off — there’s no one cares what we do or when. We can stay there tonight — the electricity’s on, and the water — and we’ll be comfortable enough.”

“Fine,” Mrs. Smith said. “I don’t mind a little discomfort; after all, there will be plenty of time to fix things the way we like them.”

“And that way,” Mr. Smith said, as though talking to himself, “I can get started on the cellar first thing tomorrow morning.”

THE HONEYMOON OF MRS. SMITH (VERSION 2)

OR, THE MYSTERY OF THE MURDERED BRIDE

WHEN SHE CAME INTO the grocery she obviously interrupted a conversation about herself and her husband. The grocer leaning across the counter to speak confidentially to a customer straightened up abruptly and signaled at her with his eyes, so that the customer, in a fairly obvious attempt at dissimulation, looked stubbornly in the opposite direction for almost a minute before turning quickly to take one swift, eager look.

“Good morning,” she said.

“What’ll it be for you this morning?” he asked, his eyes moving to the right and left to insure that all present observed him speaking boldly to Mrs. Smith.

“I don’t need very much,” she said. “I may be going away over the weekend.”

A long sigh swept through the store; she had a clear sense of people moving closer, as though the dozen other customers, the grocer, the butcher, the clerks, were pressing against her, listening avidly.

“A small loaf of bread,” she said clearly. “A pint of milk. The smallest possible can of peas.”

“Not laying in much for the weekend,” the grocer said with satisfaction.

“I may be going away,” she said, and again there was that long breath of satisfaction. She thought: how silly of all of us — I’m not sure any more than *they* are, we all of us only suspect, and of course there won’t be any way of knowing for sure… but still it would be a shame to have all that food in the kitchen, and let it go to waste, just rotting there while…

“Coffee?” the grocer said. “Tea?”

“I’m going to get a pound of coffee,” she said, smiling at him. “After all, I like coffee. I can probably drink up a pound before…”

The anticipatory pause made her say quickly, “And I’ll want a quarter pound of butter, and I guess two lamb chops.”

The butcher, although he had been trying to pretend indifference, turned immediately to get the lamb chops, and he came the width of the store and set the small package on the counter before the grocer had finished adding up her order.

One good thing, she was thinking about all this — I never have to *wait* anywhere. It’s as though everyone knew I was in a hurry to get small things done. And I suppose no one really wants me around for very long, not after they’ve had their good look at me and gotten something to talk about.

When her groceries were all in a bag and the grocer was ready to hand it to her across the counter, he hesitated, as he had done several times before, as though he tried to gather courage to say something to her; she was aware of this, and knew fairly well what he wanted to say — listen, Mrs. Smith, it would start, we don’t want to make any trouble or anything, and of course it isn’t as though anyone around here was *sure*, but I guess you must know by now that it all looks mighty suspicious, and we just figured — with an inclusive glance around, for support from the butcher and the clerks — we all got talking, and we figured — well, we figured someone ought to say something to you about it. I guess people must have made this mistake before about you? Or your husband? Because of course no one likes to come right out and *say* a thing like that, when they could so easily be wrong. And of course the more everyone talks about this kind of thing, the harder it is to know whether you’re right or not…

The man in the liquor store had said substantially that to her, fumbling and letting his voice die away under her cool, inquiring stare. The man in the drugstore had begun to say it, and then, blushing, had concluded, “Well, it’s not *my* business, anyway.” The woman in the lending library, the landlady, had given her the nervous, appraising look, wondering if she knew, if anyone had told her, wondering if they dared, and had ended by treating her with extreme gentleness and a sweet forbearance, as they would have treated some uncomplaining, incurable invalid. She was different in their eyes, she was marked; if the dreadful fact were not true (and they all hoped it was), she was in a position of such incredible, extreme embarrassment that their solicitude was even more deserved. If the dreadful fact *were* true (and they all hoped it was), they had none of them, the landlady, the grocer, the clerks, the druggist, lived in vain, gone through their days without the supreme excitement of being close to and yet secure from an unbearable situation. If the dreadful fact *were* true (and they all hoped it was), Mrs. Smith was, for them, a salvation and a heroine, a fragile, lovely creature whose preservation was in hands other than theirs.

Some of this Mrs. Smith realized dimly as she walked back to her apartment with the bag of groceries. She, at least, was almost not in doubt; she had known almost certainly that the dreadful fact was true for three weeks and six days, since she had met it face-to-face on a bench facing the ocean.

“I hope you won’t think I’m rude,” Mr. Smith had said at that moment, “if I open a conversation by saying that it’s a lovely day.”

She thought he was incredibly daring, she thought he was unbelievably vulgar, but she did not think he was rude; it was a word ridiculous when applied to him.

“No,” she had said, recognizing him, “I don’t think you’re rude.”

If she had ever tried to phrase it to herself — it would hardly be possible to describe it to anyone else — she might have said, in the faintly clerical idiom she had learned so thoroughly, that she had been chosen for this, or that it was like being carried unresisting on the surface of a river which took her on inevitably into the sea. Or she might have said that, just as in her whole life before she had not questioned the decisions of her father but had done quietly as she was told, so it was a relief to know that there was now someone again to decide for her, and that her life, inevitable as it had been before, was now clear as well. Or she might have said — with a blush for a possible double meaning, that they, like all other married couples, were two halves of what was essentially one natural act.

“A man gets very lonesome, I think,” he had told her at dinner that night, in a restaurant near the sea, where even the napkins smelled of fish and the bare wood of the table had an indefinable salty grain, “a man alone needs to find himself some kind of company.” And then, as though the words had perhaps not been complimentary enough, he added hastily, “Except not everyone is lucky enough to meet a charming young lady like yourself.” She had smiled and simpered, by then fully aware of these preliminaries to her destiny.

Three weeks and six days later, turning to go in through the door of the shabby apartment house, she wondered briefly about the weekend ahead; she had been naturally reluctant to buy too much food, but then, if it turned out that she *should* be there, there would be no way to buy more food on Sunday; a restaurant, she thought, we will have to go to a restaurant — although they had not been together to a restaurant since that first dinner together since, even though they did not actually have to economize, they both felt soberly that the fairly large mutual bank account they now had ought not to be squandered unnecessarily, but should be kept as nearly intact as possible; they had not discussed this, but Mrs. Smith's instinctive tactful respect for her husband's methods led her to fall in with him silently in his routine of economy.

The three flights of stairs were narrow and high, and Mrs. Smith, with the immediate recognition of symbols she had inherited, had always had, potentially, and was now using almost exclusively, saw the eternal steps going up and up as an irrevocable design for her life; she had really no choice but to go up, wearily if she chose; if she turned and went down again, retracing laboriously the small progress she had made, she would merely have to go up another way, beginning, as she now almost realized, beginning again a search which could only, for her, have but one ending. "It happens to everybody," she told herself consolingly as she climbed.

Pride would not allow her to make any concessions to her position, so she did not try particularly to walk silently on the second floor landing; for a minute, going on up the next flight, she thought she had got safely past, but then, almost as she reached her own door, the door on the second landing opened and Mrs. Jones called, piercingly and as though she had run from some back recess of her apartment to the door when she heard footsteps.

"Mrs. Smith, is that you?"

"Hello," Mrs. Smith called back down the stairs.

"Wait a minute, I'm coming up." The lock on Mrs. Jones's door snapped, and the door closed. Mrs. Jones came hurriedly, still a little out of breath, down the landing and up the stairs to the third floor. "Thought I'd missed you," she said on the stairs, and, "Good heavens, you look tired."

It was part of the attitude that treated Mrs. Smith as a precious vessel. Her slightest deviation from the normal, in the course of more than a week, was noted and passed from gossip to gossip, a faint paling of her cheeks became the subject of nervous speculation, any change in her voice, a dullness of her eye, a disarrangement in her dress — these were what her neighbors lived on. Mrs. Smith had thought early in the week that a loud crash from her apartment would be the sweetest thing she could do for Mrs. Jones, but by now it no longer seemed important: Mrs. Jones could live as well on the most minute crumbs.

"Thought you'd never get home," Mrs. Jones said. She followed Mrs. Smith into the bare little room which, with a small bedroom, a dirty kitchen, and a bath, was the honeymoon home of Mr. and Mrs. Smith. Mrs. Jones took the package of groceries into the kitchen while Mrs. Smith hung up her coat in the closet; she had not bothered to unpack many things and the closet looked empty; there were two or three dresses and a light overcoat and extra suit of Mr. Smith's; this was so obviously only a temporary home for them both, a stopping-place. Mrs. Smith did not regard her three dresses with regret, nor did she particularly admire the suits of Mr. Smith, although they were still a little unfamiliar to her, hung up next to her own clothes (as his underwear in the dresser, lying quietly beside her own); neither Mr. nor Mrs. Smith were of the abandoned sort who indulge recklessly in trousseaus or other loving detail for a preliminary purification.

"Well," said Mrs. Jones, coming out of the kitchen, *"you* certainly aren't planning to do much cooking this weekend."

Privacy was not one of the blessings of Mrs. Smith's position. "I thought I might be going away," she said.

Again there was that soft, anticipatory moment; Mrs. Jones looked quickly, and then away, and then, sitting herself down firmly upon the meager couch, obviously decided to come to the point.

"Now, look, Mrs. Smith," she began, and then interrupted herself. "Look, why this 'Mrs.' all the time? You call me Polly, and from now on I'll call you Helen. All right?" She smiled, and Mrs. Smith, smiling back, thought, how do they find out your first name? "Well, now, look here, Helen," Mrs. Jones went on, determined to establish her new familiarity immediately, "I think it's time someone sat down and talked sensibly to you. I mean, you must know by now pretty well what people are saying."

Here we are, Helen Smith was thinking, two women of the singular type woman, one standing uneasily and embarrassed in front of a window, wearing a brown dress and brown hair and brown shoes and differing in no essential respect from the other, sitting solidly and earnestly, wearing a green and pink flowered housedress and bedroom slippers — differing, actually in no essential, although we would both deny indignantly that we were the same person, seeking the same destiny. And we are about to enter into a conversation upon a fantastic subject.

"I've noticed," Mrs. Smith said carefully, "that there's a lot of unusual interest in us. I've never been on a honeymoon before, of course, so I can't really tell whether it's only that." She laughed weakly, but Mrs. Jones was not to be put off by sentiment.

"I think you must know better than that," she said. "You're not *that* wrapped up in your husband."

"Well… no," Mrs. Smith had to say.

"And furthermore," Mrs. Jones went on, looking cynically at Mrs. Smith, "you're not any blushing eighteen-year-old girl, you know, and Mr. Smith isn't any young man. You're both people of a reasonably mature age." Mrs. Jones seemed to feel that she had made a point here, and she said it again. "You are both people who have outlived their youth," she said, "and naturally no one expects that you're going to go around billing and cooing. *And furthermore* you yourself are old enough to show some intelligence about this terrible business."

"I don't know what kind of intelligence I ought to show," Mrs. Smith said meekly.

"Well, good heavens!" Mrs. Jones spread her hands helplessly. "Don't you realize your position? *Everyone* knows it. Look." She settled back, prepared to demonstrate reasonably. "You came here a week ago, newly married, and moved into this apartment with your husband. The very first day you were here, people thought there was something funny. In the first place, you two didn't act like you were the types for each other at all. You know what I mean — you so sort of refined and ladylike, and him…"

Rude, Mrs. Smith thought, wanting to laugh; he said he was rude.

Mrs. Jones shrugged. "In the second place," she said, "you didn't look like you belonged in this house, or in this neighborhood, because you always had plenty of money, which, believe me, the rest of us don't, and you always acted sort of as though you ought to be in a better kind of situation. And in the *third* place," Mrs. Jones said, hurrying on to her climax, "it wasn't two days before people began to think they recognized your husband from the pictures in the paper."

"I see what you mean," Mrs. Smith said. "But a picture in the paper—"

"That's just what started us really thinking," Mrs. Jones said. She enumerated on her fingers. "New bride. Cheap apartment. You made a will in his favor? Insurance?"

"Yes, but that is only natural—" said Mrs. Smith.

"Natural? And him looking just like the man in the paper who mur—" She stopped abruptly. "I don't want to frighten you," she said. "But you should know all about him."

"I appreciate your concern," Mrs. Smith said in her turn, coming away from the window, to stand in front of Mrs. Jones so that Mrs. Jones had to look up from her seat on the couch. "I know all these things. But how many newly married couples are there who make wills in each other's favor? Or take out insurance? And how many women over thirty get married to men over forty? And maybe sometimes the men look like pictures in the paper? And with all this talk and gossip about us all around the neighborhood, you notice no one's been even sure enough to say anything?"

"I wanted to call the police two, three days ago," Mrs. Jones said sullenly. "Ed wouldn't let me."

"He probably said," Mrs. Smith said, "that it was none of your business."

"But everybody's *wondering,"* Mrs. Jones said. "And of course no one can know for sure."

"You won't know for sure until…" Mrs. Smith tried not to smile.

Mrs. Jones sighed. "I wish you wouldn't talk like that," she said.

"Well," said Mrs. Smith reasonably, "what exactly is it you want me to do?"

"You could get some kind of information," Mrs. Jones said. "Something that would let you know for sure."

"I keep telling you," Mrs. Smith said, "there's only one way I can ever know for sure."

"Don't *talk* like that," Mrs. Jones said.

"I could run away from my husband," Mrs. Smith said.

Mrs. Jones was surprised. "You can't run away from your *husband"* she said. "Not if it isn't true, you couldn't do that."

"I have really no grounds for divorce," Mrs. Smith said. "It is a very difficult subject to mention to him."

"Naturally, you wouldn't have discussed it," Mrs. Jones said.

"Naturally," Mrs. Smith said. "I could hardly search his clothes — there is nothing, I happen to know, in the pockets of the suit hanging in the closet and searching his overcoat pockets and his dresser drawers would hardly turn up anything convincing."

"Why not?"

"Well, I mean," said Mrs. Smith in explanation, "even if I discovered, say, a knife — what difference would it make?"

"But he doesn't do it with—" Mrs. Jones began, and stopped abruptly again.

"I know," Mrs. Smith said. "As I recall the details — and I haven't read much about them, after all — he generally does it—"

"In the bathtub," Mrs. Jones said, and shivered. "I don't know but what a knife would be better," she said.

"It's not our choice," Mrs. Smith said wryly. "You see how silly we sound? Here we are, talking as though we were children telling ghost stories. We'll end up convincing each other of some horrible notion."

Mrs. Jones hesitated for a minute over her own reactions, and finally decided to be mildly offended. "I really only came up," she explained with dignity, "to let you know what people were saying. If you stop to *think* about it for a minute, you ought to be able to understand why someone might want to help you. After all, it's not me."

"That's why I think you ought not to worry," Mrs. Smith said gently.

Mrs. Jones rose, but as she reached the door she was unable to keep herself from turning and saying urgently, "Look, I just want you to know that if you ever *ever* need any help — of *any* kind — just open your mouth and scream, see? Because my Ed will be up as fast as he can come. All you have to do is scream, or stamp on the floor, or, if you can, race downstairs to our place. We'll be waiting for you." She opened the door, said with a voice that she tried to make humorous, "Don't take any baths," and went out. Her voice trailed up from the stairs, “And remember — all you have to do is scream. We’ll be waiting.”

Mrs. Smith closed the door rather quickly and, before she started to think, went out to the kitchen to see to her groceries, but Mrs. Jones had put the things away. Mrs. Smith found the pound of coffee, and measured water into the coffeepot, thinking of her promise to the grocer that she would finish the pound of coffee herself. Mr. Smith drank coffee sparingly; it made him nervous.

Mrs. Smith, as she moved about the bleak little kitchen, thought, as she had often before, that she would not like to spend her whole life with things like this. It had not been so in her father’s life, where a peaceful, well-ordered existence went placidly on among objects which, if not lovely, had at least the pleasures of familiarity, and the near-beauty of order, and Mrs. Smith, who had then been Helen Bertram, had been able to spend long days working in the garden, or mending her father’s socks, or baking the nut cake she had learned from her mother, and pausing only occasionally to wonder what was going to happen to her in her life.

It had been clear to her after her father’s death that this patterned existence was no longer meaningful, and had been a product of her father’s life rather than hers. So that when Mr. Smith had said to her, “I don’t suppose you’d ever consider marrying a fellow like me?” Helen Bertram had nodded, seeing then the repeated design which made the complete pattern.

She had worn her best dark blue dress to be married in, and Mr. Smith had worn a dark blue suit so that they looked unnervingly alike when they went down the street together. They had gone directly to the lawyer’s, for the wills, and then to the insurance company. On the way, Mr. Smith had insisted on stopping and buying for the new Mrs. Smith a small felt dog which amused her; there had been a man selling these on the street corner, and all around his small stand were tiny wound-up dogs which ran in circles, squeaking in shrill imitation of a bark. Mrs. Smith brought the box with the dog in it into the insurance company and set it on the desk, and while they were waiting for the doctor she had opened the box and found that there was no key to wind the dog; Mr. Smith, saying irritably, “Those fellows always try to cheat you,” had hurried back to the street corner and found the stand, the salesman, and the performing dogs gone.

“Nothing makes me more furious,” he told Mrs. Smith, “than to be cheated by someone like that.”

The small dog stood now on the shelf in the kitchen and Mrs. Smith, glancing at it, thought, I could not endure spending the rest of my life with that tawdry sort of thing. She sometimes thought poignantly of her father’s house, realizing that such things were gone from her forever, but, as she told herself again now, “I had my eyes open.” It will have to be soon, she thought immediately after, people are beginning to wonder too openly. Everyone is waiting; it will spoil everything if it is not soon. When her coffee was finished she took a cup into the living room and sat down on the couch where Mrs. Jones had been sitting, and thought, it will have to be soon; there’s no food for the weekend, after all, and I would have to send my dress to the cleaners on Monday if I were here, and another week’s rent due tomorrow. The pound of coffee would be the only detail unattended to.

She had finished her fourth cup of coffee — drinking by now hastily and even desperately — when she heard her husband’s step on the stairs. They were still a little embarrassed with one another, so that she hesitated about going to meet him just long enough for him to open the door, and then she came over to him awkwardly and, not knowing still whether he wanted to kiss her when he came home, stood expectantly until he came politely over to her and kissed her cheek.

“Where have you been?” she asked, although it was not at all the sort of thing she wanted to say to him, and she knew as she spoke that he would not tell her.

“Shopping,” he said. He had an armful of packages, one of which he selected and gave to her.

“Thank you,” she said politely before she opened it; it was, she knew by the feel and the drugstore wrapping, a box of candy, and with a feeling which, when she felt it again later, she knew to be triumph, she thought, of course, it’s supposed to be left over, it’s to prove the new husband still brings presents to his bride. She opened the box, wanted to take a candy, thought: not before dinner, and then thought, it probably doesn’t matter, tonight.

“Will you have one?” she said to him, and he took one.

His manner did not seem strange, or nervous, but when she said, “Mrs. Jones was up here this afternoon,” he said quickly, “What did she want, the old busybody?”

“I think she was jealous,” Mrs. Smith said. “It’s been a long time since *her* husband has taken any interest in her.”

“I can imagine,” he said.

“Shall I start dinner?” Mrs. Smith asked. “Would you like to rest for a while first?”

“I’m not hungry,” he said.

Now, for the first time, he seemed awkward, and Mrs. Smith thought quickly, I was right about the food for the weekend, I guessed right; he did not ask if she was hungry because — and each of them knew now that the other knew — it really did not matter.

Mrs. Smith told herself it would ruin everything to say anything now, and she sat down on the couch next to her husband and said, "I'm a little tired, I think."

"A week of marriage was too much for you," he said, and patted her hand. "We'll have to see that you get more rest."

Why does it take so long, why *does* it take so long? Mrs. Smith thought; she stood up again and walked across the room nervously to look out the window; Mr. Jones was just coming up the front steps and he looked up and saw her and waved. Why does it take so long? she thought again, and turned and said to her husband, "Well?"

"I suppose so," Mr. Smith said, and got up wearily from the couch.

THE SISTER

MARGARET LOOKED AT HER brother with the first conscious affection she had felt for him in her life. He looks big and awkward and childish, she thought, and whatever he's going to say is going to be right out of the movies. She watched him shut the door and stand just inside it for a minute, wondering how to start. Then he came slowly over and sat down uneasily in the pale blue slipper chair beside the bed.

"Golly," he said.

Margaret laughed. "Golly," she said.

"You really going?" her brother asked.

"Sure am," Margaret said.

Her brother ceremoniously took a package of cigarettes out of his pocket and offered her one. She shook her head, pointed at the lighted cigarette she had left on the edge of the dresser. Her brother lit his, and went across the room to the table and got an ashtray.

"You're going to burn the dresser scarf, leaving cigarettes around like that," he said.

"Been doing it ever since I started sneaking cigarettes in here," Margaret said.

"Mother put an ashtray in my room a couple of weeks ago," her brother said. "Guess she's started getting smarter. She never gave *you* an ashtray till you came home from college."

"I was smoking when I was fifteen," Margaret said.

Her brother rose and began to wander around the room. He came over to the bed and looked at the suitcase Margaret was packing. "I remember this dress," he said, lifting a corner of the hem, "you wore it the night I couldn't find a date for Dick and you came instead. We went to the country club dance."

"Those were the days when I still felt like an old maid," Margaret said.

Her brother hesitated. "Say," he said finally, "you really going to marry this guy?"

"I really am," Margaret said.

"You know what you're doing to your father and mother?" her brother said.

Margaret walked over to the dresser and picked up her cigarette. "You sound just like Dad," she said, "voice and everything. Now tell me I'm ungrateful and silly and don't know what I'm doing, and that I'll be home trying to beg pardon in a week."

"I don't think you will," her brother said. Margaret turned and looked at him. "You're too smart," he went on, "you went to college."

"I met him in college," Margaret said.

"I know," her brother said. "If I'd gone to college maybe I would have met a nice girl."

"Instead of the one you did meet."

"There's nothing wrong with Bobbie." Her brother frowned and stared firmly at Margaret's suitcase on the bed. "She's a nice kid. That's why we got married."

Margaret turned around to look at him. "What did you say?" she demanded. "Did you say you had married that little tramp?"

Her brother looked up and then down again, and Margaret suddenly began to laugh. "Do you know what *you're* doing to your father and mother?"

"I figured I'd tell them right afterward," her brother said, "but then you came home with this business about going out to Chicago to marry this guy, and that was bad enough."

"So I killed your story?" Margaret said. "What are you going to do?"

"Tell them later on, when they get used to you."

"They're going to get a shock."

"Margaret," her brother asked, "listen, what's wrong with them? No one else has children like us."

"What's wrong with us?" Margaret said. "We're good, honest, middle-class people belonging to a country club and owning one car. I went to college because I wanted to, and you didn't go to college because Dad thought you ought to go to work. We play a family game of golf and a family game of bridge and not one of us ever said a nice word to any of the others. What do *you* think is wrong with us?"

"Bobbie says Dad was too strict with us," her brother said.

"Maybe so," Margaret said. "When were you married?"

"About a week ago."

"Where's Bobbie now?"

"With her family. They know about it. Her sister went with us."

"Should have taken me," Margaret said. "I would have liked to be there."

"I'd like to be at your wedding," her brother said. "We never talked like this before, did we?"

"Why should we?" Margaret said. "Nothing ever happened to us before."

She closed the suitcase and locked it, putting it on the floor. Her brother came over and helped her on with her coat, and she picked up the suitcase and looked around.

"Did I forget anything?" she asked.

"Look," her brother said, "do you want any money?"

Right out of the movies, Margaret thought. “Thanks,” she said, “he sent me plenty.”

“I have some cash with me,” her brother insisted.

“Keep it for Bobbie,” Margaret said, “she’ll probably need it.”

He followed her to the door of the bedroom. “Well,” he said. He leaned over and kissed her on the cheek. “Good luck.”

“Give Bobbie my love,” Margaret said, and started down the stairs.

Her father came out of the living room with her mother in back of him. Margaret went straight on toward the front door, but her father held out his hand.

“Wait a minute,” he said. “You won’t change your mind?”

“You don’t know what you’re doing,” her mother said.

“I’m really going,” Margaret said to her father.

“A man none of us knows,” her mother said, “out in Chicago.”

“You can always come home, daughter,” her father said, “we’ll always make you welcome.”

“Thanks,” Margaret said.

“Margaret,” her father said, “let me say this once more. Your mother and I are terribly hurt by all this, and yet we are trying to do only what is best for you. Maybe this news, so sudden and everything, has surprised us a little —”

“You and your brother,” her mother said, “always such *obedient* children.”

“Listen,” Margaret said, turning around to her father and putting down the suitcase, “listen, you want to hear something that will *really* surprise you?”

ARCH-CRIMINAL

I SUPPOSE THE MOTHERS of most twelve-year-old boys live with the uneasy conviction that their sons are embarked upon a secret life of crime. In my case, this belief about my son Laurie is shared — not without reason — by Mrs. John R. Simpkins, of upper New York State, whose opinions on Laurie are even more forceful than those held by myself and, to a lesser extent, by my husband, who has recently been doing research into eighteenth-century crime, and points out that at that time *all* twelve-year-old boys were criminals — or, as he has it, cross coves — and many of them, as a matter of fact, were named Simpkins. “The gooseberry trick,” he says reassuringly, “glomming the grapevine.”

I refer, of course, to the Mrs. John R. Simpkins who lived next door to us the summer when Laurie was nine, and across the street from the Rowland boys, although of course when we rented the house for the summer we had no idea the Rowland boys were going to turn out to live nearby. Mrs. Simpkins still writes to me occasionally, when there is any news about people we used to know, and although she never comes right out and asks about Laurie’s criminal record, and makes no mention of the less savory aspects of our six weeks next door, she writes in her most recent letter that she thought of us at once when she came across the newspaper story about the Rowland boy, clipping enclosed. In the next paragraph she says that her own dear little boy is receiving many compliments on his little poems in the school paper, and what is dear little Laurie doing these days? Still interested in all kinds of sports, Mrs. Simpkins supposes, and she wonders if he is as “lively” as ever?

"Look at this," I said, slamming the letter and the clipping down on the desk before my husband.

He regarded the clipping absently. "Got the torn on him, did they?"

"That woman ought to be locked up as a malicious gossip," I said. "I can imagine what that whole town thinks of us."

"The Rowlands—"

"Well," I said reasonably, "if she says it about the Rowlands it's probably true, because you know as well as I do that that older boy of theirs was never anything but a—"

"Choir bird," my husband said.

"But poor little Laurie — taken in by those juvenile delinquents — just following along and doing what they told him—"

"An outfielder," my husband suggested. "The outfielder on that last job."

I snatched my letter and the clipping and stormed out of the study. "Maybe," I said over my shoulder, "if Laurie had a father who spoke English—"

"That's what you said to Mrs. Rowland," my husband remarked amiably.

It was, too, almost. I went into the kitchen and decided to get even with Mrs. Simpkins and the Rowlands and my husband by serving vegetable soup for lunch again today, and put the cover on the saucepan wishing I had Spike Rowland's head inside. All I had said to Mrs. Rowland was that perhaps Spike's father should try to be a good example to his boys, and that was the only time I ever heard Mrs. Rowland laugh out loud. I never met Mr. Rowland myself, but Laurie did.

Spike was thirteen, Billy Rowland was ten, and Laurie was nine. The dear little Simpkins boy next door was about six months older than Laurie, and his young sister and our daughter Jannie were devoted friends all that summer. I thought it would be nice if Laurie and dear little Tommy

Simpkins played together, and went so far as to invite the Simpkins children over for supper the first week we were there, but the party was a complete failure as far as Laurie was concerned, since after supper Tommy Simpkins settled down to play house with his sister and Jannie, and Laurie wandered outdoors in search of amusement, and met the Rowland boys shooting out streetlights.

We noticed, of course, that Laurie's general deportment had taken a turn for the worse as the summer wore on. He was impertinent, dirty, callous, and really treated little Tommy Simpkins most unkindly. He also became most evasive about his activities, and we only found out about the fire at all because he came home one evening with his jacket scorched and soot all over his face.

"What?" I demanded, dropping the jacket to seize Laurie and turn him around and around for signs of burns. "What?"

Laurie shook his head irritably. "I *told* him you'd be mad," he said.

"You were right. I am mad. Told who?"

"Spike. I told him he should use his own jacket."

"What for?"

"To put out the fire."

"What fire?"

"The one in our tree house."

"A fire? In your tree house? In our backya — is it out?"

"It's out all right," Laurie said as I turned and headed wildly for the back door. "Nothing to worry about *now.*"

I sat down, counted to a hundred while Laurie absentmindedly rubbed soot on the curtains, and then, composed and lighting a cigarette with hands that shook only slightly, I said, "Now, Laurence, tell me all about this please. Your tree house caught fire?"

"Not at first."

"What do you mean?"

"It was all right before Billy poured on the kerosene."

"What?" I said faintly.

"He said it would burn better, but then the tree house burned too."

"What *started* the fire?"

"Spike did."

"Why?"

"To cook the potatoes."

"Potatoes?"

"The ones he hooked from old man Martin's store."

"He *stole* potatoes?"

"Well… he sort of had to."

"Why — why — why?"

"Because of Billy. So old man Martin would chase Spike instead."

"Young man," I said, "your father will be home at five o'clock, and you will spend the time until he comes in the bathtub. *He* will speak to you and decide what is to be done. I shall inform him that you have been associating with thieves and arsonists. Upstairs."

"No bath," said Laurie sullenly.

"Bath," I said. "Just one thing, though — what made Spike think that Mr. Martin wanted to chase Billy?"

"Because Billy put the cat in the meat counter. But I didn't do anything," Laurie said. "*I* just stood there."

Unfortunately Mrs. Simpkins had seen the fire in the tree house, and she made a number of fairly pointed remarks about little boys who played quietly with their little sisters as opposed to little boys who ran around with roughnecks. We absolutely forbade Laurie to see, contact, signal, or remember the Rowland boys, and it was the next morning that I dropped over and had my chat with Mrs. Rowland. She was a gray, tired woman, and she came to the door carrying the baby. Both of them looked weary and reluctant. I told her as politely as I could that I thought diplomatic relations between our houses must cease, and she nodded, sighing, as though we had been the last family who still spoke to them and now we were going, too. I asked if she would mention to her sons that their friendship with Laurie must be brought to an immediate halt.

"I'll tell them," she said, and the baby looked at me cynically.

I said that luckily the tree was not badly damaged, because of course we had only rented the house for the summer; "I *am a* little surprised," I added, "that a boy Spike's age would encourage such a thing."

"You are?" she said.

"Perhaps Mr. Rowland—"

She stepped back. "What about him?" she demanded, clutching the baby tighter.

"I meant only that perhaps Mr. Rowland could speak to the boys. Tell them that this kind of thing is dangerous."

"What kind of thing?" she said. *"He* never did anything, and you better not say he did."

"Well, if you call setting fire to a tree—"

"Oh, you mean Spikey," she said. *"He's* just a kid — I don't worry about *him*. But you better not say anything against his father — *he* didn't go setting fire to trees."

"I am only," I told her with vast patience, "suggesting that perhaps Mr. Rowland should set his sons a good example."

It was, as I say, the only time I ever heard Mrs. Rowland laugh.

We kept Laurie in solitary for a week. During that time his behavior was exemplary, and his morale astonishingly high. He read the greater part of “The Hardy Boys at Eagle Lodge,” and spent a lot of time painting, although he declined a proposed correspondence with the Simpkins boy, who suggested that poor Laurie might enjoy playing chess by mail.

We believed optimistically that Laurie was a reformed character. I told my husband, on the last day of Laurie’s confinement, that actually one good scare like that could probably mark a child for life, and my husband pointed out that kids frequently have an instinctive desire to follow the good example rather than the bad, once they find out which is which. We agreed that a good moral background and thorough grounding in the Hardy Boys would always tell in the long run.

The next day the policeman came. He knocked on the front door while my husband was reading the Sunday papers and I was basting the roast. He asked for Laurie.

“Laurie?” I said, and my husband said, “What?”

“You got a boy about ten years old?”

“Yes,” my husband said, and I added defensively that Laurie was only nine.

“Well,” the policeman said, and he seemed embarrassed. “I got kids of my own,” he explained. “Girl ten, boy six.”

We waited tensely, and after a minute he went on. “I better talk to the boy, I guess.”

“Now, look here,” I said, “Laurie didn’t do anything,” and my husband said, “What did he do?”

“Well, there’s been a little trouble,” the policeman said. “Your boy seems to have been mixed up in a little trouble.”

A soft step on the stairs silenced him. Laurie, having ascertained the nature of our guest, was going back up to his room. His father went out and captured him, and when he was brought in, looking sullen and nervous, I had to resist a strong impulse to run over and gather him up bodily, crying out that he was my little baby and no one was going to touch him while I was around. Luckily the policeman spoke first.

"Now, then, son," he said. "Let's hear about this concrete mixer."

Laurie started to say, *"What* concrete mixer?" but caught his father's eye and said instead, "It was just an old concrete mixer, is all."

"Who turned it on?" the policeman asked.

"Spike," said Laurie almost inaudibly.

"Were you there?"

Laurie looked from me to his father to the policeman. "I guess so," he said.

"How did Spike start the concrete mixer?"

Laurie swallowed unhappily. "Wires," he said.

"Wires?"

"He twisted some wires together," Laurie said. "He said he was going to show me and Billy how you started a concrete mixer."

The policeman leaned forward. "Which wires?" he demanded. "You remember, son?"

Laurie shook his head, and the policeman sat back uneasily.

"Spike got inside," Laurie insisted. "We were just standing there."

The policeman regarded his fingernails casually. "Just where is this fellow Spike right now?" he asked. Laurie shook his head. "Well, anyplace you can think of where he *might* be?" Laurie shook his head. "You got any idea where he *usually* hides?"

"Whyn't you ask Billy?" Laurie said.

“He doesn’t know either.” The policeman sighed. “We’d sort of like to find that boy,” he said.

“You going to arrest him?” Laurie asked.

The policeman hesitated. “As a matter of fact,” he said at last, reluctantly, “I guess mostly we want him to go and turn the concrete mixer off again. The foreman’s gone out of town,” he explained to us, “and there’s no one around can get the blasted thing turned off and it is just down there grinding and grinding away. Look, son,” he said again pleadingly to Laurie, “you think of *any* where — anywhere at *all* — that kid might be?”

“Nope,” Laurie said.

“Why don’t you ask the boy’s father?” I said.

Laurie snickered. The policeman glanced at me briefly and compassionately and then said to Laurie, “This all checks in pretty well with what the other boy — Billy — tells us. I don’t think you’ll be in any real trouble about it, but I think we better, you and me and Dad here, have a man-to-man talk about kids who get into mischief.”

The application of this remark seemed pretty clear, so I excused myself and got back to my roast. After about half an hour I heard my husband and Laurie saying goodbye to the policeman at the front door. From the kitchen window I could see Mrs. Simpkins peering out of *her* kitchen window to see the policeman leave our house.

We got away fairly lightly; Laurie laboriously constructed a written apology for the company that owned the concrete mixer, which had finally burned itself out and gone off by itself. My husband offered to pay our share of the damage, but since Laurie had not been actually involved in the turning on of the concrete mixer the company declined, and the owner actually patted Laurie on the head when Laurie tearfully proffered his allowance for the week he had been confined. So far as I know, no attempt was ever made to collect from Mr. Rowland.

The clipping Mrs. Simpkins sent me, three years later, said only that Spike Rowland had been sentenced to two years in prison for stealing a large sum of money from the movie theater where he worked as an usher, and driving off with it in a stolen car. The father of the convicted youth was identified as John Rowland, owner of Honest John's Used Car Lot.

When Laurie came home from school and took his place at the lunch table, I set the clipping beside his plate without comment. "Vegetable soup?" he said.

"Again?" Jannie said, and my husband looked sadly down at his plate.

Our two younger children, Sally and Barry, had already begun their lunches; Barry had spilled his milk and Sally was thoughtfully smashing crackers with the back of her spoon.

"Look," Laurie said to me earnestly, "I work hard in school all day and I ought to have—" His eye fell on the clipping. "What?" he said. "I'm supposed to read this or something?" He read, scowled, read again, shrugged, dropped the clipping on the floor, and then said, "Hey!" in pleased surprise and picked it up again. "Hey," he said, "I didn't know old man Rowland sold cars. *That* guy?" He chuckled.

"You noticed that your friend has been sent to prison?" I asked.

"That? Oh, his old man'll take care of *that*. Spike used to say his father *owned* that town. Boy." Laurie sighed reminiscently. "We used to have times. You know that week I was supposed to be in my room?" he asked his father.

"Up the spout and charley wag," my husband said.

"Right," Laurie told him. "Boy," he said again. "They ever get that concrete mixer put back together again?" He addressed his sister Jannie.

“You should of seen it,” he said. “Cops all over the place and Billy and me — *we* didn’t know a *thing!”* He laughed.

“It was about four days before that boy turned up,” I said.

“Well, *we* knew they couldn’t find him,” Laurie said. “He could of stayed there a year, I guess.”

“Stayed where?” I asked, and my husband said, “You *did* know where he was, then?”

“Oh, sure,” Laurie said. “He was in our cellar.” He turned to Jannie again. “We had this Black Hand Society,” he explained, “and Spike would cut off two of our fingers if we told, it was in the rules. And we took him lots to eat — Billy got him a box of graham crackers and a bag of apples he hooked, and I got that meat loaf was in our refrigerator.” He turned to me. “You thought it was the dog, you remember?”

“Mrs. Simpkins,” I said faintly.

“Yow were too little,” Laurie told Jannie. “Boy, we used to hook potatoes and cook them on a fire, and Spike used to take us for rides in one of his father’s cars—”

“What?” said my husband.

“ — And a couple of times we sneaked out at night and went to the movies, and once Spike’s old man gave him five bucks, and Spike bought a box of cigars, and—”

“Laurie,” I said, wailing.

“Oh, *Mother,”* Laurie said. “You always think I’m a *baby.”* With a show of vast disgust he picked up his spoon. After a minute he chuckled again. “Boy!” he said.

MRS. ANDERSON

MR. ANDERSON, WATCHING HIS wife pour his second cup of breakfast coffee, took out a pack of cigarettes and put one in his mouth. Then he felt at his pockets, one by one, looked on the floor under his chair, moved his plate, and finally got up and went over to the stove, where he found a match and lighted his cigarette. “Left my damn lighter upstairs again,” he said.

Mrs. Anderson put down the coffeepot, and sighed. “Thank *heaven* you said that,” she said.

“What?” Mr. Anderson came back to his chair and sat down. “Said what?”

“About your lighter,” Mrs. Anderson said. “You don’t *know* how worried I’ve been.”

“About my lighter?” Mr. Anderson frowned, and looked quickly at his coffee cup as though once his wife started worrying about his lighter, the next logical step was poisoning his coffee.

“About your saying it, and leaving your damn lighter upstairs again.” Mrs. Anderson pushed the sugar bowl across the table and went on. “It was this dream I had — you see, you said—”

“I am not sure,” Mr. Anderson said carefully, “that I am equal to hearing about your dreams at present. I—”

“But *this* one,” Mrs. Anderson persisted, “this one has been *worrying* me. You see, I dreamed that you never said three or four — I guess it was really three — things you *always* said. Three times in my dream I sat there waiting and waiting for you to say these things you always say. Like leaving your lighter upstairs.” She thought. “What I mean is, you say things over and over and this time you didn’t.”

“Please,” Mr. Anderson said. “Please, Clara.”

“Like leaving—”

“But I don’t leave my lighter upstairs every morning,” Mr. Anderson said.

“Yes, you do,” Mrs. Anderson said. “Every single morning you take out a cigarette and you look for your lighter and then you go over to the stove and get a match and you say you left your damn lighter upstairs again. Every single morning.”

Mr. Anderson started to answer, and then thought better of it. “Nearly eight-fifteen,” he said instead.

“I’ll get the car out,” Mrs. Anderson said.

On the way to the station Mrs. Anderson resumed. “I just wish I could remember the other things you didn’t say. Like at this corner you always say, ‘Doesn’t that light *ever* turn green?’”

Mr. Anderson, who had gotten as far as “Doesn’t that light—” turned and looked at his wife. “I do not,” he said.

“All right, dear,” said Mrs. Anderson. “It’s the ones I *don’t* remember that worry me, the ones you left out.”

“In your dream,” Mr. Anderson asked elaborately, “what happened when I didn’t say these things?”

Mrs. Anderson frowned, remembering. “Nothing, I *think,”* she said. “I remember in my dream I worried and worried, and then the alarm went off and I thought I still had a knife in my hand when I woke up.”

“Well, well,” said Mr. Anderson. He leaned forward and looked through the windshield. “Plenty of time to get a paper,” he said.

“That’s not one of the ones I forgot,” Mrs. Anderson said, pleased. “I remembered about the paper.”

“Goodbye,” Mr. Anderson said abruptly, and got out of the car. He went quickly up onto the station platform, turned to wave to Mrs. Anderson, and went into the newsstand. “Got a paper for me today?” he asked amiably, and then stopped, thinking.

“Same as usual, Mr. Anderson,” said the girl at the newsstand. “Lovely day.”

“Lovely,” said Mr. Anderson absently. He put the paper under his arm and went out again onto the platform. “Morning,” he said to someone he recognized but whose name he could not remember. “Morning.”

“Morning, Andy, what’s the word today?”

“Pretty good, thanks,” Mr. Anderson said, “how’s yourself?” and stopped, thinking. When the train came he stepped on so absent-mindedly that he stumbled and nearly fell, and inside he went without thinking to a seat on the left, the side away from the sun, and he had settled himself and his coat and opened his paper before he realized consciously that he was on the train at all. He held out his ticket and found himself saying, “Well, Jerry, feeling pretty fit?”

“Can’t complain,” said the conductor. “And you, Mr. Anderson?”

“Ten years younger than I ought to feel,” said Mr. Anderson, and stopped, thinking.

By the time the train came into the city, Mr. Anderson had decided what he was going to say to his wife when he got home that night. “About this business of my saying the same things over and over,” he was going to tell her, “about this dream of yours. I think you’re overtired,” he was going to say, “need to get away for a little while, maybe take a little vacation, go someplace for a week or so. Might even be able to go with you myself.

Both of us getting into a rut," he was going to say, "too much the same old round. Better get away for a while," he was going to say.

Once he had concluded that Mrs. Anderson was overtired, he was able to get into his office without difficulty. "Top of the morning," he said to the receptionist; "Well, well, another day," he said to his secretary; "Daily grind starting again," he said to Joe Field.

"Same old treadmill," Joe Field said back.

Mr. Anderson stopped again, and thought. Heard Field say that pretty often, he thought, nearly every day, in fact. Matter of fact, Mr. Anderson thought, every morning for a matter of five years or so I have said "Daily grind starting again" to Joe Field and he has said "Same old treadmill" back to me. Mr. Anderson began to wonder seriously.

Toward noon Mr. Anderson said abruptly to his secretary, "Do you think I say the same things over and over?"

She looked up, surprised. "Well, you always end your letters 'Sincerely yours,'" she said.

"No," Mr. Anderson said, "when I talk, do I repeat myself?"

"You mean when I say 'I beg your pardon, I didn't hear you'?" she asked, blinking.

"Never mind," Mr. Anderson said. "I have a sort of headache, I guess."

At lunch he sat with Joe Field in the same restaurant where they had had lunch together for five years or so. "Well," Joe said as they sat down, sighing deeply, "good to get out for a while."

"Don't seem to have much appetite these days," Mr. Anderson said, studying the menu.

"Lentil soup again," Joe Field said.

"Look, Joe," Mr. Anderson said suddenly, "do you ever find that you're saying the same things over and over?"

“Sure,” Joe said surprised. “I *do* the same things over and over.”

“Ever find you’re getting in a rut?”

“Sure,” Joe said, “I’m *in* a rut. That’s where I always *wanted* to be, in a rut.”

“My wife told me this morning,” Mr. Anderson said unhappily, “that every morning after breakfast I say ‘Left my damn lighter upstairs.’”

“What?”

“Every morning after breakfast I say the same thing,” Mr. Anderson said helplessly. “Every morning on the way to the station I say ‘Won’t that light *ever* turn green?’ and ‘Plenty of time to get a paper’ and all sorts of things.”

“Lentil soup,” Joe was saying to the waitress, “and Spanish omelette. And coffee.”

“I think I’ll go home,” Mr. Anderson said.

He telephoned his wife before he got on the train, and she met him at the station at home. When he got into the car he said, “The one thing I don’t want to do is *talk.”*

“Something wrong at the office?” she asked him.

“No,” said Mr. Anderson.

“Are you well?” She turned and looked at him. “You look feverish,” she said.

“I *am* feverish,” Mr. Anderson said. “You turned too sharp at that corner.”

Mrs. Anderson winced slightly, and Mr. Anderson shut his mouth tight and folded his arms and stared straight ahead of him. After a minute he said, “You’re tired, Clara. Getting in a rut. Ought to get away for a while.”

“I’ve been thinking,” Mrs. Anderson said. “About the way people talk, I mean. And I sort of thought that maybe people *had* to talk that way, sort of saying the same things over and over because that way they can get along together without thinking.” She stopped and thought. “Why I was so worried,” she said, “was because if people didn’t say those damn things over and over, then they wouldn’t talk to each other at *all”*

“Some quiet place,” Mr. Anderson said fervently. “Lie in the sun, loaf around, play a little tennis.”

“We can’t afford it,” Mrs. Anderson said. She stopped the car in front of the house and Mr. Anderson climbed out wearily. He followed her up the front walk and through the door, put down his coat and hat and went into the living room and sat down with a sigh. His wife closed the door sharply. “I’d soon as not live with a man who doesn’t talk at *all”* she said, her voice somehow different. “Even what you *do* say is better than nothing.”

“I told you I didn’t feel well,” Mr. Anderson said.

“When I said we couldn’t afford to go away, you didn’t say ‘Life’s too short to worry,’” Mrs. Anderson said crossly.

Mr. Anderson sighed. “Life’s too short to worry,” he said.

“It doesn’t do any good *now”* Mrs. Anderson said. “Besides, when you got off the train you didn’t ask if it was time to change the oil in the car.” Her voice had become almost tearful.

“I *told* you I had a headache,” Mr. Anderson said. “I wish you wouldn’t fidget with that knife.”

“And when you left this morning,” Mrs. Anderson said, her voice rising to a wail, “I sat there and sat there and sat there and you got on your old train without one *word* except goodbye.”

“Clara, get control of yourself,” Mr. Anderson said sharply. It was the last thing he ever did say.

COME TO THE FAIR

AFTER A GREAT DEAL of most serious reflection, Miss Helen Spencer had decided that she was not going to the fair. “Granted,” she told herself reasonably as she sat over her lonely cup of tea at dinnertime, “granted that they need the money. *No* one could say that I didn’t want to spend the money for charity. *No* one,” she told the cat, who stared long at her, and then she bent to give one quick touch to his front paw. “It’s not that I grudge the money, not at all.” Having lost the cat’s attention, she addressed the teapot. “But what earthly sense is there in *my* going? I’d stand on the edge of the crowd, and say good evening to everyone, and laugh when everyone else was laughing, and buy myself an ice cream cone and maybe a balloon, and pretend I was having a wonderful time, and smile cheerfully at Mrs. Miller.” She lowered her eyes before the teapot’s steady regard. “And Dr. Atherton,” she said, “of course.” She broke off and sipped several times, very quickly, at her tea.

“Anyway,” she went on to the African violet on the windowsill, “who is going to notice whether I’m there or not? He’ll be playing darts with Mrs. Miller and everyone will be having a good time and dancing on the green, so why should *I* go? *I* don’t play darts.” She thought for a minute and then, smiling ruefully at the sugar bowl, said, “Not that anyone ever *asks* me, of course.”

She sighed, and perhaps the sugar bowl and the teapot and the violet sighed with her, since they should have known perfectly well that Helen Spencer was very lonely and, often, very unhappy, with the poignant misery that comes to lonely people who long to be social and cannot, somehow, step naturally and unselfconsciously into some friendly group; Helen Spencer was a lovely woman, to whose care was entrusted the fifth grade of the local school; she had been born and grown up in this town, and people who had known her all her life very often said to one another, “She’s a *lovely* woman — I’ve often thought of asking her over for tea or something one of these days.” As a result, Helen rarely went anywhere, and from the moment the first posters had begun to appear on the village trees (“Village Fair, July 25, 7 P.M. Come one, come all”) she had known she would not go, as she followed her quiet daily round from home to school to post office to library to dinner alone with a faint miserable longing at the back of her mind, and perhaps even the faintest touch of self-pity.

Now, at six-thirty on the evening of the fair, with the first distant sounds of laughter and excitement coming from the wide lawn behind the courthouse, where the booths were almost set up, and the lights tested, and the bunting fluttering in the early evening breeze, Helen sat docilely at her coffee, pretending not to notice the untouched dinner before her. She thought sensibly, “I do believe I’ll do my nails and wash my hair and go right to bed and read a magazine. I can always,” she thought, “say I have a cold, if anyone should ask me. If anyone should ask me.”

Then, because she knew self-pity when she saw it, she shook her head violently, said, “How silly I am,” and got up, intending to set her uneaten dinner away in the refrigerator (“I’ll certainly be hungry later,” she thought) and told the cat, who stepped lithely between her ankles as she went toward the kitchen, “I’ll do a penance for feeling sorry for myself. If the phone *should* just possibly ring—” and she hesitated, plate in hand, glancing hopefully over her shoulder at the phone, which was defiantly silent— “if the phone rings, I will let it ring seven times before I answer it.” She reflected. “Six,” she said. “Six times before I answer.”

The phone rang then, briskly, and Helen tripped over the cat, caught the plate, set it down in a flying swoop on a chair, and answered before the phone had rung twice. “Yes?” she said. “Yes?”

“Helen, it’s Dorothy Brandon. Look, dear, you’ve *got* to help us.”

“I?”

“It’s Wilma Arthur’s mother. Oh, wouldn’t you *know* she’d have to do it today?”

“Do what?”

“Fall *downstairs*, of course. It’s such *horrible* luck.”

“Poor woman.”

“But couldn’t she have done it *tomorrow*? I mean, of course, yes, the poor woman, she broke her leg and of course we’re all *terribly* sorry, but of course look where that leaves us, and it’s *already* after six.”

“Six-thirty.”

“Six-thirty!” Her voice rose to a wail. “And if *you* don’t do it, I just think I’ll go *crazy* — first it was that Williams boy forgetting to order the ice cream, and then the lights in the grab bag wouldn’t work, and then that *horrible* trombone player—”

“A horr —?”

“He went and had a baby, I mean his wife did, this afternoon, and we had to ask the Hot Rock Trio to come over from South Arlen, and then Mr. French got mad and said he wouldn’t play his musical saw if he had to compete with a jazz band, so by the time I got *him* smoothed down, then little Michael Willis was going to run the lemonade stand and his mother said because he threw a rock through the Perrins’ window—”

“But,” said Helen most practically, “I *can’t* repair the Perrins’ window, and when it comes to playing the trombone—”

“Helen, please *do* be sensible. All we want is — what?” she said to someone away from the phone. “What did you say? He did? Just now? What is the lemonade stand going to *do?* You tell them if I get my hands on that dog I’ll — Helen,” she said again into the phone, “I really don’t have time to *talk*. Just hurry right on over and don’t worry about a costume because we have loads of scarves and beads and stuff. But *hurry.”*

“But what—” Helen began, and then realized that she was talking into an empty phone. “What?” she said vaguely to the cat, hanging up slowly, and the cat yawned widely, eyes shut. “I guess I’d better hurry, then,” Helen said, picking up her dinner plate and looking at it absently. “They *want* me,” she explained, and set the plate down before the cat, who looked at it, startled, and then began hastily to bite at the slice of cold chicken, eyeing Helen with disbelief. Then the door slammed shut behind her and the cat settled down comfortably, finishing off the chicken first, going on to the cottage cheese in the salad, even tasting delicately at the lettuce. When nothing remained on the plate but lettuce and a slice of pineapple, the cat abandoned it and leaped softly onto the table, where he finished off the cream in the pitcher, took a lick at the butter, and then moved gracefully down and into the overstuffed chair, primped himself briefly, and fell beautifully asleep.

Helen Spencer, racing down the street with a completely meaningless sense of urgency, and no hat, ran onto the fair grounds, panting, between wooden booths advertising fish ponds and grab bags, lemonade and hot dogs, pony rides and homemade fudge; she made her way, pushing, through the little groups of women and men and children who fussed around the booths, the early comers, the ladies who had baked the home-baked cakes and contributed the embroidered aprons and donated painted ashtrays to go into the grab bag, the children ducking away from grown-up hands, standing big-eyed before the baseball-throwing concession and the little train made of borrowed wagons hitched to a jeep.

“Helen, *hurry* — there’s a line waiting already.”

“But what?” said Helen breathlessly as Mrs. Brandon took her arm and led her firmly across the lawn. “Where?”

“Come *along*, we’ve got to get something for your *head.”*

Helplessly Helen, realizing that she had forgotten to comb her hair, pattered along behind Mrs. Brandon, asking at intervals, “What?” or “Where?” They came up behind a row of booths, going carefully between cartons and boxes where additional supplies were kept, and finally Mrs. Brandon raised a curtain on the back of a booth and said, “Here, now, as soon as we can get you dressed you can start, because if we keep these people waiting any longer, heaven only *knows* what they’ll do, the Armstrong girl’s been here fifteen minutes *already!”*

The booth held two chairs, one on either side of a bridge table, a heap of bright-colored cloths, and nothing else. “We just need to tie these around you, any old way,” Mrs. Brandon said, putting Helen forcibly down into one of the chairs and coming at her with a scarf of flaming scarlet, “and someone is going to bring some earrings and necklaces, but of course you can start without *those*. The Armstrong girl—” She stood off and looked at Helen, at the scarlet scarf wound around Helen’s head. “You look real nice in that color,” she said, “you ought to get a hat or something, let me see. Blue around your shoulders, and you’ll be sitting down, so there really isn’t any need for anything like a skirt or anything, we can throw this blue shawl over the table and that’ll hide you, and now, where did they put the cards?”

“Cards?”

“Wilma said they’d be right… here. Now, why don’t you just glance over them and I’ll run outside and check your sign and then I can tell the

Armstrong girl to come right in."

"Cards?" Helen said, appalled. Fingers shaking, she opened the deck of cards Mrs. Brandon handed her and stared at them in bewilderment. "But…" she said, but Mrs. Brandon had already gone and outside her voice said dimly, "And you can go on in, in just a minute, as soon as the Gypsy Queen is through — ah — communing with her spirits."

"But I don't know how—" Helen said, going to the front of the booth and parting the curtains, "Mrs. Brandon, I—" She broke off, looking back into the faces staring at her; in front of the booth was a waiting line that seemed to reach into the far distance, and, glancing down, Helen saw at her side an enormous sign, painted in bright reds and greens: "Madame Mystery. Knows All, Tells All, Reads the Future and Explains the Past. Fifty cents."

"Oh, golly," Helen said. Blindly, she made her way back to her chair and sat down, staring without comprehension at the deck of cards. As they spread out before her she saw one named "A sick person," with a picture of an invalid in bed attended by a doctor and a nurse, one named "The ring," picturing a bride and groom, one of a cupid, a broken mirror, a train, a house. Briefly, the thought of her quiet living room, her cat, her magazine, came across her mind, and if she had not been a person of good humor and good sense she might very well have tiptoed softly out through the back of the booth and fled home. In a small town, however, one does not unnecessarily leave the Mrs. Brandons marooned without a fortune-teller for their fairs, and Helen straightened her shoulders and tightened her lips, and called upon her memory and whatever good fairies were watching her, and said loudly, "Let the first seeker of truth come forward."

The curtains at the front of the booth parted and the Armstrong girl came in, moving cautiously in the dim light. Since she was a high-school junior in the school building where Helen taught fifth grade, she recognized Helen and smiled a little, saying, "I never knew *you* could tell fortunes," as she sat down. "I *love* having my fortune told," she added unnecessarily.

Helen pondered in what she trusted was the identifiable gypsy manner, her hands on the cards and her head bent. (Armstrong; Sally, was it? Susie? Not too bright, anyway — hadn't she failed geometry last year? — one of the cheerleaders, Helen rather thought; interested in that red-haired Watson boy.) "Choose a card," Helen said finally with vast authority.

The Armstrong girl giggled, debated with her hand hovering over the cards, and pounced at last. *"This* one," she said. Helen turned it over. "The clouds," she said, regarding the stormy landscape pictured on the card. "Well."

The feeling of being left out, of being always the one left alone at home, never regarded, never considered, never remembered, swept over her suddenly; here was a girl who would never, obviously, know that feeling, and, without thinking, Helen said, "You will never be lonely. *You'll* never be hurt. The trouble in your life will be small." (What troubles could she have, after all, a girl who couldn't pass geometry but had a redheaded young man?) "The invitation," Helen said, turning over the next card, "of course *you* know what *that* is?" The girl nodded, smiling. "You will have your wish about the invitation," Helen said, "and it will be one of the happiest occasions of your life." The girl leaned forward eagerly. "Will Mother let mego?" she asked, breathless. With great solemnity Helen turned over another card. "The stone wall," she said. "Well, you will be allowed to go, I think, but only because your mother knows that she can trust you to behave yourself and do as you are told. If you should disobey — come home late, or something—" She turned over another card. "The lightning.

Well, you can count on getting into all kinds of trouble. *Serious* trouble," she said, raising her head to regard the girl ominously. "*Terrible* trouble."

The girl nodded, wide-eyed. "Am I going to get married?" she asked after a minute.

Helen turned up another card. "Broken mirror. Well. Not to the person you are thinking about now. You'll be older in another few years, and what looks so appealing to you now may then seem only a childish fancy. You will someday find" — she hesitated— "the man of your dreams," she finished grimly.

After all, she thought, there was nothing here that didn't make sense. And every girl thought she had a man of her dreams. Dr. Atherton wouldn't look much like a dream man to a sixteen-year-old, but who — Helen wondered while the Armstrong girl dwelt lovingly on her own future — was thinking about Dr. Atherton? I've known him since he had his first skate coaster, Helen thought; I'll be so happy when he finally settles down with Mrs. Miller.

"How old will I live to be?" asked the Armstrong girl.

"The flowers," Helen read. "Very old. You will be… hmm… wise, and respected, and have many grandchildren and you will have a fine life."

She paused, and the Armstrong girl gathered herself together reluctantly. "Well," she said. "Thanks so much, Miss Spencer." She started for the entrance to the booth and then stopped. "Look," she said, turning, "can you tell me just *anything* more about that dance? That invitation, I mean?"

Agreeably Helen turned up another card. "The moon," she read, and lifted her head and grinned at the Armstrong girl, who grinned back. "Say, thanks," the girl said, and left.

At some time during the evening someone brought her a candle, which was set on the table and did little to dispel the gloom that surrounded

Madame Mystery; by that time Helen had begun to feel that she had never known anything so well — not the plates she washed and dried at home, not the walls of her house, nor the clothes she wore every day — as she knew the pictures on these cards, the weddings and invitations and sicknesses and unexpected letters. She had told old Mrs. Langdon that her delphinium would surpass itself next year, young Bobbie Mills that his pitching arm would improve; she told all the pretty young girls that they would wait awhile, and look around, before they married, and she told all the plain young girls that they would find husbands sooner than they expected. She strongly advised fourteen-year-old Betsy Harvester not to run away to Hollywood, and refused laughingly to predict whether little Mrs. Martin's baby would be a boy or a girl. Still, the line in front of her booth continued, and it was not until Mrs. Brandon came in with a paper cup of lemonade that Helen realized that it was growing late, that the fair must be almost over.

"We're making a *fortune,"* Mrs. Brandon said, patting Helen affectionately on the shoulder, "they say you're *wonderful."*

Helen straightened her back, and stretched. "Good to rest for a minute," she said. When she raised her eyes to Mrs. Brandon she blinked; she had been staring at the cards in candlelight for so long that the darkness of the rest of the booth dazed her. Mrs. Brandon went to the entrance and peeked out. "About six people waiting," she said. "Honestly, Helen, what you've *done* for us." She paused uncomfortably for a minute, and then said in a rush, "Never got to know you very well, *really*. Why don't you come for lunch tomorrow and help us figure out the profits? Like to have you."

"Why…" Helen said. "Thank you, I'd love to," she said. Then, hastily, "Better get back to work. Customers waiting."

"Honestly" Mrs. Brandon said, patting Helen's shoulder again. "One o'clock, then, tomorrow." She departed through the back curtain of the booth and Helen heard her stumble against a carton. That will be nice tomorrow, Helen thought, maybe Bill Atherton… "Let the next approach," she said quickly, drowning out her own thought. After all, even if you'd known a person since he lost his first tooth, that still didn't give you any right to… "And what do you wish to learn from the cards?" Helen asked, and looked up and said, "Oh," weakly.

Mrs. Miller smiled. She was a woman who smiled charmingly, and walked charmingly, and spoke and laughed and dressed charmingly; if her charm was lost upon Helen Spencer, it was not because of malice in Mrs. Miller. "You've certainly been popular tonight," Mrs. Miller said. "I've been waiting in line for hours."

Deep embarrassment covered Helen, and she was hopeful that in the dim candlelight Mrs. Miller could not see that Helen, a grown woman and presumably a reasonable person, was blushing cruelly. "I'm only doing this—" she began weakly, and then thought, why am I apologizing? It's nothing to *her*, and said, "Are you interested in the future? Do you care to have the past explained?"

Now, most townspeople had had a fling at predicting Mrs. Miller's future, and although her past was perfectly clear, it had been obscured by the earnest efforts of well-meaning people to cast a blight upon it; Mrs. Miller had been married and divorced and, since she had not been born or raised locally, there was obviously something dangerous about Mrs. Miller; Helen Spencer, who was above petty gossip, detested Mrs. Miller cordially.

"I want to know," Mrs. Miller said, smiling demurely, "if I should accept an invitation I have received today. A most *important* invitation."

So she's caught him at last, Helen thought, and turned the cards one by one with tight hands, forcing herself to move slowly and gently. Pretend it's somebody else, she told herself, and said, "Here is the card for an invitation, and next to it the card for marriage." Mrs. Miller stirred, and smiled. "If it is an invitation to be married — of course, a proposal — it looks as though you must certainly accept. The next card is one for great good fortune. A long journey — perhaps a honeymoon?"

"Perhaps," said Mrs. Miller happily.

Probably Bermuda, thought Helen, who had always wanted passionately to go to Bermuda. "There will be few difficulties in the way of your happiness," she continued mournfully, "and you will be favored by great good fortune." With finality she gathered the cards together. "How happy you must be," she said, not without irony.

Mrs. Miller rose. "Thank you *very* much," she said. "I'm so excited." And she ran out.

I wish I hadn't come, Helen thought. I wish I'd washed my hair; now, I am not going to tell any more fortunes and I never want to see these cards again and why am I making a fool of myself here when other people… I wish I'd done my nails. I wish I had enough money to go to Bermuda by myself and settle down there; maybe I can apply to be transferred to some school in — say — Ruritania.

She turned over the cards miserably, one by one; the ring, she thought, the bridge, the sunlight. Someone came into the booth and she said without looking up, "No more tonight. I'm tired."

"Fine," said the voice of Bill Atherton. "I already know my future."

"Oh," said Helen, perceiving that it was beginning to seem that she could say nothing else. Of course, she thought, he *would* come in right after her;

they came together, and she probably insisted gaily that they *must* have their fortunes told; I'm only surprised that they didn't come in together.

Helplessly she surveyed several possible remarks ("How nice to see you; I understand you're getting married"; "Mrs. Miller just told me; congratulations to you both"; "Will you both come someday for tea?") and intelligently remained silent. "I've come to the rescue," he said. "You've been long enough in the clutches of the gypsies."

Helen laughed, almost naturally. "It's been fun," she said.

"Then," he said, taking the cards from her, "I'll tell *your* fortune, just for a change." He spread the cards before him and looked at them, frowning. "I see," he said ominously, "a lady who is fond of gaiety, and people, and laughter."

"I know who *that* is," she said.

"Do you? I also see a lady who is lonely, and sad, and anxious to go far away."

"I know who *that* is."

"The first lady is awaiting a champion to defend her against black despair."

"I hope you'll be very happy," Helen said.

"The second lady has finally learned to accept the inevitable, and bows to it."

"Certainly," Helen said. "I—"

"The second lady," he continued smoothly, "is, as everybody knows by now, leaving this town as fast as she can, and for a good reason."

"I thought Ruritania," Helen said.

"But the *first* lady," he said, overriding her, "will probably live happily ever after. Eileen Miller," he said carelessly, as though it were of no importance whatsoever, "is leaving here tomorrow to go to Siam." He gathered the cards together. “She’s had word from her future husband. He’s a missionary.” Then, for the first time, he looked directly at Helen. “Do you know,” he said, “that tonight is the first time most of the people in this town have had any chance at all to talk to you easily?”

“But I—”

“Especially,” he said, “me. Now, let’s go play darts. You’ve done enough damage tonight.” And he threw the cards into a corner.

At home Helen’s cat, disturbed by some obscure cat-prescience, stirred on the chair and arose, yawning prodigiously. Perhaps he heard a mouse, or perhaps he recognized that his mistress had never been out so late in her life; at any rate, he slipped down from the chair and out into the kitchen, where one leap brought him onto the stove and the remains of the cold chicken. Thoughtfully, without fear of interruption, he selected a chicken leg and fell to work.

PORTRAIT

THAT WAS THE WAY she talked, and I used to listen, and watch her sitting with her legs swung over the arm of her chair, talking and smiling but not laughing. I don’t think I ever saw her laugh.

Go walking through the valley,
go walking through the valley,
go walking through the valley,
as we have done before.

… There was a child dancing in the garden and I went out and spoke to it.

“Child,” I said, “you are stepping on my flowers.”

“Yes,” said the child, “I know.”

“Child,” I said, “you are walking on my garden.”

“Yes,” said the child, “I know.”

“Why?” I said.

“I am dancing,” said the child; “can’t you see?”

Go in and out the windows,
go in and out the windows,
go in and out the windows,
as we have done before.

… The little boy looked at me and he was crying.

“Look,” he said, “my hands are dirty.”

“Why are they dirty?” I asked him.

"I was digging to get my father," he said.

"Is your father dead?" I asked him.

"They hanged him," he said.

"Why did they hang him?" I asked him.

"Because he was alive," he said.

"Then why were you trying to dig him up?" I asked him.

"Because now he is dead," he said, "and they can't hang him again."

Go forth and face your lover,
go forth and face your lover,
go forth and face your lover,
as we have done before.

… Far off among the trees there was a little girl sitting, and when I came to her she looked at me and frowned.

"Leaves will fall on you," I said.

"I don't mind; I'm hiding," she explained.

"Why are you hiding here?" I said.

"It's darker than most places," she explained.

"Who are you hiding from?" I said.

"Everybody," she explained.

"Why?" I asked.

"They want me to comb my hair," she explained.

And now you two are parted,
and now you two are parted,
and now you two are parted,
as we have done before.

That was the way she talked, but I don't think I ever saw her laugh.

GNARLY THE KING OF THE JUNGLE

GNARLY THE KING OF the Jungle had been Ellen Jane's special property ever since her mother first told her about him; Gnarly was a lion who had been born years and years ago and had run away from the other lions to live with a little girl (like Ellen Jane) and had learned to talk to children, but not to grown-ups. "No matter how you try," Ellen Jane told her mother over and over again, "you can't hear Gnarly the King of the Jungle or even get him to talk to you." Gnarly's adventures were many: Sometimes he fought (and defeated) a band of monkeys who were teasing a small boy; once a cruel man made Gnarly substitute for a horse on a merry-go-round and his lot was made bearable only by the children who came to talk to him; once, even, Gnarly found a buried treasure and gave it to all the children in the world to spend on candy. (Ellen Jane got a piece of the candy; it was by her pillow one morning marked "From Gnarly the King of the Jungle.")

Ellen Jane's mother had invented Gnarly and all her friends told her she should put him in a book. "The way Ellen Jane loves it," her friends would say to her, "you could make a lot of money with a book."

Ellen Jane's mother was kept busy all day trying to invent new adventures for Gnarly to have each night before Ellen Jane went to bed. In all of his adventures Gnarly had to be friendly with children and talk to them. It was not until two weeks before Ellen Jane's sixth birthday that her mother completely solved the question of Gnarly's future adventures. "Ellen Jane," she had asked, "what would you like for your birthday?" And Ellen Jane had replied, as though it were the most natural thing in the world: "I only want Gnarly the King of the Jungle. I want him to come live with me."

And so Ellen Jane’s mother, desperate, looked in the telephone book for places that might conceivably sell wooden lions, hunted through junk shops and secondhand stores, and finally found a huge wooden lion which had, incredibly, come off a merry-go-round, and which, with a new coat of paint and a pair of red jeweled eyes, might pass as Gnarly the King of the Jungle. Ellen Jane’s mother took the lion to a carpenter and had it set on a pair of huge wooden rockers and had a cheerful grin carved on in place of the ferocious scowl that had graced the merry-go-round. Finally, she had her own dressmaker compose a green velvet saddle for Gnarly. He made an imposing picture at last, when he was smuggled into the house and placed beside the breakfast table, along with Ellen Jane’s other birthday presents.

The morning of her sixth birthday, Ellen Jane came downstairs saying, “Has Gnarly come yet, Mother? Where is Gnarly?” and when her mother proudly escorted her to Gnarly, Ellen Jane only stood in the doorway with her hands clasped and said, “Hello, Gnarly.”

While Ellen Jane’s mother stood by the breakfast table, watching, Ellen Jane gravely climbed onto Gnarly’s back, rocked tentatively three or four times, and then announced: “I want my breakfast here, and my lunch and my dinner and my breakfast tomorrow morning and my lunch tomorrow and my dinner tomorrow and my breakfast the next day and my lunch…” Ellen Jane became interested in Gnarly’s ears. “Look, Mother,” she said, “his ears are different, one is up and one is down.”

“Shall I ask Veronica to serve your breakfast up there, then, dear?” asked Ellen Jane’s mother.

“I’m going to live on Gnarly from now on,” Ellen Jane said absently, twisting around to look into Gnarly’s face.

Ellen Jane’s mother opened the kitchen door. “Veronica,” she said, “would you give Ellen Jane her breakfast on her rocking horse, please?”

“Rocking lion,” said Ellen Jane. “Look, V’ronica. This is Gnarly.”

Veronica had been doing general cooking and housework for Ellen Jane’s mother long enough to have heard about Gnarly the King of the Jungle, and now she inspected the rocking lion cautiously from behind the tray with Ellen Jane’s breakfast. “Ellen Jane,” she said, “that’s certainly a nice toy. You’re certainly a lucky little girl.”

“Not a toy,” Ellen Jane said. “It’s Gnarly.”

“Gnarly,” Veronica said.

“Look, V’ronica. He has eyes.”

“Miz Curtain,” Veronica said in sudden panic, “ain’t Ellen Jane going to open her other presents? Her *other* presents?” she repeated significantly, gesturing toward the little heap of gifts on the table.

“Ellen Jane, dear,” her mother said.

“Yow know,” Veronica said, her voice rising, “that little box—” she pointed at herself, and then gestured violently at the gifts.

Ellen Jane’s mother made her voice persuasive. “Dear,” she said, “don’t you want to see the pretty things everyone else has given you for your birthday?”

“Sure,” Ellen Jane said. “Gnarly wants to see them, too. Bring them on over, V’ronica.”

Veronica picked up one of the boxes. “Open this one first,” she said eagerly. Ellen Jane ripped the tissue paper off the little box. “What is it?” she asked.

“It’s a lovely gift, dear,” her mother said.

Ellen Jane opened the box and took out a thick gold chain bracelet with a plaque set in. “It says ‘Ellen Jane,’” she said, reading the engraving on the plaque. “Who’s it from?” She hung the bracelet over the lion’s ear. “There, Gnarly,” she said. “You wear that while I open everything else.”

"That's from me," Veronica said, pointing at the bracelet. "Ellen Jane, I gave you that bracelet."

"Did you?" Ellen Jane said, rocking on Gnarly so fast that the bracelet flew off. "It's pretty, V'ronica. Get it back for me, will you? It's under the table."

"Put the bracelet on, dear," her mother said as Ellen Jane took it from Veronica. "It's perfectly beautiful, Veronica, and *so* thoughtful of you."

"I got it from a fellow I know, Miz Curtain," Veronica said, pride in her voice. "He gets stuff like that wholesale and so I got this here bracelet for Ellen Jane when it was her birthday."

"Thank you, Veronica," Ellen Jane's mother said.

Satisfied, Veronica passed the other gifts up to Ellen Jane, one by one. A scarf was taken from its box and tied around Gnarly's neck, a pair of gloves sat comically on his ears, a painting set was placed on one rocker for his inspection, a lapel pin was fastened onto the saddle next to Ellen Jane.

"Well, dear, I think you've had a lovely birthday," Ellen Jane's mother said as Veronica carried out the tissue paper and ribbons. "I think we had better sit right down after breakfast and write little letters to everyone — your grandmothers and your aunt Alice and everyone to tell them how much you enjoyed the presents."

"We don't have to write V'ronica," Ellen Jane said, "she's right here."

"Dear," her mother said, "I thought that since it was your birthday we might go into town and have lunch and go to a movie — would you like that?"

"I can't go on Gnarly," Ellen Jane said.

"I see," said her mother. "Veronica, you can clear the breakfast dishes whenever you're ready."

She got up to leave the room but in the doorway she turned. “Lunch at Schrafft’s?” she said pleadingly. But Ellen Jane was looking into Gnarly’s face again and did not hear; her mother sighed and went out.

For a minute Ellen Jane hung with her arms around Gnarly’s neck, carefully examining his face and front legs. Then she rose and turned around in the green velvet saddle and bent over again, looking at his hind feet and his tail. She was curled around the saddle, investigating his stomach, when Veronica came in to clear the breakfast dishes.

“Good God, child,” Veronica gasped, “what are you doing?”

Ellen Jane lifted her head disdainfully. “I’m getting to know Gnarly,” she said.

Veronica sat down in the chair recently occupied by Ellen Jane’s mother. “You gave me a scare,” she said. “I thought you was falling off that thing.”

“Look at him, V’ronica. He has ears and red eyes and on his stomach he’s all smooth and then up here it gets to be a mane and around his neck he’s got a big collar of fur. *Look.”*

Veronica approached gingerly. “Is that supposed to be this here King of the Jungle your mother tells of?” she asked.

“This is Gnarly. Look at his ears, V’ronica, He can talk, too.”

“Let’s hear him,” Veronica said immediately.

“He can’t talk to *you;* he wouldn’t talk to anyone but me. Not around here, anyway. He talks only to children. Look. Gnarly, this is Ellen Jane talking. Tell me something.” She bent around and put her ear to his mouth, and then rose, turning to Veronica. “He says this is the nicest place he was ever in and he likes me more than anything in the world.”

Veronica was impressed. “Does he hear everything we say?”

“Sure. Ask him anything and I’ll tell you what he says.”

Veronica thought deeply. “Ask him how old I am,” she said triumphantly.

Ellen Jane listened to Gnarly. “He says you’re thirty-four.”

Veronica, awed, approached to look more closely into Gnarly’s face.

“I know that’s right,” Ellen Jane added, “because you told me only the other day how old you are, V’ronica. Just the other day you said to me that you were thirty-four years old.”

Veronica giggled. “Ask him does he want to help me with these dishes?” She began to stack the dishes. Suddenly she started and turned around.

“Ellen Jane,” she said, “did you say something?”

Ellen Jane stared, and Veronica shrugged. “I must be crazy,” she said.

“What was it, V’ronica? What did you hear?”

“Oh, nothing,” Veronica said teasingly. “I just thought I heard something, that’s all.”

“What, Veronica?”

“Well,” Veronica began slowly. “I did think I heard someone say, ‘Sure, I’ll help you with those dishes.’ As plain as day I heard it.”

“It wasn’t me,” Ellen Jane said.

“I sure thought I heard it,” Veronica said. She paused, a stack of dishes in each hand. “Couldn’t have been that horse, now, could it?”

“Gnarly?” Ellen Jane began to laugh.

“Well…” Veronica shrugged again and went through the swinging doors to the kitchen.

Suddenly she put her head back through the doors. “You call me, Ellen Jane?”

“No,” Ellen Jane said. “I didn’t say anything.”

Veronica looked at the lion and sighed. Then she frowned and walked over to Gnarly.

“Now, you stop teasing me, do you hear?” she said firmly to the lion. “I won’t have my whole morning’s work busted up by your making fun of me.

If you want to come help with those dishes—"

"V'ronica!" Ellen Jane's voice was horrified. "Are you talking to Gnarly?"

Veronica looked at her. "I certainly am," she said. "And if this fresh horse thinks he can get away with any—"

Ellen Jane bounced up and down in the saddle angrily. "You're not," she screamed, "you're not talking to Gnarly at all. He's my lion and you can't have him talking to you. It's only your imagination, nasty V'ronica, and you're making believe he talks to you just to be mean!"

Veronica looked at her for a minute and then turned around and went back into the kitchen.

"Mother!" Ellen Jane shouted. "Mother, come here right away!"

"That's right, call your mother" — Veronica raised her voice from the kitchen— "and when she comes I'll tell her what a selfish little girl she has, and how you yelled at me just because Gnarly talks to me, too."

Ellen Jane's mother came running to the door. "Ellen Jane," she cried, "is something wrong, dear? Did you fall? What is it?"

Ellen Jane began to cry. "V'ronica did a terrible thing," she wailed.

"Veronica did?" Ellen Jane's mother was puzzled. She went to the kitchen door and swung it open. "Veronica?" she said. "What happened to Ellen Jane?"

Ellen Jane thought quickly. She and Gnarly had to do something bad to Veronica, something very bad. "She frightened me awfully, Mother," Ellen Jane said.

"But how, Ellen Jane?"

"By telling me about her brother, that's how," Ellen Jane said deliberately. "Her brother's a mean awful man and she told me he'd come and get me. He's in jail."

The kitchen door slammed back against the wall and Veronica cried, “Ellen Jane, you promised you’d never tell!”

Ellen Jane looked at her mother. “He’s in jail for stealing and killing people and robbing a bank and all sorts of awful things.”

“Miz Curtain,” Veronica said, “please don’t believe her.”

“And for murdering and hitting policemen and taking a million dollars out of a man’s pockets.”

“Veronica,” Ellen Jane’s mother said, “how much truth is there in all this?”

“It’s all true,” Ellen Jane said, “she told me herself, a long time ago, and she made me promise not to tell anyone ever because she said if you knew you’d have her put in jail, too.”

“Veronica,” Ellen Jane’s mother said, “I think we had better talk this over in the kitchen.”

Veronica turned silently and held the kitchen door open for Ellen Jane’s mother to pass through. Ellen Jane watched the door close behind Veronica, and then she threw her arms around the lion’s neck and began to whisper in his ear, looking at the kitchen door and now and then giggling softly.

THE GOOD WIFE

MR. JAMES BENJAMIN POURED a second cup of coffee for himself, sighed, and reached across the table for the cream. “Genevieve,” he said without troubling to turn, “has Mrs. Benjamin had her breakfast tray yet?”

“She’s still asleep, Mr. Benjamin. I went up ten minutes ago.”

“Poor thing,” said Mr. Benjamin, and helped himself to toast. He sighed again, discarded the newspaper as unworthy of notice, and was pleased to find that Genevieve was bringing in the mail.

“Any letters for me?” he asked, more to contribute to some human communication and desire, even so low a one as desiring the mail, than to secure information that he might very well have in a minute; “Anything for me?”

Genevieve was too well bred to turn over the letters, but she said “It’s all here, Mr. Benjamin” as though he might have suspected her of abstracting vital letters, about business, perhaps, or from women.

There were of course — it was the third of the month — bills from various department stores, the latest of them dated on the tenth of the previous month, when Mrs. Benjamin had first taken to her room. They were trifling, and Mr. Benjamin set them aside, along with the circulars that advertised underwear, and dishes, and cosmetics, and furniture; it would amuse Mrs. Benjamin to look these over later. There was a bank statement, and Mr. Benjamin threw it irritably away toward the coffeepot, to be looked over later. There were three personal letters — one to himself, from a friend in Italy, praising the weather there at the moment, and two for Mrs.

Benjamin. The first of these, which Mr. Benjamin opened without hesitation, was from her mother, and read,

Dear, just a hurried line to let you know that we're leaving on the tenth. I still hope you might come with us and of course up until the minute we leave for the boat we'll be waiting for word from you. You won't even need a trunk — we're planning to do all our shopping in Paris, of course, anyway, and of course you wouldn't need much for the boat. But do as you please. You know how we both counted on your coming and cannot understand your changing your mind at the last minute, but of course if James says so I suppose you have no choice. Anyway, if there's any chance of you and James both joining us later, do let me know. I'll send you our address. Meanwhile, take care of yourself, and remember we are always thinking of you, love, Mother.

Mr. Benjamin set this letter aside to be answered, and opened the other letter addressed to his wife. It was, he assumed, from an old school friend, because he did not know the name, and it read:

Helen, darling, just saw your name in the paper, being married, and how *marvelous*. Do we know the lucky man? Anyway, we always said you'd be the first married and now here you are, the last — at least, Smithy hasn't married yet, but we never counted *her*. Anyway, Doug and I are just *dying* to see you, and now that we're in touch again I'll be waiting for word from you about when you and your new hubby can run up and pay us a visit. Any weekend at *all*, and let us know what train you'll make. Just *loads* of love and congratulations, Joanie.

This letter did not absolutely require an answer, but Mr. Benjamin set it aside anyway, he poured himself a third cup of coffee, and drank it peacefully, regarding the department store advertisements superimposed upon the horrors of the morning paper. When he had finished this cup of coffee, he rose, and collected the advertisements and the paper and said, when he saw Genevieve standing in the kitchen doorway, “I’m finished, thanks, Genevieve. Is Mrs. Benjamin awake?”

“I just took up her tray, Mr. Benjamin,” Genevieve said.

“Right,” said Mr. Benjamin. “I’ll be leaving for the office on the eleven-fifteen train, Genevieve. I’ll drive myself to the station, and I’ll be back about seven. You and Mrs. Carter will take care of Mrs. Benjamin while I’m gone?”

“Of course, Mr. Benjamin.”

“Good.” With his little collection of papers, Mr. Benjamin turned resolutely toward the stairs, leaving behind him the breakfast dishes and the coffeepot and Genevieve’s incurious eyes.

His wife’s room was at the head of the stairs, a heavy oaken door with brass-trimmed knobs and hinges. The key hung always on a hook just beside the doorway, and Mr. Benjamin sighed a third time as he lifted it down and weighed it for a minute in his hand. When he fitted the key to the lock in the door he heard the first split second of stunned silence within, and then the rattle of dishes as his wife set aside her breakfast tray and waited for the door to open. Sighing, Mr. Benjamin turned the key and opened the door.

“Good morning,” he said, avoiding looking at her and going instead to the window, which showed him the same view of the garden that he had seen from the dining room, the same flowers a little farther away, the same street beyond, the same rows of houses. “How are you feeling this morning?”

“Very well, thank you.”

The lawn, seen from this angle, showed more clearly that it needed trimming, and he said, “Have to get hold of that fellow to do the lawn.”

"His name's in the little telephone book," she said. "The one where I keep numbers like the laundry's, and the grocer's." There was the sound of her coffee cup being moved. "Kept," she said.

"It's going to be another nice day," he said, still looking out.

"Splendid. Will you play golf?"

"You know I don't play golf on Mondays," he said, turning to her in surprise; once he had looked at her, even without intending to, he found it not difficult; she was always the same, these mornings now, and it came as more of a shock to him daily to realize that although, throughout the rest of the house, she existed as a presence made up half of recollection and half of intention, here in her room she was the same as always, and not influential at all. She sometimes wore a blue bed jacket and had an egg on her tray, and she sometimes put her hair onto the top of her head with combs instead of letting it fall about her shoulders, and she sometimes sat in the chair next to the window, and she was sometimes reading the books he brought her from the library, but essentially she was the same, and the same woman as the one he had married and probably the same woman that he might one day bury.

Her voice, when she spoke to him, was the one she had used for many years, although recently she had learned to keep it lower and without emotion; at first, that had been because she disliked the thought of Genevieve and Mrs. Carter hearing her, but now it was because it did so little good to shout at him, and frequently drove him away. "Any mail?" she asked.

"A letter from your mother, one from someone named Joanie."

"Joanie?" she said, frowning. "I don't know anyone named Joanie."

"Helen," he said irritably, "will you *please* stop talking like that?"

She hesitated, and then took up her coffee cup again with a gesture that made it clear that whatever she had intended to say, she was persuaded that there was no reason to say it again.

“I don’t know her name,” he said patiently, “but it was on her letter. She said Smitty wasn’t married yet. She said how wonderful that you were married and would you and your hubby visit her soon.”

“Joan Morris,” she said. “Why didn’t you say so instead of letting me—” She stopped.

“There were no other letters,” he said deliberately.

“I wasn’t expecting any but Mother’s.”

“Has Mr. Ferguson forgotten you, do you suppose? Or perhaps given up a difficult job?”

“I don’t know Mr. Ferguson.”

“So easily discouraged…” he said. “It could hardly have been a very… *passionate* affair.”

“I don’t know anyone named Ferguson.” She kept her voice quiet, as she always did now, but she moved her coffee cup slightly in its saucer, and looked at it with interest, the thin cup moving in a tiny delicate circle on the saucer. “There wasn’t any affair.”

He went on, speaking as quietly as she did, and watching the coffee cup, but he sounded almost wistful. “You gave him up so easily,” he said. “Hardly a word from me, and poor Mr. Ferguson was abandoned. And now he seems to be weakening in his efforts to release you.” He thought. “I don’t believe there’s been a letter for nearly a week,” he said.

“I don’t know who writes the letters. I don’t know anyone named Ferguson.”

“Perhaps not. Perhaps he saw you in a bus, or across a restaurant, and had since that magic moment dedicated his life to you; perhaps, even, you succeeded in dropping a note out the window, or Genevieve took pity on you… perhaps Genevieve's fur coat was a bribe?"

"It hardly seemed likely that I should be needing a fur coat," she said.

"It was a present from me, originally, was it not? You will be pleased to know that Genevieve came directly to me and offered to return the coat."

"I suppose you *did* take it back?"

"I did," he said. "I prefer not to have Genevieve indebted to you."

He was already tired of her this morning; it was not possible to communicate with her because she would not abandon her coffee cup, and she knew already of course that he had taken the coat and the jewelry away from Genevieve. There was not even the hope between them that he believed she had actually dropped a note from the window, or somehow gotten word to the outside world; there was not even, they both knew, any way in which she might sit down and, hands trembling and with nervous glances at the door, set upon paper any statement of her position which might bring someone to unlock the door and let her out. Even if she had been allowed pencil and paper or had found it possible to scrawl with a lipstick upon a handkerchief, she was not capable anymore of expressions such as "I am kept prisoner by my husband, help me" or "Save an unfortunate woman unjustly confined" or "Get the police" or even "Help"; there had been a period when she had tried to force her way out of the room when the door was opened, but that had been only at first. She had then fallen into a sullen indifference and during that time he had watched her closely, since the (then almost daily) letters from Ferguson had suggested methods for release and he had suspected then that she was trying to communicate with her mother. Now, however, in this fairly new attitude of hers, which had begun when she gave away her clothes to Genevieve and began to stay in bed all day, and the letters from Ferguson were not as frequent, he had become easier in his mind about her, and even allowed her books and magazines, and had once brought her a dozen roses for her room. He did not for a minute believe that she was crafty enough to be planning an escape, or to use this apparent resigned state of mind to deceive him into thinking she had accepted his authority. “You still remember,” he asked her, thinking of this, “that you may at any time resume your normal life, and wear your pretty clothes again, and return to normal?”

“I remember it,” she said, and laughed.

He came toward her, toward the bed and the coffee cup and toward her blue bed jacket, until he could see clearly the combs on the top of her head and the small hairs that escaped. “Just tell me,” he said beggingly. “All you have to do is to tell me — only a few words — tell me about Ferguson, and where you met him and what—” He stopped. “Confess,” he said sternly, and she lifted her head to look at him. “I don’t know anyone named Ferguson. I never loved anyone in my life. I never had any affairs. I have nothing to confess. I do not want to wear my pretty clothes again.”

He sighed, and turned toward the door. “I wonder why not,” he said.

“Don’t forget to lock the door,” she said, turning to take her book from the table.

Mr. Benjamin locked the door behind him and stood for a minute holding the key in his hand before he hung it again on its hook. Then he turned wearily and went down the stairs. Genevieve was dusting the living room and he stopped in the doorway and said, “Genevieve, Mrs. Benjamin would like something light for lunch; perhaps a salad.”

“Certainly, Mr. Benjamin,” Genevieve said.

“I won’t have dinner home,” Mr. Benjamin said. “I thought I might, but I believe I’ll stay in town after all. I believe Mrs. Benjamin needs new library books; will you take care of that for her?”

“Certainly, Mr. Benjamin,” Genevieve said again.

He felt oddly hesitant, almost as though he would rather stand there and talk to Genevieve than go on into his study; perhaps that was because Genevieve would certainly answer “Yes, Mr. Benjamin.” He moved abruptly before he could say anything else, and went into his study and closed and locked the door, thinking as he did so, two rooms locked and shut away from the rest of the house, two rooms far apart, and all the house in between not being used, the living room and the dining room and the hall and the stairs and the bedrooms all just lying there, shutting two locked rooms away from each other. He shook his head violently; he was tired. He slept in the bedroom next to his wife’s and sometimes at night the temptation to unlock her door and go inside and tell her she was forgiven was very strong for him; he was fortunately kept from this by the frightful recollection of the one time he had unlocked his wife’s door during the night and she had driven him out with her fists and had locked the door from the inside, returning the key to him in the morning without a word; he suspected that soon it would not be possible for him to enter her room even by day.

He sat down at his desk and pressed his hand to his forehead irritably. It had to be done, however, and he took a sheet of her monogrammed notepaper and opened his fountain pen. “Dearest Mommy,” he wrote, “my mean old finger is still too painful to write with — James says he thinks I may have sprained it, but I think he is just tired of taking dictation from me — as if he had ever done anything else; anyway, we’re both just *sick* that we can’t join you in Paris after all, but I really think we’re wiser not to. After all, we only came back from our honeymoon in July, and James just *has* to spend *some* time at his old office. He says maybe this winter we can fly down to South America for a couple of weeks, and not let anyone know where we're going or when we're coming back or anything. Anyway, have a lovely time in Paris, and buy *lots* of lovely clothes, and *don't* forget to write me." Mr. Benjamin sat and regarded his letter and then, sighing, took up his pen and added, "Love, Helen and James." He sealed and addressed the letter and then, sitting quietly at his desk with his hands folded in front of him, he spent a moment thinking. He reached a sudden decision and opened the bottom drawer of the desk and took out a box of rather cheap notepaper, faintly colored, and a fountain pen filled with brown ink. With a sober air which made his gesture somehow ominous, he took the pen into his left hand and began to write in a bold hand, "My dearest, I have finally thought of a way to get around the jealous old fool. I've spoken to the girl a couple of times at the library and I think she'll help us if she's sure she won't get into trouble. Here's what I want to do…"

DEVIL OF A TALE

AND THE DEVIL SAT in the lonely silences of hell, lost in thought. There had been upon Earth a man, son of God, and he had put the devil to rout. And the world worshipped God's son, and through him God, and the devil sat alone.

"I will have a son," the devil said. "There will be a woman who will bear me a son."

And, taking himself to Earth, he sought out one Lady Katharine, wise and witty, mother of no children, but wife to a weak man. And the devil, speaking with Lady Katharine, put her his problem, and offered her the mothering of his son.

But Lady Katharine was wiser than that. "What assurance will I have," she said to the devil, "that you will reward me suitably?"

"You have my word, madam," said the devil courteously.

But Lady Katharine laughed, and said to the devil: "I will bear your son, and then you will forget your word and carry me off to hell. I will require adequate security."

"I will give you a throne in hell," the devil promised.

"I will take a throne on Earth," Lady Katharine replied.

"I will give you all you ask of me," said the devil, "and you will have my son as hostage."

"You will care for your son well enough without me," said Lady Katharine. "I will take your right eye as hostage."

So a bargain was struck, and the devil gave Lady Katharine his right eye as security for his bargain. And Lady Katharine bore a son to the devil, and kept the devil’s eye in the form of a ruby in a box with a cross on the lid. And during her lifetime she possessed the wealth of the world, and all its joys, and she lived many long and pleasant years with the devil’s right eye as hostage for her soul. And the devil’s son grew and flourished under his father’s watchful care, and he was the only son of Lady Katharine’s life, and upon her death he would assume the wealth she had taken from the devil.

And Lady Katharine died, and the devil took her soul, and demanded his eye for her soul’s freedom.

But the devil’s son was possessed of all Lady Katharine’s wealth, and the box with the cross as well, and having not his father’s dread of the cross, he opened the box and found therein the ruby that was the devil’s eye, and with it a note saying that it was Lady Katharine’s wish that it be thrown into the sea to redeem her soul from hell.

But the devil’s son, being his father’s heir, laughed and closed the box upon the ruby. And the devil, wanting his eye, came to his son, and disclosed himself, and said: “I am your father, and I have protected and guided you all your life. You have my eye, and the redemption of your mother’s soul; throw the box into the sea and free yourself from my anger.”

But the devil’s son, knowing his father well, said: “I am your only son, and you are not likely to have another; I will keep your eye as guarantee of your continued favors to me, and you dare not harm me; as for my mother’s soul, let it lie in hell.”

And he turned his back on the devil and went out into the world.

THE MOUSE

THE NEW APARTMENT into which Mrs. and Mr. Malkin moved on the first of October was large and comfortable. It had a woodburning fireplace, and a big kitchen, and was near Mr. Malkin's office; Mrs. Malkin had had the living room painted a soft rose, and the bedroom an equally soft blue, and the kitchen green, and then, in a sudden burst of what Mr. Malkin might have thought was wifely humor, she had taken the room Mr. Malkin had felt immediately was to be his study and had had it painted gray, a heavy slate gray. Mr. Malkin worked for an insurance company and had read somewhere that light, cheerful colors were best for work — Mr. Malkin's minor executive's office at the company had tan plaster walls and straight chairs — but Mrs. Malkin had been firm. "You're such a gloomy type anyway," she had said unkindly. She had relented to the extent of orange drapes and a bright rug, but Mr. Malkin never did like working in the room. Sundays, when Mrs. Malkin was moving cheerfully about in the kitchen, Mr. Malkin sat in his gray and orange room and pretended he was working, but at the end of the year, when he proposed repainting it, Mr. Malkin was to bring up as an unanswerable argument the fact that he felt he never had done any work in that room. And Mrs. Malkin was going to say that he never did any work anywhere anyway.

Mrs. Malkin had felt privately for a long time that it was her duty to see that her husband wasn't always as boyish as he intended to be; she had squashed with some enthusiasm his attempts to take up golf, had discouraged his friendship with an older member of the firm whom she thought patronizing, and had seen to it that at twenty-nine Mr. Malkin was always correctly dressed, good-mannered, childless, and taciturn.

Mr. Malkin liked his wife, or did until the terrible incident of the mouse.

The mice, both of them, had come with the apartment. The minute Mrs. Malkin had gone into the new kitchen and found the mousetrap the old tenant had left in the back of a cupboard, she had known she was going to have trouble. “They’ve been using this mousetrap right along,” she told Mr. Malkin, “and you can see it hasn’t done any good. Prints all over the kitchen.”

“Trouble with this trap,” said Mr. Malkin, getting down on his knees beside it, “they used the same trap over and over. Mice smell where traps have caught other mice, won’t go near a trap that’s been used.”

Mrs. Malkin regarded her husband. “What makes you think you know anything about mice?” she asked.

“You get me a new trap,” Mr. Malkin said, “and I’ll have your mice caught for you.”

Mrs. Malkin didn’t remember to get a new trap until after the painters were finished and Mr. Malkin had put up the drapes and the pictures and she had had her new lampshades made and set them up. Then one night when she went out into her freshly painted kitchen to get a pack of cigarettes, Mrs. Malkin put her foot down on the mouse, which was racing for cover under the refrigerator. She screamed and ran into the living room, where Mr. Malkin was sitting and reading.

“I didn’t know you were afraid of mice,” Mr. Malkin said soothingly.

“I’m not,” Mrs. Malkin said, “except I do hate to have one of them scare me like that.”

“You get a trap in the morning,” Mr. Malkin said, “and I’ll have that mouse by night.”

Mrs. Malkin got a trap the next morning, Mr. Malkin set it that night, and the mouse was caught, but just as Mr. Malkin was telling Mrs. Malkin, “You see, trouble with that old trap was that the mouse smelled where other mice had been caught,” Mrs. Malkin heard a suspicious rustling in the newspapers behind the stove, and the next morning there were mouse tracks all over the sink.

“I’m going to have to get the exterminator,” Mrs. Malkin said to Mr. Malkin over the breakfast table, “this cannot go on. I’m not afraid of mice — you know that — but they’re making me so nervous.”

“No one needs an exterminator for a couple of mice,” Mr. Malkin said. “You just get me a trap today…”

Mrs. Malkin nodded, helped her husband with his overcoat, and kissed him goodbye. “You get that trap,” Mr. Malkin said as he went down the stairs, “and I’ll see that your mouse is caught by night.”

Later that morning Mrs. Malkin called her husband at the office. “You get me a trap?” Mr. Malkin asked right away.

“A trap?” Mrs. Malkin repeated vaguely.

Mr. Malkin thought he detected a strangeness in his wife’s voice. “Is there something wrong?” he asked.

There was a brief silence. Then: “What I called you about,” Mrs. Malkin said, “I was glancing through your desk.”

Mr. Malkin thought swiftly. He had obviously done something wrong; however, at the moment, he could remember nothing in his desk that would offend his wife. “I keep a lot of junk—” he began.

“I know,” Mrs. Malkin said, “there’s a little bankbook.”

“A bankbook?” Mr. Malkin said.

“It’s made out to the name of — let me see.” There was a pause while Mrs. Malkin looked at the bankbook. “Donald Emmett Malkin,” she said.

“Donald Emmett Malkin,” Mr. Malkin said.

“There’s a balance of twenty-nine dollars,” Mrs. Malkin said, “a dollar a week for about six months.”

“Twenty-nine dollars,” Mr. Malkin said. “Well.”

“You’d better see if you can get that money back,” Mrs. Malkin said. “After all, it’s almost thirty dollars.”

“Yes,” said Mr. Malkin. “I had forgotten about it. I’ll get the money back.”

“Who’s Donald Emmett Malkin?” Mrs. Malkin said.

“Just a name,” Mr. Malkin said vaguely. “A joke I had at the time.”

“Donald for your father, Emmett for my father,” Mrs. Malkin said. “You say you’ll get that money back? Shall I leave the book out for you?”

“Yes,” Mr. Malkin said. “It was probably just a joke.”

“Probably,” Mrs. Malkin said. “I saw the mouse, by the way.”

“Frighten you?” Mr. Malkin said.

“I hate mice,” Mrs. Malkin said, “it was all fat and funny. Well, I’ll throw this little book out then, if you’re sure you won’t want it.”

“Sure,” Mr. Malkin said. He hung up with some relief.

When he got home that night, Mrs. Malkin met him at the door. She was wearing her wine-colored housecoat and had her hair sleek and straight down her back.

“I got the mouse,” Mrs. Malkin said.

“In the trap?”

“No,” Mrs. Malkin said gently, “just the mouse. I was too quick for her.”

“For her?” Mr. Malkin was saying as he followed his wife into his study. The mouse lay in the center of the floor, on a piece of white typing paper. The mouse was, too, just the color of the walls. “For her?” Mr. Malkin said with more strength.

“I hit her with the frying pan,” Mrs. Malkin said. She looked at her husband. “I was very brave,” she said.

“You certainly were,” Mr. Malkin said heartily.

“Then I put her on the piece of paper with the broom,” Mrs. Malkin said, “and brought her in here. And I know why she was so fat.”

Mr. Malkin bent over the mouse and saw why she was so fat, and then he looked up at his wife. From the look on her face, Mr. Malkin realized that she was the most terrible woman he had ever seen.

MY GRANDMOTHER AND THE WORLD OF CATS

SINCE MY GRANDMOTHER IS patient, and cats are long-lived, I am not giving any sort of decent odds on the ultimate outcome of their feud; although my money is privately on my grandmother, there is a lot of big dough coming from somewhere on the cats, and I am not one to give anyone a tip on a losing proposition. I can, however, give a brief résumé of the situation up to now, as a constant observer, and I'd like to add that, taking the long view, I have never thought that the cats had the staying power to match up with the old lady. Nine lives, maybe, but not the staying power.

My grandmother is a charming, gentle woman, except for what she does to cats. She is partial to them, too, and grieves constantly over the cruel chance that has chosen her as their natural enemy. She seems to appall them. Since she came to live with us, when my grandfather died, about fifteen years ago, there have been no fewer than forty or fifty cats that have bided their little hour with us, developed their personality scars, and gone. Perhaps it is just that we have gotten used to my grandmother, and it's too much to ask of a cat.

I remember Flossie, who used to bite my grandmother. Nothing more. Just walk up to my grandmother peacefully, get a firm grip on her ankles, and hang on. For a while my grandmother thought it was just affection, and was tremendously pleased at being singled out for Flossie's friendship, but then, as Flossie grew older and bigger and her teeth got longer, my grandmother developed a tendency to sit with her feet tucked under her. Finally Flossie began to have kittens, thousands of them, and one day my grandmother was sitting resting her legs by putting them on the floor and Flossie, who my grandmother had thought was safely out of the room, came from under a table with one of her oldest kittens and began to teach him how to bite my grandmother's ankles. Since it is one of her cardinal principles never to have a cat killed, and never to dismiss one for any but a very adequate reason, my grandmother, who of course had no sort of proof against Flossie, went on sitting with her feet underneath her. However, Flossie finally made her mistake, and one day, in a fine jovial spirit, came running into a room and, mistaking my father for my grandmother, took a sizable piece out of his shin.

After Flossie was gone, my grandmother began to have trouble with the one kitten we had kept, a yellow half-Persian named Creampuff. Creampuff's approach tended more toward the psychological breakdown. He would leave the room pointedly whenever my grandmother entered, glancing over his shoulder with his lip curled as he left. If Creampuff was quietly eating in the kitchen and my grandmother came in, Creampuff would stop eating and walk out. When this had no effect except to make my grandmother lose a little weight, Creampuff began to kill flies and leave them around. Whenever my grandmother started to sit down anywhere, she would find seven or eight dead flies on the chair. One day I was sitting by the piano while my grandmother played and sang and Creampuff came into the room. He had not seen my grandmother, apparently, and she was delighted to think that he might be ready to make friends with her. "I'll just keep on singing," she said to me in a hurried whisper, "and you tell me what he does." So my grandmother went on singing "I passed by your window," and I watched Creampuff. He wandered around the room for a while, and then I noticed that all the time he was watching my grandmother out of the corner of his eye. Suddenly he jumped up on the piano bench, just as my grandmother reached “To bid you good morning, good morning, my dear,” and was quavering on the high note. After one pained glance at my grandmother, Creampuff moved up onto the music stand and began killing flies. He waited until they landed on the music and then smashed them. My grandmother, torn between artistic integrity and absolute fury, finally left the room herself, upon which Creampuff grinned evilly at me, knocked the music off the stand, and went out of our lives. I don’t know whatever happened to him; apparently he felt that his work in our house was finished.

After that my father put his foot down, and for a while there were no more cats in our house. Things went along quietly, no internal strife; my mother got herself a little dog, which became very fond of my grandmother, and used to come to her to have its stomach scratched.

Then one day I let a kitten follow me home, and it started again, worse than before. I named the kitten Nick, and since my grandmother was out of town the weekend I found him, he had time to make himself at home and adapt himself to the dog. He appeared to be a dear, lovable little kitten, until my grandmother walked in the front door. “Oh, a *kitten!”* my grandmother shrieked. “Wuz e a tweet ‘ittle ting.” Nick made a cat noise in his throat and charged. My grandmother, who had been bending over to look Nick in the eye, lost a good part of her coiffure.

From that time on, Nick turned into the prize of all our cats. He developed an attitude toward my grandmother that made Flossie and Creampuff seem like amateurs, and this time my grandmother lost her noncombatant bearing and tore into Nick, giving as good as she got. When Nick found a secret passageway through the furnace gratings that would lead him into my grandmother’s room when she had all her doors and windows closed, and used this passageway to sneak in at night and jump up and down on her stomach, my grandmother filled the bathtub full of lukewarm water and dropped Nick in. Once my grandmother made a cake and left it, freshly iced, on the kitchen table to cool, and Nick walked around the top of it, making a pretty design. That time my grandmother caught Nick and put him under a dishpan turned upside down on the floor, and then she sat beside it and beat on the top with a spoon. It got so none of us were surprised when we would see Nick racing around the house and my grandmother after him with a broom.

"I think your grandmother's losing her mind, young woman," my mother said to me.

"Nick means no harm," I said.

"Your grandmother's plotting evil," my mother said.

When my brother ran the family car into a telephone pole, my grandmother was heard to say darkly that it was plainly more of that cat's doing, and then one morning the doorbell rang and my grandmother opened the door and a very small yellow bird was sitting on the porch. "What do *you* want?" my grandmother asked, but before the bird had a chance to answer, Nick, obviously concluding that this was a friend of my grandmother's, hurried out of the door and captured the bird, which he took away with him. My grandmother, looking very thoughtful, went out and bought a canary in a cage, which she presented to my mother. A few days later my grandmother rushed into the bedroom, where my mother was quietly teaching me how to make buttonholes, and screamed: "Hurry, that cat is after the canary, I always knew it!" My mother and I rushed downstairs, my mother armed with a darning *egg*, and found Nick on top of the canary's cage. The canary was swinging back and forth, caroling tenderly to Nick, who was eating the lettuce that my mother had put between the cage bars. My grandmother was staggered for a minute, but finally she recovered herself enough to point accusingly at Nick, who was watching her comfortably, with a little piece of lettuce hanging out of his mouth, and said dramatically: “Didn’t I always say so? A born thief!”

Later on my grandmother went to bed with a cold cloth on her head, and my mother and I settled the question of Nick.

“Young woman, either that cat leaves this house, or I will not be responsible for your grandmother,” my mother said.

“Possibly there is someone I could give him to, someone we don’t know very well,” I said. “Someone who doesn’t come here very often.”

“I’ll speak to your father,” my mother said. We both knew that my grandmother would never allow herself to be intimidated by a cat; either there had to be a good and sufficient reason for Nick to go, *or* my grandmother would fight it out on her home grounds until something gave. Apparently my mother spoke to my father; the next morning when she went up to see how my grandmother was feeling, she told my grandmother that Nick and my father had had a run-in, and Nick was leaving.

“Give him to me,” my grandmother said. “I’ve been thinking of leaving myself.”

“You want him?” my mother said, astounded.

“Think I’d let a fine cat like that go out of the family?” my grandmother said.

My grandmother and Nick went south for a while; we had weekly bulletins from my grandmother, saying that Nick had run away, Nick had bitten a train conductor, Nick had torn up all the hotel pillows, Nick had fallen into the ocean, Nick had hurt his paw in a fight with a crocodile (this was a subject to which we could never persuade my grandmother to return; she said she didn’t like to think about it), Nick was tired of traveling and they were coming home. They came home, my grandmother vigorous and brown, Nick thinner and looking rather tired.

“Traveling agrees with us,” said my grandmother, “doesn’t it, Nicky-boy?” She pulled Nick’s ear affectionately. Nick purred.

Nick soon afterward died as a result of a run-in with a Chevrolet, and my grandmother got another cat, a sleek black creature with an angel face.

“Tough, isn’t he?” said my grandmother when she brought him home. She had named him Mo after my grandfather. It soon developed that Mo was an eccentric; he lived entirely on salmon and cantaloupe; when cantaloupe was out of season he would eat strawberries. He used to sleep on the stairs, on the top stair but one. This led to a tiff with my brother, who used to come rushing in through the front door and up the stairs as fast as he could, and every time my brother started up the stairs fast, Mo would sit up and yawn just as my brother came to him, and my brother would trip.

One day my brother came in through the front door fast, and, suddenly remembering Mo, stopped and looked to see if Mo was there. Mo was. So my brother turned around to my grandmother, who was sitting in the living room knitting a hat for my father, and said that this time he was going to teach that cat a thing or two. Then my brother walked slowly up the stairs and picked Mo up and brought him downstairs and set him on the floor. With Mo sitting at the foot of the stairs watching, my brother walked up the stairs very carefully, and then turned around and walked down. “See, I didn’t fall once,” he said to Mo. He tried it once more, walking up very slowly and then down again. Then he said to Mo: “Okay, watch this.” And he went outside the front door and then slammed it open, running in and up the stairs, and he got halfway up and he tripped and fell flat on his face. Mo sat down below with a serious expression, watching my brother lying there talking to himself. Then, still without speaking to Mo, my brother came down the stairs and turned around and raced up again as fast as he could go, and this time Mo ran, too, and he beat my brother to the top and my brother tripped over him and fell again.

My grandmother came out into the hall and asked pleasantly: “Fall down, dear?” Mo came walking down and followed my grandmother out into the kitchen, where she gave him a dish of strawberries, and my brother put his head through the banisters and lay there groaning until my mother came and picked him up.

My grandmother finally broke Mo’s spirit. She first tied a ribbon around his neck; when this didn’t seem to work, she put a bell on the ribbon. She explained to me that this also made him a good watch-cat; he could not endure having anyone come into the house without seeing if he could do something to them, and if he moved, my grandmother, who was a light sleeper from the time when Nick used to jump up and down on her stomach — my grandmother would hear the bell and come down to get the burglars. This would probably have worked out very well, but unfortunately Mo had a fit because every time he tried to sleep the bell would ring.

My grandmother seemed very put out when Mo died.

“I always used to feel safe with him in the house,” she said wistfully. “Much safer than I did with your grandfather.”

MAYBE IT WAS THE CAR

MAYBE IT WAS THE car. Or maybe it was the tree with elm blight, or the bathtub leaking again, or the laundry being late, or the thought of hamburger again tonight, or maybe after all it was the student of my husband's who asked me, wide-eyed and innocent, "How is your painting going?" When I told her the only painting I have done in twenty years was the lawn chairs, she stared, and frowned, and said, "But I thought you were supposed to be a painter." "I am supposed to be a writer," I told her with a certain tautness. "Funny," she said. "I always thought you were a painter. What kind of writing do you do?"

"Am I supposed to be a writer?" I asked my husband that evening.

"What?" he said. "I said, am I supposed to be a writer?" "I guess so," he said. "Why?" "I thought I was supposed to be a painter," I said.

"I don't understand anything you say anymore," he said. "How long till dinner?"

The car is new. It is a tiny English convertible, black and dancing and winsome. The children named it Toro at once because it has a picture of a bull on the steering wheel. I would rather be driving around in Toro than broiling hamburgers again tonight; I left my husband sitting in the living room reading the evening paper and went out into the kitchen and sat on my high stool in the corner and looked out at Toro parked in the driveway. My daughter had broken the zipper in her skirt. The rosebush I had planted by the porch was clearly not going to grow. I am a writer, I said to myself in the corner of the kitchen. I am a writer and here I sit broiling hamburgers. The dog had been down at the brook rolling in the mud again.

In a house with several thousand phonograph records, of all sizes and ages and speeds and degrees of loudness, I own two. One is a record of various music boxes playing. The other is a record of bullfight music. I went upstairs and borrowed one of the children's record players and brought it down to the kitchen and got my two records and put on the one where the steam calliope plays "The Sidewalks of New York." "Mother's gone batty again," my older son said to his father in the living room. "I wonder what she'll do this time."

"Everything," my husband said obscurely, "is either true or false or one of your mother's delusions."

"I wish she'd put on the bullfight music," my son said. "That calliope makes me nervous."

"The last time she played bullfight music we had vegetable soup four nights running," my husband said.

"You ought to take us out to dinner more," my son said.

"Usually after she's played the music boxes she goes up and cleans out the linen closet or sometimes she goes and reads the letters I used to write her when we were in college." My husband's voice shook.

"I just wish she'd put on the bullfight music," my son said.

I got off my stool and went into the living room. "Listen," I said, "am I a writer or am I a middle-aged housewife?"

"Oh, Lord," my son said, and my husband said, "A writer, dear. A writer."

"Yes indeed," my son said.

I went out the back door and down the steps and got into Toro. I could see my husband and my son looking out the living room window at me, and my daughter came to the window of her room upstairs and said, "Are you going out? Wait a minute till I put on another skirt and I'll come with you."

"You stay here and cook the hamburgers," I said. "There's ice cream in the freezer for dessert."

"Where are you going?" she asked me.

"I'm running away," I said. "I shall probably go out west and fight Indians."

"Again?" she said. "I thought you were playing the music boxes."

"Someday you will hear of me again," I said. "I will be running a bar in Singapore, or selling newspapers on a street corner in Algiers, or maybe a little old lady will come up to you many years from now and peer into your face and ask if you remember your mother and it will be me."

"Oh," she said. "Well, have a nice time."

I backed the car down the driveway and turned and headed out of town. It was five-thirty in the afternoon, very warm, and the country road was fresh and green. I am a writer, I told myself sternly, not someone who cooks and cleans and mends zippers. I am running away. I drove for about twenty miles and went through half a dozen small towns, but they were too close to home; I knew them all, knew the stores and houses and even some of the people. I have to go farther, I thought; I do not often go east, so I took the first road going east. It was a poor road, and got progressively less familiar, so I followed it until I came to an intersection and then turned south. By the time I had gone forty miles I could not recognize anything I passed, but it was getting dark. I came to a little town that had a sign saying "Settled 1684." There was a broad village green, and a handsome old colonial building called the Colonial Inn, and all around there were split-level ranch houses and glass-brick stores. I will stop here, I thought, and drove to the parking lot of the inn.

When I came into the lobby there was a dining room on my right named The Old Cow Shed and a bar on my left named The Trough. I went up to the desk and asked the lady there, who wore necklaces of copper beads, if I could get a room. She looked at me carefully and said, “Aren’t you from around here somewhere?”

“No,” I said. “I’m from Rio de Janeiro. I’m just passing through.”

“I thought I seen you at the A and P supermarket,” she said.

“No,” I said, “I’m a tourist.”

“Funny,” she said. “Must of been someone else.”

“Yep,” I said.

“Going to stay long?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “I may get an emergency call from my boss. The old man. Secret service work, you know.”

“Oh,” she said again. “Maybe you’ll recommend the inn when you go on?”

“Most certainly,” I said. *“Muy bono.”*

“All you Mexicans are rich, aren’t you?”

“Oil,” I said, and signed the little card she gave me. I signed it “Mrs. Pancho Villa” because I knew perfectly well she had seen me at the supermarket. She looked at it and said, “Glad to have you with us, Room Three,” and gave me a key. I climbed the little narrow stairway and found Room 3, which had a fine old colonial spool bed and a modern maple desk. I combed my hair and washed my face and went down the stairs again and outside, and found a drugstore, where I bought a toothbrush, three mystery stories, and a box of caramels. Then I went back to the inn and went into The Old Cow Shed, and a hostess with her hair in pigtails found me a table in the corner. I ordered two daiquiris in memory of Rio, and a filet mignon. Three times the hostess came by and asked me if everything was all right, and each time I said yes, fine. I read a mystery story while I had my dinner, and with my coffee I had a drambuie. Then I went upstairs and got into the colonial spool bed and read my mystery story until I fell asleep, about nine-thirty.

When I woke up it was seven in the morning, and I went downstairs and into The Old Cow Shed and ate waffles and sausage. Then I paid my bill and went and got Toro out of the parking lot and drove down the main street of the town. Just at the edge of the town there was a cottage for sale and I stopped Toro and got out. The cottage had a big garden with a white picket fence around it, and a path of stepping-stones and a little gabled roof. While I stood at the gate looking, a man came around from the back and nodded at me. “Morning,” he said. “Nice little house, ain’t she?”

“Yes,” I said. “Very nice.”

“Good foundations. New roof. All new heating system. Storm windows.”

“How many rooms?”

“Five. Three down, two up. Modern kitchen.”

“No,” I said, “it’s too big.”

“Too big for what?”

“Too big for me. I want only one room.”

He shrugged. “Some people like a lot of space,” he said.

“Not me. I’m a writer.”

“A writer? Like on TV?”

“No,” I said.

“Wouldn’t of thought so,” he said. “Would have figured you for someone with a family. Kids, you know. Baking pies and cakes and cookies. Would have said right off you were a good cook.”

“I’m a writer.”

“All right,” he said. “So the house is too big for you.”

“I was only looking anyway.”

“No harm done,” he said.

I got into Toro and drove off, back the twenty miles till I got to places I recognized, and then back twenty miles more home. When I came in they were sitting at the kitchen table having lunch. My daughter had made a shrimp salad and hot biscuits. “Hello,” they said. “Have a nice time?”

“Sure,” I said.

“Ninki had her kittens in the laundry basket,” my daughter said.

“Something’s gone wrong with the collar on my white shirt,” my husband said.

“The garage called,” my son said. “They said the vacuum cleaner wasn’t worth fixing and you ought to get a new one.”

“We put your records away,” my daughter said. “Dad ate three hamburgers and the sole is coming off my sandal, the white one.”

“Where did you go?” my husband asked me.

“I don’t know,” I said. “Around the world.”

LOVERS MEETING

IT COULD NOT HAVE been accident, or a dream, or the quick small betrayal of the mind that caused her to hear the music; she knew that she had not turned on the radio, or put a record on the phonograph, and yet she heard it, clear and sweet and incredibly distinct, the words soft in her ear: “What’s to come is still unsure, in delay there lies no plenty…”

So began the lonely, long terrible night that Phyllis spent in an adventure that ended… but first, to how it began. It began tidily, for Phyllis was a logical girl. She took fresh gloves, she tied her hair in a knot, she put a handkerchief in her purse. But she went out of the apartment without turning out any lights, and she did not look behind.

If she heard the footsteps when she left the apartment, she did not notice them particularly, or perhaps they merged perfectly with the sharp sound of her own high-heeled shoes going down the corridor; at any rate, it was not until she stepped out into the lonely street, walking easily and consciously and proudly, that she heard the sound of steps behind her, coming as surely along the street as she herself, and carrying with them the echo of the song… “What’s to come is still unsure…”

Without surprise if not without fear she walked on. She walked quick and quicker, tense and alert. There were other sounds and she was aware of them, but also aware that she *knew* they were there though she heard nothing. Nothing except the following feet. And she walked without pause, yearning for the song to go on. The song said unsure, but it was sure, it was, it would be. *He* knows. So she walked through streets with crowds, faceless crowds, silent except for his feet.

If he is following me, she thought, trying to keep her mind level, reasonable, if he is, *could* he be, following me, is it because he is trying to tell me what to do? Am I doing wrong? Am I walking toward something I should be running away from? Or should I be running away from *him?* Wondering, she only just stopped in time at the street corner, and saw almost without surprise that the taxi driver sitting in his car at the corner was gesturing to her and calling, “Lady, lady.”

“Yes,” she whispered. “Yes. Certainly.” Her lips formed the syllables carefully, consciously. She bent from the waist, stiffly. And looked at him. A familiar face, she thought. “Yes, fa—” Then she touched the cab’s cold metal and the face changed. “This is no street for you to walk alone,” the driver said. So she got into the cab, without looking back, and sat in the middle of the seat. “The bar,” she directed. “Which bar, lady?” “Why, why, the Zanzibar! Of course.”

The driver looked at her fleetingly in the mirror, and then back at the traffic again; the cab pulled out into the middle of the street and merged into the line of cars going uptown. “Lady,” the driver said finally, “mind if I take you somewhere else? I mean, usually my fares tell me where they want to go and I take them there” — he laughed briefly, humorlessly— “but this time, lady, I really think you better let me take you somewhere else. At least, try to shake him off; he’s still following.”

The words clashed in her against those other words. The words did not fit. These sounds meant, why they meant there was someone who would say, “Hello, Phyllis, hello. Stop, it’s Jack. I wanted to ask you to go to a concert.” But that wasn’t it, that couldn’t be it. “… What’s to come is still unsure.” All right, my girl, she told herself. We’ll see. We’ll just see who will win. “Driver,” she said. “Go ahead, lose him, lose him if you can.”

“Right, lady,” the driver said. The cab picked up speed, moving gradually over toward the curb and then suddenly, unexpectedly, turned against a red light and sped the wrong way down a one-way street. “If I get a ticket for this,” the driver said, “you can have it, lady.” He turned the wheel hard and they were going downtown again, and no car had turned out of the one-way street behind them. Phyllis, shaken from the quick turning, almost laughed, in the back of the cab, to think that she and a friendly taxi driver were running from… running from… “How did you know anyone was following me?” she demanded suddenly, and the driver, looking at her quickly in the mirror again, said succinctly, “Saw him.” “Saw who?” Phyllis asked. The taxi pulled to the curb and stopped. “You’re okay now, lady,” the driver said. “This is where we stop.” He waved away the bill that Phyllis offered him. “Not from you, lady,” he said. “I’d just as soon not take anything from you.”

So he knew. She walked again. She skipped a little. She hummed. “La ci darem la mano…” And the melody fitted itself again to the voice inside. Goddamn. Goddamngoddamngoddamni. She let her pace break. Nothing could stop it now. Soon she would find it. It would open in front of her like a toy shop and she would go in and it would be like clouds of lilacs. And he would be in armor, damn it. And she laughed at her own audacity. Then she was at the door. A tall footman in wine-red velvet said, “How many, lady.” And she answered, “One.”

One. Why might she not buy two, seven, fifty-four, the whole great building with its lights and its flashing words and the tall red-velvet footman who bowed to her and smiled courteously as she passed; why might she not wander down the dark aisle alone, owning all she could not see? She knew abruptly that it was necessary for her to leave, go home perhaps, but not stay here, where the tall red-velvet footman bowed to her and smiled again as she passed him going out, as though he had not just seen her going in… and then he touched her gently on the shoulder and she half turned, conscious of quick movement behind her. “Pardon, madam,” the footman said, his voice very soft as befitted the voice of a man who spent all day on the immense threshold of recorded sound, “Pardon, but you had better hurry. You are being followed. If you choose, you may leave by the side entrance.” He bowed and smiled impersonally, and added, “But hurry. Please, please hurry.”

She nodded and moved past him. She felt his eyes follow her until she turned and went up the stair to where his eyes could not follow and again she could hear the steps. They were soft on the carpet, but quite distinct. And the music, too. And now she sauntered. On the left was a tall mirror misted as an old woman’s eye. And on the right wall a man regarding her with humor. “You certainly came just in time, so far,” he said. “Go to the end of the corridor and wait there.” So she went on and through the curtain, where for the moment she could not see, she heard, “Hurry, hurry, there’s just time.”

“Hurry, hurry,” the voice from the enormous screen picked up and mocked her, but the voice was wrong and the music was different. She went quickly, without consciousness of the darkness, down the aisle toward a door surmounted by a red sign saying “Exit,” opened it somehow, and slipped through. She went clumsily but quickly down the open steel stairway without looking back, and, once in the street, almost ran, because the footsteps were still behind her. She reached the corner just as a bus pulled up, and the bus driver opened the door for her, leaned forward to give her a hand as she stepped in. “I’m going home,” she said to him helplessly, and he nodded, without looking at her, and said, “I should think so. We’ll get you there as fast as we can.” She opened her pocketbook to find change, and the bus driver put his hand over the money box and said, “Never mind. I don’t want it.” He started the bus and she moved back to find a seat. The bus was nearly full and she went almost to the back and sat down next to an old lady whose lap was piled high with bundles. The old lady smiled at her over the bundles and said, “Poor dear. We all saw it.” “I’m going home,” Phyllis said, and the old lady said, “Of course you are, dear. I think it’s a shame. He should be arrested, *I* think. People like that.” She craned her neck to see out the window past the bundles, and clicked her tongue reprovingly. “And there he is still,” she said. “Following right along.”

Phyllis offered a strained grin that she meant for a smile and said nothing. “Let them try,” she muttered. It will be mine now. They know and they think I am afraid. Let them try to get me away. When I get home and can sit still I’ll have it all to myself. It will sing for me like a copper whistling kettle.

And she stepped out at the side door swiftly as the vehicle stopped, while the old woman leaned over whispering to the driver and the other passengers lifted themselves in their seats to look after her. And she went on, hardly feeling the pavement, toward home.

Did the footsteps still follow? She almost ran down the dark street toward home, but stopped suddenly; was that one last footstep, unable to stop as soon as she? “What’s to come is still unsure,” came sweetly and distinctly to her, and she began to run again. The door of her apartment house opened to her push, and she ran across the lobby, debated as she ran over to the elevator, and decided on the stairs. She ran up (was that a footstep on the marble of the stairs behind her?) past the landing on the first floor onto the stairs to the second floor, up to the third and down the corridor to her own apartment. Hastily, fumbling, she found her key and put it into the lock, opened the door and slammed it shut behind her, closed the bolt, and leaned breathless against the cool, safe wood. Ahead of her, at the far end of the room against the windows, a shape rose up in the darkness from the heavy chair. “You took long enough getting here,” he said.

Nodding, she went to the mirror. She let down her hair and brushed it. She took up the vial. “Such a tiny glass” she said. “No, plenty,” he answered. “There lies their lies.” The music swelled. “Drink. In delay there lies no plenty… In delay there lies repentance… What’s to come is sweet and sure…”

MY RECOLLECTIONS OF S. B. FAIRCHILD

TWO AND A HALF years ago my husband and I decided that for our fifteenth anniversary we would give ourselves a tape recorder. We believed that with a tape recorder we could preserve, permanently, the small, shrill voices of our children and, with the further record taken with the movie camera, preserve fond memories against the future. We thought sentimentally of sitting in an evening, gray, worn, palsied, and blessedly alone, watching as the projector reeled off endless series of pictures of our children dancing, swimming, shooting off fireworks, playing baseball, and taking their first faltering steps, and listening at the same time to their recorded voices reciting “The Night Before Christmas” and singing “Three Blind Mice.”

The glories of a tape recorder were suggested to us, first, by an ad in the Sunday paper, pointing out that a big store in New York where we had a charge account, was selling “reconditioned” tape recorders for ninety-nine dollars and ninety-nine cents, a saving, the ad pointed out, of almost forty percent. Although we observed that ninety-nine dollars and ninety-nine cents was as close to a hundred dollars as made no difference, and was surely an extravagantly large sum to be lavished on nothing but a fifteenth anniversary, we were seduced into believing that a hundred dollars was little enough, after all, to pay for the pleasure of hearing our children’s voices in years to come, when we sat in front of our home movie screen. I wrote to the store in New York, which was called Fairchild’s, and ordered the tape recorder, asking that the ninety-nine dollars and ninety-nine cents be charged to our account.

Since we had already ordered, that month, some coin books for my husband and a box of chocolate apples, our monthly bill, which arrived some days before the tape recorder, was a hundred and eleven dollars and fifty-three cents. When the tape recorder arrived I had to pay three dollars and seventeen cents express charges. The tape recorder was in a kind of wooden crate, and when my husband came home he and our older son had to use hammers and a screwdriver to take apart the wooden crate and get the tape recorder out. Although there was a book of directions tucked inside the tape recorder, there was no tape, and while my husband and our son read the book of directions and examined the various pushbuttons and spools, I went into town to the music store and bought a package of tape recorder tape. It cost me five dollars and ninety-five cents, and the man in the music store, whom I have known for several years, was quite snippity about our buying a tape recorder from a store in New York instead of doing business through him.

All during dinner my husband and the children discussed the tape recorder, and after dinner the children retired to their bedrooms, where they practiced privately the several songs and recitations they planned to record on the tape recorder, so they could be safely stored away until the distant future day when their father and I could finally sit down for a few minutes and play over our memories. After the dinner dishes were done, we called all the children downstairs into the study and they waited, giggling and coughing nervously, while their father reread the book of directions and got the tape recorder ready to record. Everyone kept telling everyone else to be quiet. Our older son with his trumpet recorded one chorus of “Tin Roof Blues,” and the baby half whispered a little tuneless thing he greatly fancied, called “Riding with an Engineer.” Our younger daughter sang, loudly and with great attention to enunciation, a song about visiting a candy shop, and our older daughter chose to record a ballad she had learned from her grandfather, called “Your Baby Has Gone Down the Drainpipe (He Should Have Been Bathed in a Jug).” When we played back the tape, all the children were first astonished and then amused, and everyone wanted to record something else. My husband’s voice was on the tape saying that unless everyone was quiet he would not record anything at all, and my voice was on the tape saying that did everyone hear what Daddy just said? because the next child to snicker would leave the room.

We played our tape over several times, and quite a few times after that for people who dropped in, and the children asked to have it played for their friends, and we played it to their grandparents over the phone. We were quite pleased with our recording, and thought we would record more when the children, particularly the baby, had learned new numbers. However, one evening when we were playing the tape for some friends of ours who had dropped in for a bridge game (and that, as it turned out, was the evening when the nine of spades disappeared so unaccountably in the middle of the second rubber and has not come back yet) the tape machine gave a kind of agonized groan, sang “ — has gone down the drain—” and stopped. My husband and our guests fussed over it for a while, but nothing could persuade it to sing another note.

The next day my husband and older son carried the tape recorder out to the car and I drove it into town to the music store. The man in the music store and one of his clerks carried it into their repair shop and I told them how we had been playing our tape and the machine had stopped. They promised to check it over and see if it needed oiling or some such thing, and the man in the music store said that since I had not bought it there he would have to charge me for the overhaul; if I had bought the machine from him, he explained, he could have fixed it free of charge under his regular service guarantee, but since I had bought it somewhere else I would have to pay a regular repair bill. I said that was all right, it was no more than I deserved for buying it from the store in New York, and the music man said he certainly hoped I had learned a good lesson.

About three days later he telephoned me and said he could not repair the tape recorder. It had clearly, he said, been sent out by mistake, a mistake which of course could not happen with a machine bought locally. The tape recorder had not only never been reconditioned, but it had been used to death and then either dropped from a great height or stomped on by an elephant. It was a miracle, he said, that we had been able to get any result out of it at all. The one partial tape we had made was surely all we were ever going to have from this machine. He would not undertake to repair the tape recorder; he and his mechanic had taken it apart, and they would now put it back together again the way they found it, but they would not try to repair it. He suggested that since it had clearly been sent out by the New York store in error — at least, he hoped it was an error, although if I had gotten a tape recorder from him I would have been *sure* that if he said it was reconditioned that *meant* it was reconditioned — since, then, it was some kind of mistake, I must send it back to New York and let them take care of it.

I drove into town and the man in the music store and his mechanic carried the tape recorder out and put it into the car and I brought it home and my husband and our older son carried it into the house and put it on the dining room table. When I told my husband what the man in the music store had said about the tape recorder he was highly indignant and said I must certainly send it back and write in a complaint besides.

We had dinner on the kitchen table because the tape recorder was on the dining room table, and after the dinner dishes were done I sat down and wrote a letter to Fairchild's, explaining all that had happened, and stressing the conviction of the man in the music store that the machine had been sent out by mistake. I said that naturally we intended to send the tape recorder back, and what did Fairchild's suggest? I received an immediate answer, signed S. B. Fairchild. He said that I must put the tape recorder back into the crate, and send it to them express prepaid, and he was sorry that we had not decided whether or not we really wanted a tape recorder before we ordered it, because constant return of merchandise was a nuisance to the purchaser and to the store. I wrote S. B. Fairchild and said that the tape recorder was broken, that I had already paid the express charges for the tape recorder coming, and that anyway I could not possibly get the tape recorder back into the original wooden crate because it had been wholly dismantled when we took the tape recorder out and the children had used the pieces of wood for a lion cage. S. B. Fairchild wrote back and said it was a standing policy of Fairchild's not to pay express charges on return merchandise and if the tape recorder were not crated it could not be sent back. If I had thoughtlessly broken the original crate I must get a new crate. Fairchild's, S. B. Fairchild pointed out, did not encourage customers who ordered merchandise wantonly and returned it heedlessly; this caused expense to both the customer and the store.

I wrote back that in our town handicraft is at a premium and the only way I could get a new crate was by paying to have one made, and that would cost me several dollars. S. B. Fairchild wrote back suggesting that I keep the tape recorder, then, since I had wanted it enough to order it in the first place.

S. B. Fairchild's obvious conviction, that my eyes were bigger than my stomach, irritated me so much that I wrote back a fairly tart letter saying that the tape recorder was Fairchild's responsibility and not mine, and that I personally no longer shared the sanguine opinion of the man in the music store, but felt that Fairchild’s had deliberately sent me a faulty tape recorder, figuring to make a profit on what they could rake off on crating and express charges. S. B. Fairchild, clearly misreading my letter from beginning to end, wrote back that the policy of a small profit on many items had been a foundation of the Fairchild Organization since 1863.

I was trying to think of a way to answer Fairchild’s letter, when a friend of ours called to say that they were driving down to New York at the end of the week, and could they do any errands for us? I said well, yes, they certainly could; would they mind taking a tape recorder back to Fairchild’s for us? After some hesitation my friend said well, she guessed they could and I said I would bring the tape recorder right over. My husband and our older son carried the tape recorder out to the car and I drove it over to my friend’s house and we got two men who were sanding the driveway to come and carry the tape recorder and put it in the luggage compartment of my friend’s car. I gave the two men who were sanding the driveway a dollar. By way of thanks to our friends for taking the tape recorder down to New York, I got their young son an electric clock-making set, which cost four ninety-five, and he made a nice electric clock and put it in his bedroom. We were able to give up the kitchen table and start having dinner in the dining room again.

Our friends were in New York for a week, and when they came back they brought me a receipt from Fairchild’s for the tape recorder. They had not been able to carry it any farther than a desk on the main floor of Fairchild’s, they said, although the department where articles were to be returned was on the ninth floor. They had not been, they said, equal to carrying the tape recorder up nine escalators. Consequently, they had left the tape recorder in charge of a floorwalker on the main floor, and had gotten a receipt from him for its return. The receipt said that the tape recorder had been returned to the repair shop, and when I said it was to have been returned for ever and ever, they explained that the only counters on the main floor where you could put anything down at all were the repair counter and the wrapping desk. They had not thought I would like having the tape recorder left at the wrapping desk, and in order to accept the tape recorder at all the floorwalker had had to give them a repair receipt, unless they could figure a way to get the tape recorder up the nine escalators to the desk on the ninth floor where things were returned. The floorwalker explained that as long as the tape recorder was just being carried aimlessly around the store by people with no official standing at Fairchild's, it could be transported only by escalator, but as soon as he had formally accepted the tape recorder in Fairchild's name he could put it right on the freight elevator. They said that the floorwalker said that all I needed to do was write to the store explaining the situation and everyone, the floorwalker said, would be satisfied.

I thanked our friends and read over the receipt, which said that a tape recorder had been accepted for repair. Then I wrote Fairchild's a long and civil letter, recounting the scene of the return of the tape recorder, and stressing the floorwalker's acceptance of full responsibility. I carefully copied out all the numbers on the receipt, and filed the receipt itself away in the box where I keep recipes and guarantees and the instructions for using the electric mixer.

Because we had in the meantime ordered from Fairchild's a party dress for our younger daughter and a kitchen stool, our next monthly bill was for a hundred and thirty-two dollars and sixty-one cents. I was puzzled, and wrote Fairchild's, asking why the returned tape recorder was still on our bill. I pointed out that I had written them two weeks before, explaining about the return of the tape recorder, and had naturally assumed that since I received no answer to my letter I would find the price of the tape recorder deducted from my bill.

Under pressure from the children, who wanted to hear themselves singing again, my husband and I bought a new tape recorder, considerably more expensive, from the man in the music store. It worked beautifully. We recorded our older son playing "Royal Garden Blues" on the trumpet, our younger daughter singing a fairly one-dimensional song about tulips and sunshine, our older daughter doing something called "Who Strangled Old Man Gratton (with a Wire)?" which she learned from her grandfather, and the baby singing "Riding with an Engineer."

I ordered three boxes of initialed stationery and a box of expensive bath powder from Fairchild's, and our next month's bill was a hundred and sixty dollars and four cents. I wrote Fairchild's asking why the tape recorder — returned, I pointed out, two months ago — was still not deducted from our bill, and received no answer. My husband, who had not been able to decide what to do the month before, concluded that ignoring the tape recorder was the best idea, and he sent Fairchild's a check for sixty dollars and five cents, deducting the ninety-nine dollars and ninety-nine cents for the tape recorder. Fairchild's sent us a receipted bill, pointing out that there was a balance of ninety-nine dollars and ninety-nine cents still due. Would we clear this off their books, they asked, or at least pay them part of it? I wrote back a letter saying "See Enclosed" and enclosing a copy of the letter I had written them before.

By now we had begun to perceive that the receipt signed by the floorwalker was a very precious paper, and I took it out of the box of recipes and gave it to my husband and he put it into his desk in the envelope where he kept the copy of our mortgage and the preliminary listings for his income tax statements. I wrote another department store in New York, one just as big as Fairchild's, and opened an account *there*, ordering a toy train for the baby's birthday and a new kind of pencil sharpener, so our next monthly bills included a bill for eight dollars and forty cents from the new department store, and a bill from Fairchild's for ninety-nine dollars and ninety-nine cents, with a little slip pasted on the bottom of the bill asking if we would PLEASE ignore the above account no longer. My husband wrote a check to pay the bill of the second department store and threw away the bill from Fairchild's.

About three weeks later my husband and I went out one evening to play bridge and when we got home the baby-sitter told us, blushing, that there had been a telegram phoned in; she had taken a copy of it; the message, she said, edging toward the door, was on my husband's desk. The telegram said that unless we paid our long overdue account at Fairchild's Department Store the store would start legal proceedings, and it was signed S. B. Fairchild. The baby-sitter said nervously that it was *perfectly* all right, we didn't need to pay her for tonight, because she knew what it was to run short of money and she hoped that everything was going to be all right. My husband, who was beginning to get a little purple in the face, took out his wallet with his hands shaking and insisted upon paying her double. I said it was fantastic, that we didn't owe that store a cent, and she said of *course* we didn't, and it was a shame that people like that would never even give you a little time to get the money together.

The next morning the baby-sitter's mother called me to say sympathetically that under the circumstances she supposed I would want to cut down a little on my usual contribution to the School Band Booster Drive. When I went down to the store that afternoon the grocer said that he supposed I knew by now that some people were always thinking about money they had due them, but he wasn't one of them, and if I wanted to let my bill go this month he wouldn't say a word. The boy who delivers the afternoon paper wheeled his bike around and raced off before I could pay him his weekly thirty cents, calling back over his shoulder that it was all right, pay him when it was convenient.

Our mail the next morning included a letter from the baby-sitter's uncle. I knew it was from her uncle because his picture was in the upper left-hand corner, smiling broadly and pointing a finger at the legend across the top of the page, which said "YES! I am a fellow who WANTS to lend you money! Your FINANCIAL worries are OVER, and I mean *OVER!"* Among our bills, which came a day or so later, were a bill from Fairchild's for ninety-nine dollars and ninety-nine cents and a bill from the telephone company with an item for one dollar and sixty-nine cents for a collect telegram from Fairchild's. I called the telephone company and got the night supervisor and asked what on earth gave her the notion that the telephone company could charge me for a collect telegram from Fairchild's, particularly when the telegram had been delivered without my authority to my baby-sitter. The night supervisor agreed that there was a certain injustice in expecting me to pay for such an offensive telegram, but said regretfully that she had no authority to take it off the bill; I must write to the credit manager, she said, and explain it to *him*. I asked why couldn't I telephone him? and she said that they were not allowed to use the telephone to discuss company business.

The next month I got another letter from S. B. Fairchild saying that they had been patient long enough and I must pay my long overdue account ($99.99) by return mail or suffer the consequences. I wrote Fairchild another letter saying "See Enclosed," enclosing a copy of my letter to the credit manager of the telephone company, refusing to pay charges of one dollar sixty-nine cents for a collect telegram incorrectly delivered. The next month we received a bill from Fairchild’s for ninety-nine dollars and ninety-nine cents and a letter saying that my credit everywhere would be permanently impaired so long as I neglected this outstanding account, particularly if Fairchild’s had to send a collection agency after me. I also got another letter from the baby-sitter’s uncle asking me to “BRING your TROUBLES to SOMEONE who can *HELP!”*

The next month Fairchild’s went back to the beginning and started all over again; we got the little slip of paper pasted on the bill, asking us please no longer to ignore the above account, and the month after that we got the collect telegram again; this time, fortunately, I answered the phone and refused the telegram peremptorily, since I was still corresponding with the credit manager of the telephone company over the dollar and sixty-nine cents for the first collect telegram. The following month S. B. Fairchild sent us the suffer-the-consequences letter again, and the month after that was the collection-agency one.

For our sixteenth anniversary I bought my husband a nice wallet from the second department store. The children were tired of listening to their own voices on tape, and were bothering us to get a color television set. Fairchild’s had an ad in the Sunday paper one week offering color television sets at almost thirty percent off. We told the children that they had to be patient, that color television sets did not grow on trees.

About two months later — we were in the suffer-the-consequences month again — I saw in the paper that Fairchild’s was closing out a particular line of garden chairs, which I wanted very much to buy. I wrote to them ordering three plaid-seated garden chairs, and a set of nesting wastebaskets, which had been in the same ad, and an ornamental pewter tray that I thought would be nice for my mother-in-law’s birthday, and a few days later I got a letter from S. B. Fairchild. All of the Fairchild

Organization, he told me, was shocked, grieved, and revolted at my double-dealing and deceptive tactics. Was I, after all this time, unaware that I had an outstanding debit of ninety-nine dollars and ninety-nine cents ($99.99) owing to Fairchild's Department Store? Did I think I might cavalierly overlook this obligation, sacking the noble counter of Fairchild's Department Store for merchandise for which I did not intend to pay? Indeed, no such wool was to be pulled over the eyes of S. B. Fairchild. Old and valued customer as I was, I had gone too far. My order had been cancelled by the hand of S. B. Fairchild himself; my account was closed. No nesting wastebaskets, no pewter tray, not one plaid-seated garden chair would be forthcoming from Fairchild's until I was prepared to meet my natural obligations and remit in full the sum ($99.99) long overdue to Fairchild Department Stores.

I read the letter twice and then, in an exaltation of pure fury, went to the phone and put through a call, person to person, to Mr. S. B. Fairchild, of the Fairchild Department Store in New York. I waited, gripping the phone, while the phone rang at Fairchild's, and then through the series of connections that took my call from the main switchboard to the switchboard on the eleventh floor, to the credit office line, to the telephone of the secretary, to the credit office, to the office of Mr. S. B. Fairchild, to the secretary of Mr. S. B. Fairchild, to the confidential assistant to Mr. S. B. Fairchild, to the confidential secretary of Mr. S. B. Fairchild. For a while it looked as if we were stopped dead at the confidential secretary to Mr. S. B. Fairchild, but then I said if I did not get Mr. S. B. Fairchild on my long-distance person-to-person call I would put the call through every ten minutes for the rest of the day, making every attempt to tie up all telephone lines to Fairchild's Department Store. After a minute a busy-sounding man's voice got on the phone and said, "Well? Well?"

I told him who I was and said that I was calling about my bill.

“If you’re calling about your bill you should be talking to Accounts Due,” Mr. Fairchild said. “I’m a very busy man.”

“I’m calling because you wrote me a letter,” I said.

“The Business Office—”

“I ordered a pewter tray and some nesting wastebaskets and three plaid-seated garden chairs and you said—”

“If you want to place an order you should be talking to Telephone Service,” Mr. Fairchild said. “I cannot be expected to personally handle all —”

“I want my pewter tray and my plaid-seated garden chairs.”

“Or else Personal Shoppers down on the main floor.”

“I refuse, I flatly and absolutely refuse, to pay my bill.”

“Why don’t I connect you with Complaints?” Mr. Fairchild said hopefully. “I’m a *very* busy man.”

“I answered an ad for a tape recorder—”

“All of that material goes to Ad Response. That is not *this* office.”

“But the tape recorder was broken.”

“Then you want Repairs, on the main floor near the Avenue entrance.”

“No. The tape recorder was no good. I didn’t want it.”

“Then why didn’t you send it back?”

“I *did* send it back. I sent it back nearly two years—”

“Then it’s Returns you want, on the ninth floor. I *cannot* see why all these petty problems are pushed up to *me;* I have enough to do without—”

“I have written you nineteen letters, and it has cost me, altogether, counting an electric clock-making set, nearly forty-five dollars not to get that tape recorder. Do you think there is any merchandise in your store worth forty-five dollars *not* to get?”

"Office Equipment," said Mr. Fairchild, confused. "Eighth floor."

"I insist on satisfaction," I said.

"I am sorry," he said with dignity. "Are you sure you have the right store?"

I hung up and sat down to write, once more, to Mr. Fairchild. I wrote — since it was the last time — a complete and detailed account of the entire transaction of the tape recorder. I enclosed a copy of the receipt, drawn to scale, and a note signed by the man in the music store stating that the tape recorder I had brought him to repair had clearly been sent out by mistake. I reordered the pewter tray, the nesting wastebaskets, and the plaid-seated garden chairs. I included the name and address of the friends who had brought the tape recorder to Fairchild's, and finished with a paragraph telling about how my husband and I wanted to sit quietly in years to come and listen to the voices of our children. My letter covered three pages, and when I sealed it I felt that there was nothing that needed to be added to give Mr. Fairchild the whole picture on the tape recorder. I took the letter to the post office, and said that I wanted to send it by registered mail, to ensure that it should be delivered *only* to Mr. S. B. Fairchild, at the Fairchild Department Store. The postmaster suggested that I ask for a receipt on the letter, which must be signed by the person addressed and then returned to me, so I could be sure that only the person addressed had received the letter. I paid seventy-seven cents postage.

Two days later I got back my postal receipt. In the line reading Signature of Addressee someone had written in Fairchild Department Stores. In the line underneath, which my postmaster had crossed out, there was a signature reading Jane Kelly, sec'y. At the top of the receipt was stamped DELIVER TO ADDRESSEE ONLY and at the bottom of the receipt was stamped DELIVER TO ADDRESSEE ONLY. I took the receipt over to the postmaster and showed it to him, and he was surprised.

“That’s no way to run a post office,” he said.

“What should I do?” I asked him.

“Well.” He thought. “I guess we can’t get the letter back *now,”* he said. “This secretary, whatever her name is, the one who signed it down here, *she’s* got your letter now.”

“And Mr. Fairchild won’t get it?”

“Tell you what to do,” he said. “You got to turn in a complaint on this, see? So you write a letter to *me*, postmaster here, and I’ll send it on. Then you write another letter to this here Fairchild, and I think when they get your complaint in the post office department, well, they’ll let you send the second letter for nothing.”

I went home and wrote a letter explaining what had happened, and I addressed it to our local postmaster and then I took it down to the post office and put a three-cent stamp on it and handed it to him through the window, and he cancelled the stamp and opened the letter and read it and said that was fine, he would send it right on.

One week later — not quite two years since we had first ordered the tape recorder, since our seventeenth anniversary was still nearly a month off and I was getting my husband a sword cane — I went down to pick up the mail.

There was a letter from Fairchild’s, signed S. B. Fairchild, saying that my credit everywhere would suffer if they had to turn my account over to a collection agency. There was a letter from the United States Postal Department enclosing three forms to be filled out explaining misdelivery of registered mail. There was a letter from the manager of the telephone company saying that it was against their policy to continue carrying unpaid bills, and unless charges of one dollar and sixty-nine cents were remitted, telephone service would be discontinued. There was a letter in a plain envelope from the baby-sitter's uncle asking "Money troubles got YOU down? Because I'm WAITING to HELP!" There was a letter from the repair department of Fairchild's Department Store. They were extremely sorry that repairing my tape recorder had taken a little longer than their original estimate. There had been a slight delay in getting parts. The machine was put in order now, however, and waiting for me; would I please pick it up right away? Because after ten days they would not be responsible.

DECK THE HALLS

IT WAS EIGHT O'CLOCK in the evening, Christmas Eve, and Mr. and Mrs. Williams were decorating their Christmas tree. It was the first Christmas tree they had had since they were married, but this year their little girl was two years old, and Mrs. Williams had thought that it was time they started making a real Christmas for her to remember when she grew up. Mrs. Williams had bought some ornaments at the five and ten, and a lot of little toys to hang on the tree, and Mr. Williams had brought out a kitchen chair and was standing on it, hanging things on the top branches. All of the baby's relatives and friends had sent lovely things, which Mrs. Williams intended to pile lavishly under the tree, and Mr. and Mrs. Williams had bought an enormous teddy bear, taller by a head than the baby herself, which would be the first thing she would see in the morning.

When the tree was finished, with the packages and the teddy bear underneath, Mrs. Williams stood back and looked at it, holding her breath with pleasure. "Bob," she said, "it looks lovely. Like a *dream* of Christmas."

Mr. Williams eased himself off the chair gingerly. "Looks good," he admitted.

Mrs. Williams went over and moved an ornament to a higher branch. "She'll come running into the room and we'll have it all lighted up," she said happily, "and it will be something for her to remember all year round."

"We used to have fine Christmases when I was a kid," Mr. Williams said, "all the family together, and a turkey and everything."

The doorbell rang, and Mrs. Williams went to open it. “I could only get a goose for tomorrow,” she said over her shoulder, “not many turkeys this year.” When she opened the door there were two little girls standing on the porch, snow in their hair and on their shoulders, and both looking up at her. The taller of the two was holding a folded piece of paper, which she held out to Mrs. Williams.

“My mother said to give you this,” she said to Mrs. Williams.

Mrs. Williams frowned, puzzled, looking down at the children, wondering if they lived in the neighborhood. “Come in,” she said, “don’t stand out there in the cold.” She closed the door behind the little girls, and they stood expectantly in the hall, their eyes on the Christmas tree beyond the archway into the living room. Mrs. Williams, still puzzled, opened the paper and started to read it aloud.

“Dear neighbor,” she read, “these are my two little girls. The oldest is eight years of age and the little one is five…” Mrs. Williams suddenly stopped reading aloud and shut her lips tight, reading on to herself: “If you do not want to give them anything please don’t bother, but if you do Jeanie wears a size four shoe children’s size and Helen needs something to wear to school this winter. Even if you do not give them anything, a Merry Christmas.” Mrs. Williams finished reading and looked at the children for a minute. “Bob,” she said.

Mr. Williams came out from the living room, and Mrs. Williams handed him the note and turned again to the children. “You sit down there for a minute,” she said, indicating the leather bench in the hall, “and I’m going to get you something hot to drink to warm you up, and then we’ll see what we can do about this letter of your mother’s.” She turned to the littler child. “You’re Jeanie?” The girl nodded solemnly. “Well, you just let me take your muffler off and sit you up here on this bench, and then we’ll have some lovely hot cocoa…” While she talked, Mrs. Williams had put the little girl on the bench and taken off her coat, and the older girl, watching, finally took off her coat and sat beside her sister. Mrs. Williams turned around to Mr. Williams, who was standing helplessly, holding the letter. “You amuse these youngsters,” she said, “while I run out and make some cocoa.”

The children sat on the bench looking at the Christmas tree, and Mr. Williams squatted on the floor beside them. “Well,” he said, “you’re a little bigger than my little girl, so I hardly know what to say to you…”

Mrs. Williams went out into the kitchen and put some milk on to heat while she arranged a dish of oatmeal cookies and two cups and saucers on a tray. When she had made the cocoa, she put the pot on the tray and carried it out into the hall. The littler girl was laughing at Mr. Williams, and the older girl was watching with a smile. Mr. Williams was telling them a story and Mrs. Williams waited with the cocoa while he put a quick ending on it and stood up. She handed each little girl a cup and filled it with cocoa, and then gave them each a cookie. *“That* will make you nice and warm,” she said. “Believe I’ll have some, too,” Mr. Williams said.

Mrs. Williams went back into the kitchen and got two more cups, and brought them out and filled them, and she and Mr. Williams sat on the floor drinking, and Mr. Williams made faces that made little Jeanie laugh so that she could hardly hold her cup. When she had finished her cocoa, Mrs. Williams went upstairs and got out an old coat of her own, and a couple of sweaters and a warm bathrobe. She put them in an old suitcase so the children could carry them, and tore off a page from the telephone pad and scribbled on it: “I have nothing that will fit the children, but maybe you can use these. Or you can make them over.” She slipped the note in with the clothes and came back downstairs to the children, who had begun to talk to Mr. Williams.

"The second grade," the older one was saying shyly.

"Well, isn't that fine," Mr. Williams said. "I bet you're lots smarter than Helen, though," he said to the smaller girl.

"I'm smarter than *her,"* Helen said.

The smaller girl giggled. "Old Helen has to go to school every day," she said.

When Mrs. Williams came back into the hall, Mr. Williams stood up and turned away from the children. He took out his wallet, selected a five-dollar bill, and held it up to Mrs. Williams, who nodded. Mr. Williams went over and slipped it into the older girl's hand. "Don't you lose that, now," he said. "Tell your mother that's for a Christmas present for all of you."

"Can they carry the suitcase?" Mrs. Williams asked anxiously. The older girl slipped off the bench and picked up the suitcase. Even with the coat in it, it wasn't very heavy, and she would manage it all right, Mrs. Williams thought. Mrs. Williams helped the smaller girl down off the bench and began putting her coat on again.

"Thank you very much," the older girl said to Mr. Williams.

"Nonsense," Mr. Williams said, "it's Christmastime, isn't it?" The older girl smiled and reached for the suitcase.

"Wait a minute," Mrs. Williams said. She ran in to the Christmas tree and took off a couple of candy canes, and brought them back to the children.

They accepted them silently, but suddenly Jeanie began to cry, taking her sister's hand and pointing.

The older girl looked up apologetically. "It's the teddy bear," she said. "She just saw it this minute and she's always wanted one." She tried to pull her sister to the front door, but the little girl refused to move, standing and crying.

"Poor little kid," Mr. Williams said. Mrs. Williams kneeled down beside the little girl.

"Jeanie, honey," she said, "just listen to me for a minute. The teddy bear is pretty, but it's for *my* little girl," she finished.

Jeanie stopped crying, looking up at Mrs. Williams. "Wait," Mrs. Williams said. She went back to the Christmas tree, Jeanie watching her eagerly, and took two little toys off the branches. It spoiled the whole balance of the tree, having them gone, but Mrs. Williams thought quickly that she could fix that later. One of the toys was a little doll, and the other was a folded piece of blanket with three very tiny dolls in it. Mrs. Williams gave the three tiny dolls to Jeanie and the larger doll to Helen. "These are for you," she said. Jeanie held the blanket with the little dolls, looking beyond Mrs. Williams at the teddy bear.

"Thank you very much," Helen said. "We better be going." She hesitated, and finally said to Mrs. Williams, "Please may I have the piece of paper back now?"

Mr. Williams handed her the folded note and Helen put it in her pocket and took Jeanie's hand.

"Merry Christmas," she said. She picked up the suitcase in her free hand and led Jeanie to the door, which Mr. Williams opened for her. On the porch she stopped again, and turned around. "We're going to sing a Christmas carol for you," she said, "I learned it in school." She began, and after a minute Jeanie joined in weakly: "Deck the hall with boughs of holly, tra la la la la…"

Mr. and Mrs. Williams stood on the porch and watched them going down the walk, singing carefully together. When they reached the street Mr. Williams stepped back inside. "Coming?" he asked.

“Merry Christmas,” Mrs. Williams called out after the children, but even to her, her voice sounded inadequate.

LORD OF THE CASTLE

IT WAS A BLACK winter's day when I watched my father hanged. I stood, fifteen years old but too proud to show my fear before the villagers who crowded around, and watched the man I adored ascend the scaffold and take his last look at the sky and the trees and the mountains he loved.

In that ignorant little village the punishment for witchcraft was death, and not even the lord in the castle on the mountaintop was great enough to stand against the law of superstition and dread. And so my father stood today before the hatred in the eyes of the villagers and went gallantly to his death.

As I stood there, alone, I could feel the secret glances that followed me, and I could almost hear the whispers— "That's his son"— "That's the young one"— "Yonder goes the boy who inherits the devil's lore" — and I hated them all for their ignorance and fear. And when they brought my father out to walk the steps to his death, I came forward to stand beside him before he mounted the scaffold. I looked deep into his black eyes, haunted by the sight of things no mortal had ever seen before him, and I stood as straight as I could, and said to him clearly: "I know you are unjustly accused, Father, and those who have done it will suffer at my hand."

But he looked at me, and smiled, and said: "It is not well to return death for death, my son. Rather hope that I shall rest quietly, and leave you in peace." And he touched his hand to my head, and took his great signet ring from his finger and put it on mine. Then I stood watching him climb up to the platform, and as one man close by me cried out against my father: "Go back to the devil, your master!" I cried "Quiet!" and lashed out at him with the whip I carried. And the crowd moved slowly backward, sullen and murmuring, while I stood alone beside the scaffold. But I could not turn my eyes away while my father died, for I would rather have died myself than show myself, before the eyes of that crowd, a coward.

And, afterward, I rode alone, back up the hill to the tall, dark castle, mine now, my home and the home of my vengeance. At fifteen I was the lord on the hill, and possessor of such wealth, in gold and land and antique treasures, as would make me a success in any world's capital I chose to frequent. I chose none, however, for my heart and my passion and the wild, long history of my name held me to my home and the home in which my father had lived and died. I wished never to lose sight of that long black line against the sky that meant my castle on the hill, and, too, my promise to revenge my father's death held me to this place.

Many days and nights I spent there alone, reading my father's books and studying his knowledge, with only an old dumb man moving quietly (who moves more quietly than those who cannot speak?) about the darkness, bringing me what I needed and turning the world from the door. It was vengeance I was studying, and a means of it, for I was bound by that very devil lore that had killed my father, to turn it to bringing his murderers to justice. And soon it was almost a year, and I still knew nothing, and was no closer to my heart's desire.

And it was a year to the day later that I sat in the garden, hidden below the crest of the hill by a heavy stone wall, safe, I thought, from any watcher. I was reading, and no footfall disturbed my work, but a voice spoke at my elbow.

"Is this not part my garden?" it spoke, and I leaped to my feet, the book fallen to the ground, seeing before me a tall and slim young man, ragged and tired, but with a hint of my family in his half-closed eyes.

“Who are you?” I demanded of the stranger, and he laughed.

“I am your half brother,” he said.

Then I laughed, but I fell back before the look in his eyes, so much my father that I feared him.

“Your father had more than one son,” he said, and touched the signet ring on my hand with the tip of his finger, and when I moved my hand away he laughed once more.

Then he was sober again, and his eyes were kind as he watched me. “Our father,” he said, “gave you his ring, because I am afraid that I had no legal right to it… yet.”

Then I understood. “You are the son of some poor country woman whom my father…” It was delicacy made me pause, but he laughed still more.

“I am,” he said.

I felt a great kindness growing in me toward this poor unfortunate. “I owe you something, then,” I said, and he nodded idly.

I offered him sanctuary in the castle for a day or two, until we could decide what I should do for him by way of reparation for my father’s unfortunate legacy to him. And together, almost arm in arm, we walked into the castle from the garden, and through the dark hallways, I the lord of the castle, he the beggar hoping for assistance, and we passed down the long hall from whose sides great dark portraits looked down, portraits of those who had borne us and cherished us and given us our common life.

Then, in the chamber where old Joseph had kindled a fire and set out supper, I turned to my companion to bid him be seated and eat with me.

“First, tell me,” I said. “What do they call you?”

For a long moment he stared at me from under his lids, and the firelight made his eyes sparkle. “Nicholas,” he said.

“Good.” And I waved him to bring his chair nearer the fire.

As we dined for the first time together he told me strange tales of wandering and seekings, of far lands and places that existed, I was certain, in no country but that of his moving mind. He talked of wonders he had seen, of princes he had met, and queens, and I let him talk, half listening, and half wondering what part this queer half brother of mine could play in the plans I was making. For I needed help, of that there was no doubt, and perhaps this was my help, sent to me, as it were, from my dead father himself.

So, when at last the fire was growing dim, and he had silenced himself with talking, I said to him: "Do you know how our father died?"

"He was hanged."

"Were you there?"

"I saw it." As he spoke, he looked long into the fire, as though seeing it again.

"I have committed myself to vengeance upon my father's murderers," I said. "I promised him as he died that they would suffer."

Nicholas looked at me suddenly. "But he bade you forget his death so that he might leave you in peace."

I shook my head, gazing in my turn into the fire. What secret faiths it held for us that night! "By my father's death his work was broken and destroyed. By revenging him I shall recreate that work, and follow my father's dearest dreams."

Nicholas frowned. "But you cannot help your father's work by harming a few blind villagers, or even by wiping out the village itself."

"I could have put the village in flames, and the villagers into the ground, a year ago, had I wished that. They did not murder my father. It was the forces of evil and darkness and fear who gave my father into the hands of the villagers, and gave the villagers a scaffold upon which to hang him."

Then Nicholas put back his head and laughed longer and louder than ever before. “Do you want, then, to destroy the forces of evil?”

I rose. “I *will* destroy the forces of evil, and for that I require your help.”

“You will require the help of the devil himself,” said Nicholas.

And so Nicholas remained in the castle with me, and there were two of us who walked the dark halls, and read the old books. But it was Nicholas who led me onto the trail of the vengeance which I sought.

“Do you know what the villagers fear?” he asked of me one day.

“They believe that a demon haunts the castle, and makes the land dark and blood-thickened, and that so long as the lord is under this demon’s claw, there will be death and destruction along the land. My father was good and kind, but he sought this demon on the hill to defeat it, and was defeated himself.”

“And you?”

“When I myself have found and destroyed this demon, then shall my father be revenged.”

“And what is your plan?” asked Nicholas.

“To seek and destroy.”

“And who will revenge you?” asked Nicholas. “If you should perish, the demon will hold sway, and his evil will be turned loose upon the land, to bring harm as he wishes.”

“Then I must marry,” I said firmly, but Nicholas laughed. “You will really go to any length to achieve your object,” he said.

Then, for the first time since my father’s death, I rode down to the village. From the sunny windows of the houses women watched me ride by, and the men in the streets narrowed their eyes and spat in my path. On the farther outskirts of the village I dismounted, for here was the family that had brought my father’s death. There had been a man to this family, a great motionless beast, and it had been he who stopped before my father and challenged the demon of the hill. When my father's sword had taken the man's life, it was witchcraft that helped him, they cried; not all the strength of my father's arm nor the power of his voice could avail against their cries. And here was the cottage where the man had lived, and here the very path upon which he had awaited my father, and the dirt on which he had died. I stood, not knowing what I sought, and then a clear, cool laugh reached me, from the cottage garden.

It was a girl, young and golden-haired, and she stood watching me through the rosebushes.

"Are you counting pebbles," she cried, "that you stand so silent and careful?"

I frowned. "Come here," I said. She made an insolent curtsy, and with no hurrying of her steps came lazily through the garden gate to me.

"Who are you?" I said.

"Elizabeth," she said demurely.

"And why do you live here?" I gestured at the cottage of the man who had killed my father.

"Please, sir," she said, dimpling, "it is my father's home, and my mother's, I have no place else to live."

"Your father?"

"He's dead now, sir."

"Are you the daughter of the man who died before the old lord of the hill?"

"I am, sir."

"Do you know who I am?"

She glanced up at me from beneath her eyelashes. "You are the young lord, sir," she said, "and a fine figure of a man, at that," and, laughing, she turned and ran away.

I stood for a moment looking after her, and then I mounted my horse and rode back through the village and up the hill. There I found Nicholas, and I told him of Elizabeth.

And: “Bring her here,” I said.

Nicholas laughed.

“I have certainly made up my mind to marry,” I said, and then we both laughed.

And so Elizabeth came to the castle on the hill. How Nicholas brought her there I never asked, nor did he tell me what he had done. I know only that one day the door of the great study fell open, and Elizabeth stood before me, not laughing now, but proud and stubborn and lovely.

“So you came after all?” I said, genuinely pleased with my triumph.

“I had little choice,” she said.

“You make a charming addition to our family circle here,” I said.

Then, furiously angry, she cried out at me: “I am here because your devil’s hands brought me, and yet I am not afraid of you. Your devil’s hands killed my father, and he was not afraid, and I saw your father hanged and I was glad, do you hear me? And I wanted nothing more than to see your whole foul line perish, and yet I was a poor woman and could never revenge myself on you and your evil blood. But now — I am here, and I think I will see you die because of it. And I defy you and your castle and your devil, too!”

“At any rate the lady’s prayers should help you in your task,” Nicholas said, coming softly into the room, “for, if I know your devil at all, nothing will bring him more quickly than the defiance of a beautiful woman.”

And so I called Joseph and bade him keep Elizabeth prisoner in a high tower of the castle until such time as she should be more inclined to be courteous to her host.

And now suddenly Nicholas and I were feverish and hopeful of our search, for the time had come when the books my father had followed were beginning to be intelligible to me, and I could read easily the secrets they held. And one night I determined to be at this business of the devil and his will. I had caused Elizabeth to be brought to dinner, where she sat sullen and silent, and so I ordered her removed, to hide her tears in her tower prison.

The incident had left me in an evil humor, and I was ready, that night, for anything the devil might bring with him.

When Nicholas and I had finished dinner, we sat together quietly, until I said: “Nicholas, I mean to try the devil tonight.”

Nicholas laughed, as always. “Go carefully,” he said. “Our father’s ghost will be watching.”

“Will you try with me?” I asked.

Nicholas shook his head. “Sometimes, half brother,” he said, “these things are better done alone. I will be waiting to hear of your success.”

And so I sat alone in the study that had been my father’s, with one of his great books open on the table in front of me, and I drew the awful diagrams the books ordered, and mixed my secret potions, and spoke the dreadful words that were to call the devil to my side.

“In nomino lutheris, sathanus, et spiritus acherontis…”

These words the book had ordered me to speak, and as my lips formed the unholy syllables, the room rocked and a great thundering roll came from the walls and the ceiling, and from a cloud before the fire where lay my deadly potion stepped the most beautiful woman I have ever seen.

Aghast, I let my hand fall from the book, and I stared at this image in wonder and delight. Elizabeth? She was forgotten, and my father, and my vengeance, and the devil himself, for I had found a way to greater joy than either vengeance or love could bring. I felt myself drawn forward to the figure that stood so silently, regarding me, and I took a half step toward her. Then she held up her hand warningly.

"Walk carefully," she said. "Come not too close to *me."*

Recklessly I ran to her, and seized her hand. "Is there any danger in you that I would not willingly embrace?" I demanded, and came ever closer to her. With this, however, she laughed, and leaned her head back to look at me. "You are brave indeed…" she said.

No more than that shall I say of my lady of the fire. Let it be enough to add that for many nights, while Nicholas laughed at my anxiety, I locked myself again in the great study and from my father's book repeated the spell that had brought her to me at first. I cannot say how the love of a being such as this will affect a man; I know only that I was mad, and, being mad, knew my madness and deliberately sought it out. No word of my father passed, those days, between Nicholas and me — everything was forgotten before the dreams of the image which came to me from the fire. Ardently as I implored her not to leave me, to stay or to take me with her, she would always reply, half smiling: "You will be with me soon enough, and we shall never be parted then."

Such things, I know, lead to desperate deeds in a man, and yet it was Elizabeth, weary of her prison, who led me to my last disaster. For one golden afternoon, as I lay in the garden dreaming of my love, Nicholas came to me, and spoke softly and quickly: "I have given orders, half brother, that Elizabeth be released from the tower."

Angrily, I half rose. "Who are you to be giving orders in my home?" I demanded first, and then: "And Elizabeth? Has she repented?"

“I give orders because I, too, am lord here,” Nicholas said quietly, “and Elizabeth — has repented.”

I could not speak before the mockery in his eyes. What would I have to do with Elizabeth, who was nothing before my lady from the flames? And Nicholas — he would be driven away, half brother or no, and I would have no rivals in my home.

But Nicholas said: “Elizabeth has repented, and yet, despairing of your love, she has turned her heart another way… to one not, perhaps, as wealthy, but of as noble blood.” And he made a gallant bow.

Then I was on my feet, hating him and seeing how surely he had stolen my life while I had lain idly under the curse of my spells. And I reached for my sword, but it lay in the study, by the fire, where I had cast it off and forgotten it, to kneel at the feet of my lady.

Then, afraid, I saw that I had been tricked, and that while Nicholas had stolen my life, my fair lady had held me bound in witchcraft. And I turned from Nicholas and went to the study, and, for the last time, spoke the words that brought my lady to me. And then, when she came, I did not go to her, but stood safely within the compass of my charmed circle, knowing now that to leave it was death, and I watched her, standing lovely before the fire, and I said:

“Did you, then, betray me?”

She laughed. “Are you afraid to come closer to me and ask that?”

I nearly went over to the fire when she spoke, because the enchantment in her voice was enough to turn any man’s head, except if he had in him, as I did, the warm memory of betrayal.

“I want to come no closer to you than I now know I can stand with safety,” I said.

“You will be with me soon enough.”

"And you and Nicholas…" I said. "What have I left now?"

She laughed again. "Even as I betrayed your father," she said.

And now I knew that I could still be revenged.

"He bade you stay in peace," she added, "and leave him in his grave!"

And then I thought, and, crying aloud to her, I made the sign of the cross, again and again, and watched her stand untouched before me. "You have no contact with the powers of good now," she said. "Why do you invoke them against me?"

And I fell on my knees and covered my head, and she whispered: "You will be with me soon, my love, for I will be here. I will be waiting for you to come." And when I looked up she had gone.

Then, indeed, I came out from my charmed circle, and raged as a madman at the walls and the fire, seeking her to destroy her. All the curses and invocations I could find in my mind I employed against her, and still found myself only raging against stone. And then I remember my crying: "Then I shall destroy you, if you are here, if I must destroy the whole world around you!"

And I ran into the darkness of the night outside, and knew only that there was a flaming torch in my hand, but the castle was old and the trees were dry, and there was more wood than stone that had gone to make up my home….

And as I ran down the road crying aloud, with the flames from the hill close on my heels, I thought I heard a voice crying from the tower, and I thought of Elizabeth and nearly turned back. But then, seeing the castle where it stood, a thing of flame, I fell instead on my knees and thought of Elizabeth, and called her name, and tried to return again from the powers of darkness and ask a kinder Lord to forgive me. And it was there that they found me, the villagers, and dragged me away, still crying out among themselves at my madness.

And so I die, as did my father, for the crimes of witchcraft and murder, for Elizabeth lay in the ruins of the castle. And for a day only I lay in my jail, watching the scaffold outside, and I wondered long about the madness that will take a man.

And then, with day, and as I stood (like my father so long ago; like my father!) at the foot of the scaffold and heard the crowd cry out against me, the ranks of them parted, and Nicholas came up to me where I stood.

“Ah, half brother!” he cried gaily. “You have made a pretty revenge for your father!”

But I asked him only: “How did you escape the flames in the castle?”

“My mother brought me out safely,” Nicholas said.

“Your mother?”

“Yes,” said Nicholas. “She whom you saw each night in the fire — she who betrayed our father, half brother!”

And he started away, laughing, but then he turned and came to me, and his deep eyes were serious. “Half brother,” he said, “I have one further thing to give you.” He lifted my hand as he spoke, and held it tight between his own. A wild, desperate hope leaped up within me, and I cried, thinking I might yet save myself from death: “Nicholas, help me now! What will you give me?”

“Oh, half brother,” Nicholas sighed mockingly, “how eager you are!” And he lifted my helpless hand and slipped my ring, and my father’s ring, the signet ring of our house, off my finger. “I give you your freedom, brother of my house,” he said, and he gestured at the gallows.

Then, laughing still, he turned again and went through the crowd, as I cried after him, and raged at my bonds to escape and be on him, but the crowd roared me back and the jailers forced me up the steps of the scaffold. And from the height, I saw one thing. I saw Nicholas, on his way home, as he turned and waved at me; and then, as I saw him ride alone, up the long road to the smoldering embers of my house, I buried my head in my hands and knew cruelly that now, indeed, the devil held the hill.

WHAT A THOUGHT

DINNER HAD BEEN GOOD; Margaret sat with her book on her lap and watched her husband digesting, an operation to which he always gave much time and thought. As she watched he put his cigar down without looking and used his free hand to turn the page of his paper. Margaret found herself thinking with some pride that unlike many men she had heard about, her husband did not fall asleep after a particularly good dinner.

She flipped the pages of her book idly; it was not interesting. She knew that if she asked her husband to take her to a movie, or out for a ride, or to play gin rummy, he would smile at her and agree; he was always willing to do things to please her, still, after ten years of marriage. An odd thought crossed her mind: She would pick up the heavy glass ashtray and smash her husband over the head with it.

"Like to go to a movie?" her husband asked.

"I don't think so, thanks," Margaret said. "Why?"

"You look sort of bored," her husband said.

"Were you watching me?" Margaret asked. "I thought you were reading."

"Just looked at you for a minute." He smiled at her, the smile of a man who is still, after ten years of marriage, very fond of his wife.

The idea of smashing the glass ashtray over her husband's head had never before occurred to Margaret, but now it would not leave her mind. She stirred uneasily in her chair, thinking: what a terrible thought to have, whatever made me think of such a thing? Probably a perverted affectionate gesture, and she laughed.

“Funny?” her husband asked.

“Nothing,” Margaret said.

She stood up and crossed the room to the hall door, without purpose. She was very uneasy, and looking at her husband did not help. The cord that held the curtains back made her think: strangle him. She told herself: it’s not that I don’t love him, I just feel morbid tonight. As though something bad were going to happen. A telegram coming, or the refrigerator breaking down. Drown him, the goldfish bowl suggested.

Look, Margaret told herself severely, standing just outside the hall door so that her husband would not see her if he looked up from his paper, look, this is perfectly ridiculous. The idea of a grown woman troubling herself with silly fears like that — it’s like being afraid of ghosts, or something. *Nothing* is going to happen to him, Margaret, she said almost aloud; *nothing* can happen to hurt either you or your husband or anyone you love. You are perfectly safe.

“Margaret?” her husband called.

“Yes?”

“Is something wrong?”

“No, dear,” Margaret said. “Just getting a drink of water.”

Poison him? Push him in front of a car? A train?

I don’t *want* to kill my husband, Margaret said to herself. I never *dreamed* of killing him. I want him to live. Stop it, stop it.

She got her drink of water, a little formality she played out with herself because she had told him she was going to do it, and then wandered back into the living room and sat down. He looked up as she entered.

“You seem very restless tonight,” he said.

“It’s the weather, I guess,” Margaret said. “Heat always bothers me.”

"Sure you wouldn't like to go to a movie?" he said. "Or we could go for a ride, cool off."

"No, thanks," she said. "I'll go to bed early."

"Good idea," he said.

What would I do without him? she wondered. How would I live, who would ever marry me, where would I go? What would I do with all the furniture, crying when I saw his picture, burning his old letters. I could give his suits away, but what would I do with the house? Who would take care of the income tax? I love my husband, Margaret told herself emphatically; I *must* stop thinking like this. It's like an idiot tune running through my head.

She got up again to turn the radio on; the flat voice of the announcer offended her and she turned the radio off again, passing beyond it to the bookcase. She took down a book and then another, leafing through them without seeing the pages, thinking: It isn't as though I had a motive; they'd never catch me. Why would I kill my husband? She could see herself saying tearfully to an imaginary police lieutenant: "But I loved him — I can't *stand* his being dead!"

"Margaret," her husband said. "Are you worried about something?"

"No, dear," she said. "Why?"

"You really seem terribly upset tonight. Are you feverish?"

"No," she said. "A chill, if anything."

"Come over here and let me feel your forehead."

She came obediently, and bent down for him to put his hand on her forehead. At his cool touch she thought, Oh, the dear, good man; and wanted to cry at what she had been thinking.

"You're right," he said. "Your head feels cold. Better go on off to bed."

"In a little while," she said. "I'm not tired yet."

"Shall I make you a drink?" he asked. "Or something like lemonade?"

“Thank you very much, dear,” she said. “But no thanks.”

They say if you soak a cigarette in water overnight the water will be almost pure nicotine by morning, and deadly poisonous. You can put it in coffee and it won’t taste.

“Shall I make *you* some coffee?” she asked, surprising herself.

He looked up again, frowning. “I just had two cups for dinner,” he said. “But thanks just the same.”

I’m brave enough to go through with it, Margaret thought; what will it all matter a hundred years from now? I’ll be dead, too, by then, and who cares about the furniture?

She began to think concretely. A burglar. First call a doctor, then the police, then her brother-in-law and her own sister. Tell them all the same thing, her voice broken with tears. It would not be necessary to worry about preparations; the more elaborately these things were planned, the better chance of making a mistake. She could get out of it without being caught if she thought of it in a broad perspective and not as a matter of small details. Once she started worrying about things like fingerprints she was lost. Whatever you worry about catches you, every time.

“Have you any enemies?” she asked her husband, not meaning to.

“Enemies,” he said. For a moment he took her seriously, and then he smiled and said, “I suppose I have hundreds. Secret ones.”

“I didn’t mean to ask you that,” she said, surprising herself again.

“Why would I have enemies?” he asked, suddenly serious again, and setting down his paper. “What makes you think I have enemies, Margaret?”

“It was silly of me,” she said. “A silly thought.” She smiled and after a minute he smiled again.

“I suppose the milkman hates me,” he said. “I always forget to leave the bottles out.”

The milkman would hardly do; he knew it, and he would not help her. Her glance rested on the glass ashtray, glittering and colored in the light from the reading lamp; she had washed the ashtray that morning and nothing had occurred to her about it then. Now she thought: It ought to be the ashtray; the first idea is always the best.

She rose for the third time and came around to lean on the back of his chair; the ashtray was on the table to her right, now, and she bent down and kissed the top of his head.

“I never loved you more,” she said, and he reached up without looking to touch her hair affectionately.

Carefully she took his cigar out of the ashtray and set it on the table. For a minute he did not notice and then, as he reached for his cigar, he saw that it was on the table and picked it up quickly, touching the table underneath to see if it had burned. “Set fire to the house,” he said casually. When he was looking at the paper again she picked up the ashtray silently.

“I don’t want to,” she said as she struck him.

WHEN BARRY WAS SEVEN

BARRY: EIGHT HUNDRED and nine pages. That's the biggest book I ever owned.

SHIRLEY: You ought to take a while reading that.

BARRY: But I'm not going to start it until I go to bed. Because I don't want to finish too soon.

SHIRLEY: Look, Mr. Untermeyer has autographed it to you.

BARRY: Yes, I saw that already. Now *(complacently)* I have two books with the writer's name written on.

SHIRLEY: TWO?

BARRY: Yes. This book, and *Louis Pasteur*. Because on the outside of my *Louis Pasteur* book it has "Louis Pasteur" in gold handwriting, and it would be senseless to use his name in handwriting unless he really wrote it. It's senseless. Because why would somebody else write his name? So now I have two books. Mr. Untermeyer and Louis Pasteur.

SALLY: I have books from Jay Williams with his signature.

BARRY: *(reasonably)* Well, you are older than I am.

(later, Barry still carrying his book with him everywhere) BARRY: This is the heaviest book I ever owned. SHIRLEY: YOU have done everything

with that book except read it. Stop carrying it around and look inside, for heaven's sake. BARRY: I have already read the story about Louis Pasteur.

SHIRLEY: *(nervously)* Well? Is it all right? Does he know what he's talking about?

BARRY: Yes. He knows very well. He knows all the facts. Of course I do not know the facts about some of the other people he has written about — *(mispronouncing)* — Leo Tolstoi, or Winston Churchill, but about Louis Pasteur, I think he has gotten all the facts.

SHIRLEY: Will you write to him and tell him you think so?

BARRY: *(considering)* Yes. When I have read a little more. First, though, I have to weigh it.

SHIRLEY: Weigh it? The book?

BARRY: Yes. It is the heaviest book I ever owned. Also it costs six dollars and ninety-five cents and that is almost seven dollars. I think Mr. Untermeyer would like me to find out how much it weighs.

SHIRLEY: And how much *does* it weigh?

BARRY: *(over the bathroom scales)* Twelve pounds? No, that is with my foot. Three pounds. That is really a pretty heavy book. Pretty heavy for a young boy like me to carry.

SHIRLEY: Look, creep. You aren't *supposed* to carry it, you're supposed to *read* it.

BARRY: All right. I will read *Mark Twain*.

(later, Barry reading in a big study chair, vis-à-vis Stanley, also reading)

BARRY: Dad, what are *you* reading?

STANLEY: Moby Dick.

BARRY: HOW many pages does it have?

STANLEY: Oh, God, five hundred or so. Too many.

BARRY: (with enormous satisfaction) My book is larger.

STANLEY: *(defensively)* But I have to read footnotes and then Melville's correspondence and then more books about —

BARRY: Who wrote your book?

STANLEY: Herman Melville.

BARRY: *(superior)* I don't think that *he* is in *my* book. *I* have a writer named Leo Tolstoi.

STANLEY: Well, Melville —

BARRY: YOU may read my book when I have finished. There are some pages about Darwin you can read. Probably you would like them.

BEFORE AUTUMN

ALL THAT SUMMER SHE had been increasingly aware of the growing turbulence among the trees, and in the grasses, and around the hills; in the vegetable garden each morning there had been vague markings of snails, and the trees were less certain of their birds, somehow, she thought, and more noisy in the wind. That the paints had something to do with it she was certain; before the sudden violence of green in the paint box the grass flattened and grew bladed and pale, and the hills plunged mistily ahead of a purple so carefully compounded of blue, and red, and white, and sometimes, in the late afternoons, yellow. Even Daniel became less of a husband, less of a reddish-brown certainty, and more of a careful blend of plum and ochre, with brush strokes to simulate tweeds… "Possibly," she would think, "if I paint more carefully… since everything but Daniel seems to stay such a long time…"

But what of this new irresistible impulse to draw the curtains against the trees, to read by lamplight in the mornings, to move carefully into a room to Daniel, saying, "My dear, could you arrange to look less ruddy, for my sake…?" And that incredible question, at dinner, over the candles, to his open mouth— "Daniel, do you do everything the way you chew your food?"

As certainly it was not the coming of fall, always frightening, for the month was only… she would stop and think… July, in the middle, and the days long and hot.

Narrowing it down, finally, to the colors in her room, she determined on a change from pale yellow to lavender and pink, but, surrounded by curtain material, she found that her paint box could duplicate exactly (blue, touched with pink, and much white; red, watered into rose) and she folded and boxed her cloths to wait until September, when she had intended to change anyway. Then, to Daniel's mild questions ("What if I should rush in ardently and shriek: 'Daniel, for sweet heaven's sake, will you go kill something…?'!"):

"Curtains all tacked together, honey?"

"Quite finished, Daniel, thank you."

"Like them better, now you've got them?"

"Much better, thank you, Daniel."

"Why thank me, I only paid for them."

And he would smile at her, because that was a joke.

It was not until the coming of Jimmie Wilson that she made any effort to break away from Daniel. And Jimmie was only fifteen, and still vague and blurred; no tweeds, she thought, and no tan. Jimmie moved next door, so easily, and played ball against the fence, and moved about his house, and became friends with Daniel, and Jimmie's mother expected to be called upon. Jimmie, sitting on the porch, pale against the trees and the hills and the grass, first gave her the idea, and then there was the preparation, so careful, so cautious:

"Jimmie, you should learn to paint; you should try to paint the hills and the trees around here."

"As a matter of fact, ma'am, I don't have much time for things like painting. There's school, and scouts, and then my homework, you know."

"You have a painter's hands, Jimmie."

Long afternoons; frequent, warm afternoons. ("Jimmie, can you help me cut the roses today? The thorns are so bad, and I have no gloves…" "Do you have a minute, Jimmie? Come and talk to me while I do my nails here in the sun… isn’t it warm?” “When shall I give you a painting lesson, Jimmie?”)

Nothing obvious, nothing daring. Jimmie’s mother was called upon, learned to use the back gate, called in return. (“Jimmie, pass your mother her tea, like a nice boy.”)

A very careful, very cautious, easy and lazy preparation.

“Jimmie, my husband is going to teach you to shoot, he says.”

“I know, he promised me a long time ago. We have to wait until deer season, though.”

“Why for the deer season, Jimmie?”

“Why, to kill anything.”

“I see. You won’t kill each other, then?” (Too sudden? Too daring?)

“You can’t kill anyone with those guns!”

“I’m so glad to hear that, Jimmie. I must confess that I had been worried. But why can’t you kill anyone with those guns?”

“Oh, you learn to be too careful. No one wants to get hurt.”

“I wouldn’t want you to get hurt, Jimmie. But I’m sure my husband’s very careful.”

“Of course he is. They wouldn’t let him have a gun if he weren’t.”

“Do you want a gun, Jimmie? I’ll buy you one if you like.”

“Why, thanks very much… Gee…” (too soon; he was surprised) “but of course you couldn’t; it’s too much, and my mother&”

“Well, we’ll see. But I’m sure you’ll need one.”

“I’ll see what my mother says.”

“Don’t let yourself get hurt with it, Jimmie. But then, of course he’s very careful. I can’t describe how careful he is.”

There, it had been started; it would work of itself from now on. Jimmie knew, she was sure, and sympathized, and would help; she was sure because she could paint him so well. She was there in her room, painting, that day after talking to Jimmie, when Daniel came home.

“Painting again, honey? And by lamplight?”

“The sun hurts my eyes, Daniel.”

“Better see an oculist, then. Got to take care of your eyes.”

“I shall, thank you, Daniel.”

“Don’t thank me, honey, I only pay for it.”

THE STORY WE USED TO TELL

THIS IS THE STORY that Y and I used to tell, used to tell in the quiet of the night, in the hours of the quiet of the night, and the moonlight would come, moving forward, moving close; used to whisper to each other in the night…

And I, Y would say, had to go first. With the moonlight making white patterns in her hair, she would shake her head and say: I had to go first. Remember, she would say. In this very house. That night. Remember? And the picture, and the moonlight, and the way we laughed.

We had sat on the foot of the bed, the way we used to when we roomed together in school, talking together and laughing sometimes in spite of the grief that filled Y’s great house. It was only a month or so after her husband’s funeral, I remember, and yet being together again, just the two of us, was somehow enough to make Y smile sometimes, and even occasionally laugh again. I had been wise enough not to remark on the fact that Y had closed off the rooms of the house in which she had lived with her husband, and had moved into an entire new wing of the old place. But I liked her little bedroom, quiet and bare, with no room for books, and only the one picture on the wall.

“It’s a picture of the house…” Y said to me. “See, you can barely see the windows of this very room. It’s before my grandfather-in-law remodeled it, which is why the new wing isn’t there.”

“It’s a beautiful old place,” I said. “I almost wish he hadn’t changed it so much.”

“Plumbing,” Y said. “There’s nothing wrong with plumbing.”

"No," I said, "but I'm glad you've reopened the old wing… it must have been a gorgeous place in — say — your grandfather-in-law's time."

And we looked at the picture of the old old house, standing dark and tall against the sky, with the windows of this very room shining faintly through the trees, and the steep winding road coming through the gates and down to the very edge of the picture.

"I'm glad the glass is there," I said, giggling. "I'd hate to have a landslide start on that mountain and come down into our laps!"

"Into my bed, you mean," Y said. "I don't know if I'll be able to sleep, with the old place overhead."

"Grandpop's probably still in it, too," I said. "He's wandering around in a nightcap with a candle in the old barn."

"Plotting improvements." Y pulled the covers up over her head.

I told her, "God save us from all reformers," and went across the hall to my own room, pulled the heavy curtains to shut out the moonlight, and went to bed.

And the next morning Y was gone.

I woke up late, had breakfast downstairs with a first assistant footman or something of the sort presiding (even Y, married for four years into a butler-keeping establishment, had never found out which one to send for to bring tea in the afternoons, and had finally given up completely and taken to serving sherry, which she could pour herself from a decanter on the sideboard), and finally settled down to read, believing that Y would sleep late and come down in her own sweet time.

One o'clock was a little late, however, and when the menagerie began announcing lunch to me, I went after Y.

She wasn't in her room, the bed had been slept in, and none of the menagerie knew where she was. More than that, no one had seen or heard of her since I had left her the night before; everyone else had thought, as I did, that she was sleeping late.

By late afternoon I had decided to call Y's family lawyer, John, who lived on an adjoining estate and had been a close friend of Y's husband, and a kind advisor to Y. And by evening Y's lawyer had decided to call the police.

At the end of a week, nothing had been heard from or of Y, and the police had changed their theory of kidnapping to one of suicide. The lawyer came to me one of those afternoons with a project for closing up the house.

"I dread saying it, Katharine, but—" He shook his head. "I'm afraid she's dead."

"How can she be?" I kept crying out, I remember. "I tell you I was with her all that evening. We talked, and she was happier than she has been for weeks — since her husband died…"

"That's why I think she's dead," he said. "She was heartbroken. She had nothing to keep her alive."

"She had plans… she was going to sell this house, and travel! She was going to live abroad for a while — meet people, try to start life over again — why, I was going with her! We talked about it that night… and we laughed about the house… she said the picture would fall on her bed!!" My voice trailed off. It was, I know certainly, the first time I had thought of the picture since I had left Y in her room, with the moonlight coming in and shining on her pale hair on the pillow. And I began to think.

"Wait until tomorrow," I begged him. "Don't do anything for a day or two. Why… she might come back tonight!"

He shook his head at me despairingly, but he went away and left me alone in the house. I called the menagerie, and ordered my things moved into Y's room.

The full moon had turned into a lopsided creature, but there was still moonlight enough to fill the room with a haunted light when I lay down in Y's bed, looking into the empty windows in the picture of a house. I fell asleep thinking miserably of Y's cheerful conviction that the old man was loose in the picture, plotting improvements.

The moonlight was still there when I woke up, and so was the old woman. She was hanging on the inside of the glass of the picture, gibbering out at me, and she looked twenty feet high, standing in front of that picture of the house. I sat up in bed and backed as far away from the picture as I could, realizing, in the one lucid moment I had before the cold terror of that thing hit me, that she was on the inside of the glass, and couldn't get out.

Then suddenly she moved aside and I could see the road leading down from the house, and, while I watched, Y came through the gates, running, and waving desperately at me. I could feel my eyes getting wider and wider and the back of my neck getting colder and colder, and then I knew that I had been right and that Y had been caught in some malevolence of the old house, and I began sobbing in thankfulness that I had found her in time.

I picked up my slipper and smashed the glass of the picture and held out my hands to Y to hurry her on toward me. And then I saw that the old woman, no longer hanging on to the inside of the glass, was now free, and in the room with me, and I could hear her laughing. I fell back on the bed in a wild attempt to shove the old woman back into the picture and I could just see Y, dropping her hands in helpless grief, turn around and start slowly back up the road to the house. Then the room went out from under me, and the glass on the picture closed around me.

"I was waving at you to go away," Y was saying over and over. "You should have left me here and gone away. We can't ever get out now — either of us. You should have gone away."

I opened my eyes and looked around. I was in the dining room of the house, but so changed and gloomy! It was dark, and there was no furniture, no ornamentation. The place was still, and damp.

“No plumbing, either,” Y said dryly, noticing the bewilderment on my face. “This picture was painted before the improvements were put in.”

“But—” I said.

“Hide!” Y whispered. She pushed me into a corner, out of the light of the one candle on the floor.

“Oh my God,” I said, and grabbed Y’s hands.

Through the doorway came the old man, giggling and pulling at his beard. He was followed by the old woman, silent now, but with glittering grin, and half waltzing.

“Young ladies!” the old man called in a shrill, cracked voice, looking eagerly about the room. He picked up the candle and began going to the corners with it. “Young ladies,” he cried, “come out! We are going to celebrate! Tonight there is to be a ball!”

“Y!” I said. He was coming toward us.

“There you are, there you are. Lovely young ladies, shy over their first ball! Come ahead, young ladies!”

Y gave me one look, and then moved slowly forward. The old man waved the candle at me, calling, “Come along, don’t be too demure, no partners then, you know!” and I followed Y into the room. The old man waved at the woman then, saying, “Let the musicians start now,” and our first ball began. The music did not materialize, but the old man danced solemnly, first with Y and then with me, while the old crone sat dreamily in the corner, swinging the candle in time.

While the old man was dancing with Y, he would wave at me roguishly as they passed, calling out, “Wallflower!” and something that was very like a grin would come over Y. And once when he was dancing with me and we passed Y, sitting on the floor in abject misery, he cried out sternly: “Come now, look gay! Honey catches more flies than vinegar, you know!” And Y actually began to laugh.

No one could possibly say that I enjoyed myself at my first ball. But, you see, I still thought I was lying on Y’s bed, dreaming of the picture. Later, when the old man had limped off to bed, after kissing our hands gallantly, Y and I sat on the dining room floor and talked about it. In spite of the icy touch of the old man’s fingers which lingered on our hands, in spite of the chill of the stone floor and the memory of the old crone’s cackling, we sat there in the dark together and told each other that it was all a horrible dream.

Y said: “I’ve been here for a long time. I don’t know how long. But every night there’s been a ball.”

I shivered. “He’s a lovely dancer,” I said.

“Isn’t he though,” Y agreed. “I know who he is,” she said after a few minutes. “He’s grandpop-in-law. He died in this house, crazy.”

“You might have told me before I came to visit you,” I said.

“I thought he’d stay dead,” Y said.

We sat there, not talking, until finally the room began to grow lighter, and the dusk in the house was brightened with sunlight. I ran to the window, but Y laughed. “Wait,” she said gloomily.

Outside the window I could see the trees that surrounded the old house, and the road down to the gates. Beyond the gates the trees prevented my seeing much, but I did manage to make out light, and color, and… the outlines of Y’s bed.

Y came over to the window and stood beside me. “Now do you know why I keep saying I’m dreaming?” she demanded.

“But…” I turned around and looked at her. “But you aren’t,” I said.

“No,” Y replied after a minute. “I’m not.”

We stood close together then, looking out over the trees and the gate, and beyond them, ridiculously, maddeningly, to the room that would mean freedom.

“Y,” I said finally, “this isn’t true. It’s—” I began to laugh, at last. “It’s outrageous!” I shouted. And Y began to laugh, too.

And for a time Y and I, hidden away among the trees around the house, planned an escape. “We’re completely helpless unless someone comes into the room,” Y said, “and we’re completely helpless as long as these two old wrecks wander around loose.”

“Remember how I thought you were waving me on when I couldn’t hear you through the glass,” I said.

“But if the old woman hadn’t been there…”

We looked at each other. “Why is she here?” I said finally. Y shook her head. “It’s not as though she wasn’t already dead,” I began, and finished weakly— “probably…”

And that night, while the old man prepared the room for the ball, Y asked him who the woman was. And, “One of your aunts, my dear,” he chuckled, pinching Y’s cheek, and, “And I never saw a prettier girl, at that.” He shook his head sadly. “She’s aged a good deal since we’ve lived here, though. Not so pretty nowadays, are you, old hag!” he screamed suddenly, and ran over to the old woman to give her a shove that sent her rocking back and forth, giggling wildly and nodding her head.

“Has she been here long?” Y asked timidly, but the old man skipped back and forth, pirouetting with exaggerated grace. “No questions, young ladies, no questions! Pretty heads should be empty, you know!”

That was what decided Y and me. The next day our plans were made, and it all had to be done fast. I do not like to remember what we did, and Y swears now that it is all gone from her mind, but I know as well as she does that we stuffed a pillow over the old man’s face while he slept, and hanged him to a tree afterward, in an ecstasy of hatred which spent itself on him, and left us little eagerness for the old woman. But we finished it, and never went back to the forest behind the castle, where the two bodies still hang, for all I know. It’s as Y said, then: “We don’t know if we can kill them, but we do know that if they’re not dead, they’re still tied up…”

And then, weak and happy and laughing, we lay all day in the sun near the gates, waiting for someone to come into the room.

“How long has it been, Y, that we’ve been held here?”

“A year, I guess—” This muffled, from Y’s face hidden in her arms. “Or maybe more.”

“It hasn’t been more than a week,” I said.

“It’s been years,” Y said again.

And how much longer was it that we waited? The room, which we could see from the gates, had been dismantled. How bitterly we repented of the time spent away from the view of the room, the time lost while someone had taken up the carpets in the room, had taken away the linen and the mattress from the bed, had taken down the curtains and stripped the room bare of everything but dust! Where had we been, and who would come now to an empty and forsaken room? But it was Y, as always, who thought of it first.

“Why didn’t they take the picture down, then?” she said. “They’ve emptied the room and left the picture still hanging!”

“They must know something! They must believe that the picture has something to do with us!”

"They'd know the room was haunted, since two of us disappeared from there…" Y began.

"And no one will ever come into it for that reason," I finished.

We were there long enough for the ivy on the house to grow a quarter inch before someone came to rescue us.

We had often speculated as to who would come. Both of us had believed that it would be a stranger, come to see for himself if he could solve the secret of the room, but when our rescuer finally arrived one evening, it was John. I saw him first, while Y slept, and when I woke her to tell her it was John, she cried for the first time since we had given up hope. We lay in the grass before the gates, waiting for the moon to rise so John could see us and let us out.

We watched him put down a blanket on the empty bed, and lie down to stare directly into the picture. In the half-darkness that meant the moon was rising, we saw him lying there, watching for us. And as the moon rose slowly, coming toward the picture, we stood by the gates, clinging to each other and trembling with excitement.

Even before the full light was upon us, we were racing down the road to him, to the glass that he must break. I remember falling once, and stumbling to my feet to run on, with blood on my face and hands, crying out to John, and I believe now that it was during that moment wasted in getting to my feet that I knew exactly, because I heard Y's voice calling, "Come, John, come on, John, come on!" And I knew that I was screaming, too, and shrieking at the top of my lungs.

And John was sitting up in the bed, and screaming, too, and he put up his foot and kicked at the glass and broke it — at last.

And that is how we tell it, Y and I, in the quiet of the night, in the hours of the quiet of the night, with the moonlight moving close, while we wait in the secret of the night, and John runs constantly about the house, screaming and beating the walls. For I have no partner, now in the evenings, and Y and John do not like to dance alone.

MY UNCLE IN THE GARDEN

I HAVE ALWAYS TAKEN presents when I go to visit my uncle Oliver and my uncle Peter: a fruit cake, certainly, and a dozen oranges, and toys, a little jumping rabbit that winds with a key for Uncle Oliver, and a chocolate bone for Uncle Peter's cat. I get on the ferry at San Francisco, stopping in the ferry building for identical boxes of candied cherries, and run at Sausalito for the train that will take me into San Rafael. Then, carrying my packages and my suitcases and my book, I must walk slowly up the long country road in the sun, waiting for Uncle Peter to catch the first sight of me, or Uncle Oliver to look up from the wicker chair on the porch and come running down to meet me. Their cottage is halfway up a steep little country hill, with flowers growing down to the road on both sides, and orchards beyond, and Uncle Oliver will be out of breath walking up with me, eyeing the packages and saying: "Peter will be pleased to see what you have brought him." Both Uncle Oliver and I know that Peter will be pleased to see what I have brought, but Uncle Oliver will carry the presents away, to be disposed of carefully and doled out slowly.

When I reach the cottage, I must stop for a moment in the road, looking at the roof low enough to touch from the garden, the roses going up the walls and leaning over the doorway, the two flat stone steps, and the orchard and the vegetable garden creeping around the sides of the house, not content with their position in the backyard, and I must stand there for a moment and then say: "Nothing has been changed since last year, Uncle Oliver; how do you and Uncle Peter stay so young, and keep your home so pretty?"

And then Uncle Oliver, twisting his hands with delight, will say, as he always does: “I never get any older; Peter ages for both of us, and for the house, too.” Then I may go inside to be graciously received by Uncle Peter.

I call them my uncles only because it is so difficult to address both of them as Mr. Duff; some fifty years ago, when Uncle Oliver was courting my grandmother, she is said to have declared that they would be satisfactory only as bachelor brothers who would take her future grandchildren to the zoo, and so Uncles Peter and Oliver did, and her children, too, and probably my children someday as well. Aside from the one incredible year Uncle Oliver spent married to a lady known as Mrs. Duff, they have lived together, at first in a little flat in San Francisco, and finally in this rose-covered cottage, which the semi-mythical Mrs. Duff planned and arranged as a suitable bower for her husband. Neither Uncle Peter nor Uncle Oliver has ever tried to work at anything; some farsighted relative left them a small mutual income, which, augmented by the presents of oranges and fruitcake that they receive from the children whom they took to the zoo, keeps them excellently, with their several cats. Uncle Peter is lean and tired; he cares for the house and watches over the garden and the three or four trees in the orchard and the one cat that is especially his own; Uncle Oliver is rounder and lazier; he does the cooking and watches the vegetable garden and the five other cats. Uncle Peter’s gray cat, Sandra Williamson, is the only one distinguished by a name; the others, all white cats left in the house by Mrs. Duff, operate as a unit and come and go to the name of Kitty.

“They all had names once,” Uncle Oliver explains mournfully, “Mrs. Duff used to call them pretty things. One was Rosebud, as I remember, and all the others were pretty things, too.”

“Someday we will name them all again,” Uncle Peter adds, “and I will make little leather collars for them, each with his own name around his neck on a leather collar."

The white cats will all be sitting on the front porch when I come, washing one another and playing with the sunlight. Uncle Oliver will stop and touch one or two of them on the head; "Pretty little things," he will say. "Nice kitty." I do not believe that the white cats understand Uncle Oliver the way Sandra Williamson understands Uncle Peter; wherever Uncle Peter goes, Sandra Williamson will follow him, sometimes so far forgetting her dignity as to touch at a dangling shoelace. And when I come, she will be standing next to Uncle Peter in the little living room, waiting to receive me.

"Peter," Uncle Oliver will say joyously, including Sandra Williamson in his expansive loving gesture, "here is such a nice child, such a nice child, and I walked up the hill with her, and she has brought you presents."

And then Uncle Peter, who always remembers my name and will take Uncle Oliver aside later and tell him what to call me, will come forward and kiss me on the forehead while Sandra Williamson rubs against my ankles, and Uncle Oliver will pull at my sleeve and point to the packages, winking and giggling, and, with Peter on one side and Oliver on the other, and Sandra Williamson perched on the windowsill above the sofa, I will open the packages.

"Oranges," Uncle Peter will say with pleasure, and he will take one and offer it solemnly to Sandra Williamson, who will touch it with her gray paw.

"Look, Peter, what Sandra Williamson may have for her own, instead of an orange which we will eat ourselves, look at what this dear pretty child has brought Sandra Williamson," Uncle Oliver will say, with the chocolate bone. Peter must offer the bone to Sandra himself, and she will sit cheerfully with it under her paw until Uncle Peter moves to another room and requires her to bring it along.

Finally, when all of us have watched Uncle Oliver's mechanical toy move about the room, crashing into the furniture and even moving out to the front porch to startle the white cats, Uncle Oliver will gather together all the presents except Sandra Williamson's bone and an orange apiece for his and Uncle Peter's dinner, and hide them away in the back of a kitchen cabinet, to be taken out at a less exciting time. Then Uncle Oliver will remove himself to the stove, and dinner, and Uncle Peter will show me his garden, Sandra Williamson following and the white cats moving about under the trees in the dusk.

I do not think that there is any possibility that Uncle Peter and Uncle Oliver and the cats and the cottage will change or go away with time. Every year, when spring has irrevocably asserted itself, I begin to wonder about Uncle Oliver and Uncle Peter, and every year I gather together the fruitcake and the oranges, the toys and the candied cherries, and take the ferry to Sausalito. They are as apt not to be there as San Rafael is apt to have moved to Florida.

Always, during the two or three days I spend with Uncle Peter and Uncle Oliver, some minor domestic crisis arrives, brought on principally by the strain of having company. One year Sandra Williamson was ill from too much company food, one year the strain of baking a chicken pie brought Uncle Oliver into a hysterical temper, and one year Uncle Peter and Uncle Oliver quarreled. That is the visit I remember most clearly; the quarrel first made itself evident at the dinner table the evening of my arrival, and over the tomatoes, or rather the lack of them.

"Don't we always have tomatoes?" Uncle Oliver asked me angrily, indicating the table with the creamed beef on toast and the plain lettuce salad. "Don't we usually have tomatoes when you come?"

"I seem to remember that you do," I said placatingly, "but everything is so delicious…"

"We have always had tomatoes up until this year," Uncle Oliver persisted, "and we have always grown them in our own vegetable garden, too. My particular care," he added bitterly in Uncle Peter's direction.

"Possibly something got into the vines this year," I said. "They very often die off just when you expect them to be the best."

"We *would* have had tomatoes this year," Uncle Oliver said.

"I always thought the tomatoes were the least important," Uncle Peter said suddenly. "I prefer the radishes myself, and the squash."

"I notice nothing happened to the apples," Uncle Oliver said pointedly. There was a long moment of silence, and then Uncle Peter excused himself and left the table. Sandra Williamson followed him, and they went out into the garden.

"I think you hurt Uncle Peter's feelings," I said to Oliver.

"I intended to," he answered, staring at his plate. "He has been very wicked, and the tomatoes were mine by rights."

"What could he do to the tomatoes?" I was bewildered. "Surely he isn't directly responsible if the tomato vine doesn't bear tomatoes."

"Ah," said Uncle Oliver. "That is just it. Heaven only knows what the tomato vine *will* bear now. He has been consorting with the devil."

"Surely, Uncle Oliver," I began, "surely you cannot say that just because there are no tomatoes—"

"Ah," said Uncle Oliver, "but in the garden at night, in only his nightshirt, and dancing. And with Sandra Williamson dancing along behind him, the garden at night, and both of them going among the trees and over the vegetable garden. Is it any wonder," he cried out despairingly, "that the tomato vine refuses to bear tomatoes!"

"I should, in its place," I agreed, suppressing the picture of Uncle Peter dancing in his nightshirt.

"The devil has no place in San Rafael, and no business with Peter or with Sandra Williamson, and certainly no traffic with my tomatoes! Perhaps you can put a stop to it?" he asked me.

"What makes you think it's the devil?"

Uncle Oliver waved his hands. "Peter brought him to lunch one day. He smiled at me, his pointed little nose right at me, and said, 'You cook admirably, Oliver Duff,' and I said, 'I'll have no thanks from you, evil sir,' and he smiled at me still."

"Couldn't it be a neighbor?"

"It could not," Uncle Oliver said absolutely, "and I'll thank you not to suggest it."

"I'll speak to Uncle Peter," I said.

"Speak, better, to my tomato vine," Uncle Oliver said sullenly. Uncle Peter was coming in the door, followed by Sandra Williamson. He came over to Oliver and said, "It's been so long since we quarreled. What do we say to each other now?" They both looked at me.

"Uncle Oliver," I instructed, "you will say that you regret being ugly about the tomato vine, and Uncle Peter, you will say that you will make every effort to console Uncle Oliver for its loss."

"Regret ugly," Uncle Oliver muttered to Uncle Peter.

"Make every effort," Uncle Peter said. They smiled at each other.

"Now," I said, "I will go out into the garden with Uncle Peter."

Uncle Peter held the back door open for me, and we went out into the dark garden. The fruit trees were silent in the night, and the vegetable garden lay in heavy masses against the fence. Sandra Williamson preceded us down between the trees to the foot of the garden, where the grass was tall against the fence.

"Is this where he comes?" I asked Uncle Peter.

"To the other side of the fence," Uncle Peter said. "He seldom comes over. He lives in the woods on the hill."

"Are you sure it isn't a neighbor?" I said.

"Quite sure," Uncle Peter answered in surprise. "I have been consorting with the devil."

"Tell me about him."

"He comes down from the hill and stands on the other side of the *fence*. He came first some weeks ago, and Sandra Williamson saw him and came over to talk to him and I came over, too, and we talked to him."

"What about the tomatoes?"

Uncle Peter shrugged. "He asked me what in the garden I would give him for tribute; he said he would protect the fruit trees and the rest if I gave him something and I said he could have the tomato vine, because Oliver likes tomatoes least. He said that would do splendidly; I didn't know that Oliver would mind."

"Possibly if you talked to him," I said, "and asked him what else he would accept…"

"I had thought of giving him the apple tree," Peter said. "He will come later tonight, and I had thought of asking him then."

"Wait," I said. I ran back through the garden and into the house. Uncle Oliver was standing miserably by the sink, washing dishes.

"If you could have the tomatoes back," I said, "would you mind losing the apple tree?"

"The pretty little apples?" Uncle Oliver gasped. "Your uncle Peter likes them boiled with a little cinnamon and just a fragment of a sugar lump."

I thought. “If I were to promise to send you another fruitcake when I got back to town…”I suggested. Uncle Oliver sighed, but he dried his hands and opened the cupboard. Carefully he took out the bag with the oranges, the two boxes of candied cherries, the mechanical rabbit, and, finally, the fruitcake.

He looked up at me. “Do you suppose one orange… or perhaps two?”

“I think the fruitcake,” I said.

He sighed again, and handed me the fruitcake. While he was storing the rest back in the cupboard I hurried out with the fruitcake and down through the garden to Uncle Peter. “Here,” I said. “Try this.” Uncle Peter brightened.

“Do you suppose it will work?” he asked. “I was thinking about the apple tree. You see, Oliver likes apples, and the white cats eat them.”

“Try the fruitcake first,” I said.

Uncle Oliver and I sat in the living room until very late, watching the white cats settle to sleep, and Uncle Peter stayed in the garden. When I finally went to bed I glanced out of my window and thought I saw, far down among the trees, a white shape moving and Sandra Williamson capering along behind.

The next morning I woke very early and went into the garden before Peter and Oliver were awake. There was no sign of the fruitcake near the fence, but the white cats were walking about, stretching in the morning and unafraid. When I came in to breakfast there were tomatoes on the table, ripe and red and sitting on a green plate, with Uncle Oliver crowing over them.

“See, how pretty,” he said. “Pretty tomatoes. A little boy brought them.”

Peter came into the doorway, smiling. “He was so pleased with the fruitcake,” he said. “Perhaps next time you come you will bring two?”

All during breakfast Peter and Oliver were smiling at each other, making quick little gestures of friendship. Oliver insisted on my having a tomato with my coffee, and asked if it were not the prettiest I had ever tasted, while Peter sat back and watched admiringly.

Finally, when the dishes had been cleared off, Uncle Oliver sat down beside Peter and they smiled again at each other. "Perhaps soon we will go to the city for a visit," Peter said to me. Neither of them had ever come into the city since they left it to live in San Rafael, and neither of them ever expected to come; it was enough to know that they could if they wanted to. Next to the death of Mrs. Duff, it was their favorite mutual whimsy, and mention of it meant that everything was friendly again between them.

And Oliver took up the conversation from there:

"I remember so clearly the morning she died," he said to me. "Mrs. Duff, in the house here, and so pleasant a morning. And all the white cats one after another going over the fence and away."

"It was over a week before they came back at all," Uncle Peter added, "and then, just over the fence one after another, with never an explanation."

"She had pretty little names for them all," Uncle Oliver said.

"They should all have little leather collars with their names on. You could name them, Oliver, and I would make each one a little leather collar with its name on." Uncle Peter stroked Sandra Williamson's head. "All with little leather collars," he said.

When I left they walked down to the bottom of the hill with me, standing to wave goodbye, with Sandra Williamson sitting behind them, while I went along down the dirt road, carrying my suitcase.

But ever since then, when I go back each spring, I take oranges, the fruitcakes, and three toys, and three boxes of candied cherries, and Oliver puts them all away, some to be given out to himself and Peter in less exciting times, and some to be doled out carefully and exactly over the back fence at the foot of the garden.

FAME

First published in Writer, August 1948

TWO DAYS BEFORE MY first novel was to be published, while I was packing to leave the small Vermont town in which I live to go to New York, the telephone rang, and when I snatched it up irritably and said, “Hello,” a sweet old lady’s voice answered me, “Hello, who’s this?” which is a common enough Vermont telephone greeting.

“This is Shirley Jackson,” I said, a little soothed because my name reminded me of my book.

“Well,” she said vaguely, “is Mrs. Stanley Hyman there, please?”

I waited for a minute and then, “This is Mrs. Hyman,” I said reluctantly.

Her voice brightened. “Mrs. Hyman,” she said, pleased, “this is Mrs. Sheila Lang of the newspaper. I’ve been trying to get in touch with you for days.”

“I’m so sorry,” I said. “I’ve been terribly busy — my book, and all.”

“Yes,” she said. “Well, Mrs. Hyman, this is what I wanted. You read the paper, of course?”

“Of course,” I said, “and I’ve been sort of expecting…”

“Well, then, surely, you read the North Village Notes column?”

“Yes, indeed,” I said warmly.

“That’s *my* column,” she said. “I *write* that column.”

“Of course, I’m a North Village resident,” I said, “but I rather thought that for a thing of this importance…”

“Now, what I’m doing is this. I’m calling up a few people in town who I thought might have items of news for me…”

“Certainly,” I said, and reached for one of the numerous copies of the book jacket lying around the house. “The name of the book…”

“First of all,” she said, “where exactly in town do you live, Mrs. Hyman?”

“On Prospect Street,” I said. *“The Road Through the Wall.”*

“I see,” she said. “Just let me take that down.”

“That’s the name of the book,” I said.

“Yes,” she said. “Which house would that be, I wonder.”

“The old Elwell place,” I said.

“On the corner of Mechanic? I thought the young Elwells lived there.”

“That’s next door,” I said. “We’re in the *old* Elwell place.”

“The old *Thatcher* place?” she said. “We always call that the old Thatcher place; he built it, you know.”

“That’s the one,” I said. “It’s going to be published the day after tomorrow.”

“I didn’t know *anyone* lived there,” she said. “I thought it was empty.”

“We’ve lived here three years,” I said a little stiffly.

“I don’t get out much anymore,” she said. “Now, what little items of local news do you have for me? Any visitors? Children’s parties?”

“I’m publishing a book next week,” I said. “I am going down to New York for my publication day.”

“Taking your family?” she asked. “Any children, by the way?”

“Two,” I said. “I’m taking them.”

“Isn’t that nice,” she said. “I bet they’re excited.”

“You know,” I said madly, “I’ve been asked to do the Girl Scout column for your paper.”

“Really?” She sounded doubtful. “I’m sure you’ll enjoy it. It’s such an *informal* newspaper.”

“Yes,” I said. “Would you like to hear about my book?”

“I certainly would,” she said. “Anytime you have any little newsy items for me, you be sure and call me right up. My number’s in the book.”

“Thank you,” I said. “Well, *my* book…”

“I have so much enjoyed our little talk, Mrs. Hyman. Imagine me not knowing anyone was living in the old Thatcher place!”

“The Road Through the Wall,” I said. “Farrar and Straus.”

“You know,” she said, “now that I don’t get out anymore, I find that doing this column keeps me in touch with my neighbors. It’s social, sort of.”

“Two seventy-five,” I said. “It’ll be in the local bookstore.”

“You probably find the same thing with the Girl Scout column,” she said. “Thank you so much, Mrs. Hyman. Do call me again soon.”

“I started it last winter,” I said.

“Goodbye,” she said sweetly, and hung up.

I kept the column that appeared as the North Village Notes of the newspaper the next day. Several people remarked on it to me. It was on the last page of the four.

NORTH VILLAGE NOTES

Mrs. Royal Jones of Main Street is ill.

Miss Mary Randall of Waite Street is confined to her home with chicken pox.

One of the hooked rug classes met last evening with Mrs. Ruth Harris.

Hurlbut Lang of Troy spent the weekend with his parents in North Village, Mr. and Mrs. R. L. Lang.

The food sale of the Baptist Church has been postponed indefinitely due to weather conditions.

Mrs. Stanley Hyman has moved into the old Thatcher place on Prospect Street. She and her family are visiting Mr. and Mrs. Farrarstraus of New York City this week.

Mrs. J. N. Arnold of Burlington spent the weekend in town with Mr. and Mrs. Samuel Montague.

Little Lola Kittredge of East Road celebrated her fifth birthday on Tuesday. Six little friends joined to wish her many happy returns of the day, and ice cream and cake were served.

The Sorcerer's Apprentice

MISS MATT WAS at least partially conscious that she looked like the teacher everyone has had for English in first-year high school; she was small and pretty, in a rice-powder fashion, with a great mass of soft dark hair that tried to stay on top of her head and straggled instead down over her ears; her voice was low and turned pleading instead of sharp; any presentable fourteen-year-old bully could pass her course easily. She had read *Silas Marner* aloud almost daily for the past ten years, marked tests in a dainty blue pencil, and still blushed dreadfully at the age of thirty-four.

The year she was twenty-eight she had gone from New York to San Francisco through the Panama Canal with two other teachers from her high school (Gym and General Science), but none of them had found husbands. With her meekest expectations still unsatisfied, Miss Matt lived quietly alone in an inexpensive two-room apartment, with a tiny kitchenette and a Cézanne print over the sofa. She knew her landlady fairly well; they had a cup of tea together occasionally, two refined ladies, in the landlady's first-floor apartment, but in the six years she had lived in her apartment, Miss Matt had not met any of her neighbors.

On Wednesday afternoons, freed early from the high school, Miss Matt came home and straightened her apartment and washed her hair, and then, her head wrapped in a towel, wearing a Chinese silk housecoat, Miss Matt sat down with a peaceful cup of tea and played *Afternoon of a Faun* and *The Sorcerer's Apprentice* on her small portable phonograph. Sometimes, when it had been a hard day at school and the future looked unusually dark, Miss Matt would permit herself to cry luxuriously for half an hour;

afterward she would wash her face, and dress and go out to some nice restaurant for dinner.

Miss Matt was crying on the afternoon that Krishna came to see her. There was a sudden vigorous knock on the door, and while Miss Matt was still holding her handkerchief before her in surprise, the door opened a little and a small pretty head hooked curiously around the edge of the door and stayed, regarding Miss Matt.

After a minute Miss Matt walked over to the phonograph and turned off *The Sorcerer's Apprentice,* averting her head so the tears were not completely visible. "Were you looking for me?" Miss Matt asked finally, then added "Dear?" as the visitor was undeniably a female child.

"Marian said I could come in here," the child said.

Miss Matt collected herself and touched the handkerchief delicately to her eyes. "What did you want me for?" she asked. It was the first time in years Miss Matt had spoken to a child younger than the first year of high school, and she felt free to end a sentence with a preposition.

The child opened the door wider and slipped through, closing it behind her. She was carrying a large album of phonograph records, which she deposited carefully on Miss Matt's maple end table.

"Are those *your* records?" Miss Matt asked hesitantly.

"Marian said I could come and ask you if it is all right for me to play them here on your phonograph," the child said. "What's that?" She pointed at the Cézanne.

"It's a picture," Miss Matt said.

"We have pictures too," the child said. "We have pictures of my daddy."

"Won't you sit down?"

The child turned and looked at Miss Matt for a long minute. "All right," she said finally. "What's your name?"

"Miss Matt," Miss Matt said. "You may call me Miss Matt."

"Mine's Krishna," the child said.

"Krishna." Miss Matt sat down and picked up her cup of tea. "Krishna?"

"Krishna Raleigh," the child said. "I'm six years old and I live just downstairs and right underneath here." Both she and Miss Matt looked down at the floor, and then Krishna went on, "Marian said I could come and play my records here."

"Who is Marian?" Miss Matt asked, "and why should she give you permission to come up here?"

"That's my mother, Marian," Krishna said impatiently.

"I think it's all right." Miss Matt tried to make her voice sound a little doubtful, as though she felt enough authority to deny Krishna if she wanted to, but she realized almost immediately that all Krishna thought was that possibly Miss Matt did not own the phonograph either. "What records are they?" Miss Matt asked quickly.

"My daddy's records," Krishna said proudly. "My daddy made them for me and Marian, and you can listen to them if you want to."

Miss Matt stood up and reached for the album, but Krishna said "*I'll* do it" and ran across the room to put an arm protectingly over the album. "They're *my* records," she said.

"May I look at them?" Miss Matt asked coldly.

"No," Krishna said. She opened the album lovingly and took out the first record. "This is my daddy playing the piano," she said. "Take that other record off the phonograph." Miss Matt went silently and removed *The Sorcerer's Apprentice* and changed the needle while Krishna stood by, impatiently holding her record. "I play the phonograph all the time at home, but now it's broken," she said, "so Marian said I could come and ask you if you would let me hear my daddy's records."

The edge of Krishna’s chin came just to the level of the turntable; she was forced, reluctantly, to yield the record to Miss Matt to have it put on the phonograph, and Miss Matt inspected it carefully, turning it over and over, before she placed it onto the turntable. It was a private recording, labeled TOWN HALL, and then, in ink underneath, “James Raleigh, Shostakovich Polka, June, 1940.” The other side was smooth and ungrooved; Miss Matt ran her hand over it before she set it down.

“Come *on,*” Krishna said finally. “This record has where my daddy talks on it.” She waited, her face just at the edge of the phonograph, and when Miss Matt started to put the phonograph arm down on the record, Krishna giggled and said, “*These* records start from the inside, dopey.” Miss Matt put the arm down at the center of the record and waited. First there was the sound of applause, and then a short wait, and then a man’s voice said faintly “…by Shostakovich,” and then more applause. “That’s my daddy talking,” Krishna said. Miss Matt waited respectfully until the piano started and then said, “Is that your father playing?”

“He played all these records,” Krishna said. “He plays the piano in concerts.” Her voice rose defiantly. “He’s the best piano player who ever lived.”

Miss Matt sat down on the straight chair next to the phonograph. “Would you like to sit on the couch?” she asked Krishna.

Krishna went over solemnly and sat down on the edge of the couch, and Miss Matt, with the music loud beside her, watched the child curiously. She was a very pretty child, with blond curls and a sweet smile; Miss Matt wondered fleetingly if her father was blond. “Where is your father now?” she asked.

“Shhh,” Krishna said, pointing to the phonograph. “He’s in the Army.”

Miss Matt nodded sympathetically.

"He kills people," Krishna said. "He's over killing Nazis now." She sighed theatrically. "He used to play the piano, and when he's killed all the Nazis he's going to come home and play the piano again."

"He plays beautifully," Miss Matt said softly.

"It's all right," Krishna said. Her eyes wandered around the room and came to rest finally. "What's that thing?"

Miss Matt stood up and lifted the arm of the phonograph from the record. "I thought you wanted to hear your daddy playing," she said.

"What's that thing?" Krishna repeated.

Miss Matt turned. "It's a doll," she said with annoyance. "Do you want to hear the records or not?"

"I want that doll," Krishna said. She slid off the couch and scampered across the room to the doll.

"I bought that doll in a place called Panama," Miss Matt said. "I bought it from a little girl about your age whose mother made lots of dolls like that. I like that doll as well as almost anything I own." She raised her voice slightly. "Shall I continue with the records?"

Krishna was trying to reach for the doll high in the bookcase where Miss Matt kept it; finally she put her foot on the lower shelf, pushing the books back, and reached up on her toes to seize the doll triumphantly. It was a limp thing, with a gourd for a head and a scrap of red silk for a dress. "I'm going to take this doll home," Krishna said.

"That's my doll." Miss Matt forced herself to stand by the phonograph. "Your mother wouldn't like to have you take someone else's things."

"She doesn't care," Krishna said.

"Krishna," Miss Matt said, "You may not have that doll. Put it back, please."

Krishna turned and looked at Miss Matt in surprise. "I want it," she said.

“I won’t let you play your daddy’s records on the phonograph,” Miss Matt warned.

“All right.” Krishna was pulling interestedly at the doll’s head, twisting the red silk dress. “I heard them lots of times.”

Miss Matt walked over and put her hand firmly on the doll. “Give that to me,” she demanded.

Krishna began to laugh. She snatched the doll away from Miss Matt and retreated with it across the room. “You’re a crazy old woman,” she said. “You’re an old crazy old woman.”

“Go home,” Miss Matt said. She took a deep breath to calm herself, and lifted her head. “Go right home. Go home immediately.”

“No,” Krishna said. “You’re a crazy old woman, crazy, crazy.” Deliberately holding the doll out in front of her, she ripped off the silk dress and let it fall onto the floor, then snapped off the head. Miss Matt watched Krishna for a minute, her chin trembling, and then she went over to the phonograph and lifted the record off and smashed it onto the floor. “You don’t deserve to have a father like that,” she said.

Krishna began to laugh again. “Wait till I tell Marian,” she said. “Wait till I tell Marian a crazy old woman broke my daddy’s best record where he was talking.”

“You can tell Marian anything you like,” Miss Matt said. For the first time in her life her voice was shrill. “Now you take the rest of these records and get out.” She seized Krishna quickly by the shoulder, pinching as hard as she could, and began to push her toward the door, slapping her hands to make her drop the pieces of the doll.

Krishna, still laughing, clung stubbornly to the door frame, bracing her feet against Miss Matt’s furious shoving. Miss Matt finally got her into the hall and slammed the door, then took the album of records and set them quickly outside, slamming the door again before Krishna could get back in. Krishna was still laughing when Miss Matt slammed the door for the second time and turned the key, but when the child realized that the door had shut for the last time, her laughter turned suddenly into howls of anger. Miss Matt, leaning against the door on the inside, distinguished the phrase, repeated over and over, “I want that doll!” Finally Miss Matt heard the crying fade away toward the stairs, and the child’s voice crying, “Mommy, make her give me that doll!”

I’ve got to hurry, Miss Matt thought. She stepped quickly around the broken record on the floor to the broken doll, scooped up the dress and then the other pieces, and hesitated, looking around. Finally she went into the kitchenette and opened the cupboard under the sink, and put the pieces of the doll behind the boxes of soap and the dusting cloths. I’ll tell them that awful child did it, she was thinking. If I hurry, I can say that child did it all. Still hurrying, she took a brush and a dustpan and went back to the broken record. It had shattered into small pieces, and it took Miss Matt a few precious seconds to gather them up into the dustpan. I’ll tell them I’ll sue, she was thinking. She emptied the dustpan into a paper bag and put the bag into the sink cupboard with the doll, and then, her house straightened, with no sign left of Krishna’s presence, she fluffed up the pillows of the couch and went into her little bedroom, where she dressed hurriedly and carelessly, repeating to herself incoherently: “I’ll tell them the child did it, I’ll say I’ll sue.”

She pulled on a hat over her still-damp hair, tucking the straggling ends up under the hat and holding them there with many hairpins. When she put her coat on, she turned up the collar and ducked her head down so her face would be hidden. Then she picked up her pocketbook and went out, closing the door behind her quietly. Go to the movies where it’s dark, she was thinking. When she got down the first flight of stairs and was near the door of the apartment directly under hers, she hesitated for a minute before she ran down the hall to the next flight of stairs. Come back later, she thought, when they’re all tired of looking for me.

Period Piece

MRS. VAN CORN had not been out of the house in seven months. She could walk perfectly well, although she disliked it; she was not particularly afraid of subways or taxis; she was not pregnant, sick, or discouraged with the things she saw. Mrs. Van Corn had simply not been out of the house because she liked staying inside. “It’s the things that happen to me,” she would explain seriously to her few intimate friends who were allowed inside the house to visit her. “I do so detest mud, and people, and so many ugly things happen…like…” And Mrs. Van Corn would allow her voice to trail off significantly, and whatever friend was listening would nod, and shrug sympathetically, and murmur.

Mrs. Van Corn always referred to the incident of the dog by a significant silence, and her friends always understood. The incident of the dog had been the direct cause of Mrs. Van Corn’s deciding to remain inside the house. She had been outside shopping one day, with George, the chauffeur, waiting carefully outside the doors of the shops, and she had been leaving the hairdresser, displeased at something. She had almost reached the car (with George standing carefully by the open door) when a dog — not a Fifth Avenue dog — had come up and put its head under her skirt. “His nose, you know,” Mrs. Van Corn subsequently explained, faintly. It had been necessary for George to help her carefully into the car and take her home immediately. When she reached home and had been assisted to her room, Mrs. Van Corn concluded that she did not belong in the outside world, and made her decision to stay at home.

"After all," she said, "there's no need to expose oneself needlessly to these things." And so Mrs. Van Corn stayed at home. Mr. Van Corn, who went out every day, brought her back news of the outside world ("I saw Mark Carstairs the other day, and he sends his regards and asks may he call…"), and Mrs. Van Corn's son, Howard, who was usually away at college, brought home occasional college acquaintances to cheer his mother up.

Mrs. Van Corn was never bored. There was much to do around the house, and there were always her friends. She rested comfortably, fragile in lace, in a quiet room and waited for nice people to come to her, and nice people came, chatted, and departed. Rarely was Mrs. Van Corn disturbed by her guests. Perhaps one of them would speak loudly — this happened infrequently — and the guest would not return. "I can't bear harshness," Mrs. Van Corn would say afterward, appealingly. "I can't endure unpleasantness, you know." And so, when Howard came unexpectedly home from college to meet his mother's gracious kiss, and her charmed "Oh, is it vacation again, my dear?" — when Howard came home, he hesitated before speaking to his mother about the very urgent matter that had brought him to her. He sat instead at her feet, upon an embroidered pillow that Mrs. Van Corn kept for her lapdog, and spoke to her softly and graciously. But when conversation had died, and Mrs. Van Corn was sitting with her hands in her lap gazing wistfully upon space, Howard ventured:

"Mother…I'm a little worried."

"Yes, dear?" His mother's eyes rested upon him tenderly.

"I don't suppose you've heard…It's about conscription."

"Yes, dear?"

"You see, they want to take people about my age and make them join a sort of army…"

"An army, my dear?"

"Well…yes. A sort of army."

"But are we at war? I mean…I'm afraid I don't quite understand, Howard."

"Not war," Howard said, stumbling a little. "It's for peace, somehow, Mother. They take all the boys between the ages of twenty-one and thirty-one, I think, and they train them to be soldiers in case there *is* a war. Understand?"

Mrs. Van Corn nodded seriously.

"And they make them go, even if they don't want to go, and I don't want to go."

"Why not?"

"Because…well, I want to finish college, and I don't want to be in an army…"

Mrs. Van Corn was trying very hard to understand. "But, dear, I don't quite see. Won't all your young friends be with you? I mean, won't it be quite gay for you?"

"But it will be so dreadful. I'll have to drill all day, and work, and learn to shoot a gun…"

Mrs. Van Corn leaned back with her eyes closed, and Howard paused, contrite.

"Mother, I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to say anything to distress you. Just, about the guns…Well, you see why I would prefer not to go…"

Mrs. Van Corn lifted her hand to her cheek. "Please, Howard," she said. "Please don't discuss the details with me anymore."

"Will you make my father fix it so I don't have to go, then?"

"I prefer not to think about it," Mrs. Van Corn said.

Howard waited for a moment, and then he began again. “Mother,” he said.

“Yes, my dear?”

“Mother, there’s going to be a war, you know.”

“Is there, dear?” asked Mrs. Van Corn, obviously believing that the subject had been changed.

“Very soon, Mother. Does it worry you?”

“Your father mentioned it. He said it would be a good thing. He said we might do worse than go to war. War, he says, is a noble thing.” Mrs. Van Corn was quite tired out from the effort of remembering all this. She lay back again.

“People like my father,” said Howard desperately, “believe in war as a benefit to mankind, because it solves unemployment and things.”

Mrs. Van Corn nodded. “Perhaps it does,” she said.

“But, Mother,” Howard said, “if I were in this peacetime army thing, I would have to go to war.”

“Is there a war?”

“There will be.”

“And you will go to war, my dear?”

“If I am in the army I will.”

Mrs. Van Corn opened her eyes, and looked seriously at Howard. “My dear,” she said, “I would be proud of you.”

Howard stared. “Why?”

“War is a noble thing,” Mrs. Van Corn said, and closed her eyes again.

“But I might get shot, or wounded, Mother,” Howard said. “Mother,” he added urgently, “you wouldn’t want to see me blind, would you? Or shell-shocked?”

“*Please,* Howard!” his mother said, sitting up straight.

“But you wouldn’t like to have to take care of me, would you?”

“There are institutions for such cases,” Mrs. Van Corn said vaguely.

Howard took a deep breath. “Suppose I was killed, Mother?”

“Your grandfather fought in the Civil War, my dear,” Mrs. Van Corn said firmly. “And he was a hero.”

Howard stood up. “Very well, Mother,” he said. “There is only one thing for me to do. I shall get married, and so be exempt from conscription.”

“Married?” Mrs. Van Corn exclaimed. “Why, Howard, my dear boy!”

“Immediately,” Howard said.

“Some nice girl,” Mrs. Van Corn said dreamily, “some *sweet* girl.”

“Then I won’t have to go,” Howard said, almost tearfully.

“Bring her up to dinner *soon,*” Mrs. Van Corn said.

“But, Mother—”

“After all, my dear, you are getting on to the age when a man must assume his responsibilities. And I think that a wife…and a grandson,” Mrs. Van Corn went on rather more bleakly. “But a young wife,” she added happily. “Bring her soon, really, Howard. Tomorrow?”

“But…” Howard began. Then: “Yes, Mother,” he said, controlling his voice, and then, immediately: “Will you excuse me, please, Mother?”

“Of course, my dear boy,” Mrs. Van Corn said, opening her eyes. “Run along, my dear.”

As Howard left the room, Mrs. Van Corn watched him affectionately. “The dear boy,” she said to herself. “A wife! Such a gay wedding. And clothes!” I shall go out to the wedding, Mrs. Van Corn decided suddenly. I am sure everything will be charming at my own son’s wedding. Then: “The dear boy,” she said, and let her eyes close again.

4-F Party

RICKEY PARKER WAS out in the kitchen counting glasses when the doorbell rang. He looked through the kitchen door, saw Pearl just putting down her cigarette preparatory to rising, and then, coming out of the kitchen holding a bottle of bourbon, he said: “I’ll get it. It’s probably Jillie and that cousin of hers.”

Pearl rose and stood in the living room near the piano, waiting. When she saw that it was Jillie and her cousin, she stepped forward after the flurry of greetings and introductions and took Rickey by the arm. “So glad to see you,” Pearl said in her best voice to the cousin. “It’s nice of you to come around with Jillie.”

“Pearl, darling,” Jillie said, “this is Ruth. I call her Ruthie. She’s adorable. You’ll love her. She’s without a husband now too, and I think we’re going to have grand times together, all of us.”

“I’m so glad you could come tonight,” Pearl said to Ruth. “It must be very lonely for you at first.”

“It is, a little,” Ruth said. She was very small and spoke in a little voice, looking up at Pearl and barely smiling. “I guess I’ll be okay, though.”

Rickey had Jillie’s coat and had taken her by the arm and was pulling her into the kitchen. “So that’s what I was thinking,” he said. “I thought, If there are really eight women for every man, why shouldn’t I be the man….” They disappeared into the kitchen, and the door swung back and forth behind them.

“Come in and sit down, won’t you?” Pearl said. She felt eager to be a good hostess, to see that Ruth was comfortable and warm. I imagine she has that effect on everyone, Pearl thought suddenly, men especially. “How long has your husband been gone?”

Ruth sat down on the couch and folded her hands on her lap, not looking at them. “Not long yet,” she said. “Two weeks, about.”

“Are you here just visiting with Jillie?” Pearl asked. “Or permanently, or what?”

“I’m going to get a job here, I think,” Ruth said hopefully. “Welding, maybe.”

“Ever done it before?” The doorbell rang again. Pearl half rose, waiting for Rickey.

He called from the kitchen: “Will you answer that, Pearl?”

“We’re making drinks,” Jillie added.

Pearl went to the door and opened it. “Audrey,” she said, “hello.” Why do women always look so funny alone at night? she thought. I guess you’re so used to seeing them with *some*one. “How are you?” she asked.

“Darling,” Audrey said, “such an incredible taxi driver! He was so funny; wait till you hear.”

“I can’t wait,” Pearl said.

“I can’t repeat it,” Audrey said, “I’ll die. Jillie here?”

“Hello,” Jillie said from the kitchen doorway. “Rickey and I made you people some powerful drinks.”

Rickey came into the doorway behind Jillie. “Another of my girlfriends,” he said. “Meet the one man left in town, Audrey.”

“He’s crazy,” Jillie said. “He says he’s going to get eight girls for himself, because that’s the ratio these days.”

“I’m going to love every minute of this,” Rickey said. “Everyone go sit down and I’ll bring this stuff in.”

Pearl led Audrey over to Ruth and introduced them. “Ruth’s husband left only two weeks ago,” she added.

“You poor kid,” Audrey said. “Mine left seven months ago.”

“Don’t pay any attention to her, dear,” Pearl said. “She really misses him terribly.”

“Where is he now?” Ruth asked in her soft voice.

“Good Lord!” Audrey shrugged elaborately. “Would they tell me? I get letters from everywhere — he could be in Berlin!”

Ruth looked at Audrey. “Seven months is a long time,” she said.

“We’re all in the same boat,” Pearl said, “except me. What with Rickey not being taken at all, I’m probably going to be the only wife left in town before long.”

“Imagine being stuck with Rickey for the duration!” Audrey said.

“You’re all stuck with Rickey for the duration,” Rickey said, coming into the room with a tray. Jillie followed him, with a bowl of pretzels in each hand. “I’m the one 4-F in sight, girls, and you’d better get used to the idea now.”

“Where’ll I put this stuff?” Jillie asked. “You comfortable, Ruthie?”

Ruth nodded.

“Silly kid’s lonesome as hell,” Jillie said. “Just been married a few months.”

“Really?” Pearl said to Ruth.

“Not quite a year,” Ruth said softly.

“My. God.” Audrey rose and stood dramatically by the piano. “Look, everyone,” she said, “here’s the ideal state. Married just long enough to get the fun of it, and then *grass-widowed for—”*

Pearl cut in quickly, “Where is *your* husband now?”

“He’s in Texas somewhere,” Ruth said. She accepted the drink Rickey held out to her. “Thank you so much,” she said.

“I want all you girls to know,” Rickey said, “I want all you girls to know that from now on I’m the big shot around here. From now on you girls are going to be mixing drinks for me, and bringing me my slippers, and crowding around me so thick—” He began to sing, waving a drink in his hand. “ ‘Over hill, over dale, da-da-da-da-da-da-da, as the 4-Fs go rolling along….’”

“Rickey!” Pearl said. Rickey looked at her over his shoulder.

“Listen, dear wife,” he said, “you’ve got to make up your mind to share me with all these charming ladies from now on. I’m just coming into my own.”

“Why don’t you ration yourself?” Pearl asked bitterly.

Rickey said immediately: “A young man deciding to ration—”

“Himself and his primitive passion,” Audrey added.

“Himself and his primitive *elation,*” Jillie insisted.

“He said, ‘I can afford,’ “ Rickey said, “To be high and adored—”

“Because I myself am all the fashion,” Audrey finished.

“*Fay*shion,” Jillie said.

Pearl went over quietly to where Audrey was sitting. “What do you hear from Carl?” she asked.

“The same old thing,” Audrey said. “He’s working hard, and very happy to be—”

Rickey had heard them, and he interrupted with a shout: “Another man’s name! Another man’s name has been mentioned in my presence!”

“There, darling,” Jillie said. She put her arm around Rickey. “You still have me and Ruthie.”

“They ought to give me the Purple Heart for this,” Rickey said. “Talk about wounded in action.”

“Like to play bridge, or something?” Pearl asked Audrey. “This is liable to go on and on.”

Rickey got up and went over to stand in front of Pearl. “Listen,” he said, “we’re just having a lot of fun, trying to make these girls forget that they’re all alone and maybe show them a good time. Why do you have to go spoiling everything?”

“You can only handle one at a time, dear,” Pearl said, with a smile she knew was not as kind as it might be. “We have to work in shifts, after all.”

“Swing shift,” Jillie said instantly.

Rickey began to laugh. “My good old Jillie,” he said.

Pearl caught Ruth’s eye, and Ruth went across the room to where Pearl was sitting with Audrey. “You two look so confidential,” Ruth said, “I’m afraid to interrupt.”

“Don’t be silly.” Audrey smiled. “We’re just talking.”

“I thought there might be something we could do,” Pearl said. “Maybe even some silly game. After all, you probably didn’t come to hear Rickey make a fool of himself.”

“Honestly,” Ruth said, leaning against the fireplace, “it’s nice just being with people.”

Rickey and Jillie, arm in arm, bore down on them, singing, “ ‘As the 4-Fs go rolling along.’”

“What you girls gossiping about?” Rickey demanded.

“We were just talking to Ruth,” Audrey said.

“Seems to me I barely met you,” Rickey said, looking at Ruth. “You’re without a husband too, aren’t you?”

“Only two weeks without,” Ruth said shyly.

“Wait a while,” Rickey said. “Where’s the old man?”

“My husband?” Ruth said. “In Texas, somewhere, typing.”

“Typing?”

“He’s only limited service,” Ruth explained, turning to Pearl. “His eyes.”

“Mrs. Limited Service,” Rickey shouted, hoisting his glass. “Here’s to Mrs. Limited Service.” And to Ruth he prompted, “A big strong man in spite of his eyes, though?”

“He’s nice and strong,” Ruth admitted. She turned to Pearl again. “It’s just because of his eyes,” she repeated.

Jillie giggled. “If anything could keep you from missing your big strong husband,” she said, putting an arm around Rickey’s shoulder, “it’s this big strong 4-F.”

“It’s my blood pressure,” Rickey said. “Every time I see a lovely girl like Ruthie, it goes up and up and up and up and up—”

“That’s why they won’t let him in the Army,” Pearl said.

“I’m sorry,” Ruth said to Rickey. “That you’re not in the Army, I mean.”

“Dear little Ruthie,” Rickey said, “she’d miss me if I went. Just pretend I’m your husband,” he said to Ruth. “I’m the only man left in town, and I intend to make the most of it.”

“I’m beginning to feel like a fraction of a wife,” Pearl said. “Bridge — Jillie? Audrey? Ruth?”

“Honey,” Audrey was saying to Ruth, “you’ll find you’re not so lonesome after a while. After all, he won’t expect you to shut yourself away from everything.”

“You think he’s behaving wherever he is?” Jillie added.

“Bridge?” Pearl said insistently, her hand on Ruth’s arm.

“Look,” Audrey said, “mine’s been gone so long….I figure he doesn’t want to come back to any cross old maid.”

“I won’t be any cross old maid,” Ruth said.

“What you want to do,” Jillie said helpfully, “is have a little fun. Enjoy life. Have a good time.”

“I missed mine *terribly* for a while,” Audrey said.

“I told you, darling,” Jillie said to Ruth. “We’ll cheer you up if anyone can.”

“*I’ll* cheer her up,” Rickey said. “Who’s the man around here?”

Ruth laughed. “I’m not worried,” she said.

“Ruthie,” Rickey said, “all my life I’ve been waiting for a girl like you. You’re my ideal, I think. Come, kiss me.”

Ruth laughed again.

“Listen,” Rickey said heroically, “you’ll be glad enough to find a guy like me before the war’s over.”

“Rickey,” Pearl said, “you shouldn’t talk like that.”

Rickey waved one hand at Pearl. “Don’t listen to her,” he said. “She’s a sour old woman.”

“Go on, Ruth,” Pearl said, “make him shut up.”

Ruth looked at Pearl for a minute, then stood still while Rickey came across to her, leaned over and kissed her quickly, and stepped back. “Next shift,” he said.

“Happy now?” Pearl snapped at Rickey.

“Don’t rush,” Rickey said. “It’ll be your turn in a minute.”

Ruth stood for a moment where Rickey had left her, then walked out into the hall and picked up her coat. Pearl rose to stop her just as the door closed.

“Well,” Rickey said into the silence, “what a lousy sport *she* was.”

Pearl sighed. “Bridge, girls?” she asked.

The Paradise

When he got off the train, the vague feeling of apprehension that had followed him all the way from camp turned into an acute, embarrassed terror; he stood on the station platform wondering where he could turn and run to, and someone passed him, looked at him curiously, and said, “Back again, Bert?” Then he knew it was too late, and without thinking he started down toward his home.

He passed the candy store and wondered briefly if it would be worthwhile taking her a box of toffee, but then, feeling the bulk of the bracelet in his pocket, he thought, No, that’s enough, maybe I’ll get her something else later. Within a block of his home he met his ten-year-old brother-in-law, and the kid grinned and said, “Hi, Bert, what you doing home?”

“Just back for a day or two,” Bert said uncomfortably, hurrying past; the kid would certainly tell the whole town he was back.

“She ain’t home; her and Ella’s down at the Paradise,” his brother-in-law bawled after him as he reached his front gate; he opened it and went up the steps two at a time. The door was unlocked. As he pushed it shut behind him, he said tentatively, “Gladys?”

There was mail on the dining room table, put down hastily: a letter for her from his mother, a couple of bills. Bert turned his mother’s letter over in his hands for a minute and then put it down again; he knew what it said. He went into the kitchen; she had had a cup of coffee that afternoon; the coffeepot was still faintly warm under his hand. There was a package of bacon in the refrigerator, and a couple of eggs. Breakfast, he thought, and went on into the bedroom. The bed was mussed, and a magazine lay facedown, with half a chocolate bar on its cover. Her housecoat was on the floor of the closet. He left the bedroom and walked back through the kitchen, stopping to look into the bathroom (her powder box still open and a bath towel on the floor), and then into the living room again. "Gladys?" he called softly once more, his hand on the front door. Then he went out into the street again, walking quickly and lightly, his small feet moving with certainty along the familiar sidewalk.

The Paradise was far enough away so that by the time Bert had walked there he was quieted, and his hands were no longer shaking. He lit a cigarette, standing outside the double door, and then he went in. It was an orderly place, well swept and dark, with a bar at the front and booths in the back. It was nearly deserted by now; the respectable people who drank here had gone home to their dinners, and the unrespectable people had gone on to livelier, brighter places. He stood for a minute to get used to the darkness, and heard Gladys's voice clearly: "But I'm not *hungry.*"

She was near the back, sitting in a booth with her sister, Ella, and Ella's friend Frank, and a man Bert didn't know. Bert walked softly back and stood at the entrance of the booth, looking at them for a minute before Ella recognized him in the near dark. "It's Bertie," she shrieked. "Bertie's home again."

"Hey, soldier," Frank said cheerfully, "the war's over. Didn't they tell you out there in the sticks?" He reached out his foot and pulled a chair to the table. "Sit down, Corporal," he said. "Let's get you a beer."

They were all drinking beer. Bert looked at Gladys, and she said, "Hello, Bertie," and smiled. The man sitting next to her looked at him and said, "Hi."

"How come you're back?" Frank asked. "What you doing home again so quick? They can't stand him around that Army," he told Ella. "They keep sending him home."

"I don't blame them," Ella said, and giggled.

"You didn't write," Gladys said to him. "I would have known you were coming if you wrote me."

"Well, it's good to see you," Frank said. "You know Walter, here?" He pointed to the strange man.

"Hi," Walter said.

"Look, Gladys," Bert said, "why don't we go on home? I got a lot to talk to you about."

The corners of Gladys's mouth turned down, and she put her head back and drew up her shoulders. "I can't," she said. "I want to stay here."

"You're not going to start that again, are you, Bert?" Ella demanded. "Because if you are, I'm leaving. Frank and I'll go someplace else where we don't have to listen."

"I'm not doing anything," Bert said. "I just want to talk to my wife, is all."

"I don't want to talk," Gladys said. "I want to stay here."

"And that's that," Frank said. "Have a beer, Bert."

"He hasn't any right," Ella was saying to Walter. "He just can't stand seeing anyone have a nice time."

"Bert isn't going to be mean anymore," Gladys said. "Listen, Bert, you go along home and I'll be there in…" She thought. "In an hour."

"Why should he go home?" Frank put his hand affectionately on Bert's arm. "Let him stick around and have a drink."

"Go on up to Mom's," Ella said. "She'll give you something to eat."

"I saw your brother," Bert said to Gladys. "He told me where you were."

"He followed us," Gladys said. "Walter gave him a dollar." She laughed. "Like in the comics."

The waiter brought a glass of beer and put it on the table in front of Bert, and Frank paid for it. "I'm buying you a beer, Corporal," he said.

Bert hesitated for a minute, then sat down wearily. "Look, Gladys," he said, "I'm just here for a couple of days. You ought to listen to what I have to say."

"I'm listening," Gladys said. She leaned forward, her chin on her hands. "See?" she said.

"All right, dammit," Bert said. He put his hands on the table and looked at them through the glass of beer; he had small hands, hardly larger than Gladys's. That's why I don't knock one of these guys down, he thought. I'm not scared; it's just that I'm not much bigger than Gladys. He looked at her and saw that she was winking at Ella. "I guess I'm going to get a divorce," he said. "My mother thinks I ought to divorce you."

"What for?" Gladys asked blankly. When all the excitement went out of her face it was little and pale, like a rabbit's, or like the face of some small, staring fish.

"Divorce Gladys?" Ella said. "What would she do?"

"She could go back and work in the factory," Bert said. "It wouldn't have anything to do with me anymore."

"That's no way to talk," Frank said. "You're not being fair to Gladys."

"But I didn't do anything," Gladys said.

Bert looked down at his hands again instead of looking at Gladys, and he spoke very slowly and carefully so that nobody would make any mistakes about him. "My mother says our getting married was a mistake, and that when I'm out of the Army you won't settle down and we shouldn't try to stay married. And we were only married for a few days before I left, so it isn’t as though…” He stopped helplessly, then began again: “So they gave me an emergency furlough.” He looked at Gladys. “That means trouble at home. You think I like chasing you into every bar in town?” he finished desperately.

Gladys’s lip trembled. “I didn’t do anything,” she said. “I write you every single week, and I tell you every single thing I’ve been doing. It’s not nice to talk like that.”

“Why don’t we go someplace else?” Walter asked suddenly. “I want to eat.”

Ella began to talk across the table to Walter again. “You know what people are going to say about a girl Gladys’s age who gets divorced by her husband, and it isn’t very nice to think of people talking like that about your own sister.”

“You see why I wanted to go home?” Bert said. “This is no place to talk about something serious.”

“Seventeen,” Ella went on, her voice rising. “Only seventeen years old, my sister is. And what are people going to say?”

Walter stood up and reached for his coat on the rack. “I’m going someplace and eat,” he said. Dragging his coat after him, he started for the door.

“Let’s all go,” Ella said. “We can talk later.” She shoved impatiently at Frank to get him to let her out of the booth, and Gladys slid along the seat on her side to get out. Bert caught her by the arm. “Listen, Gladys,” he said softly. “Let them go wherever they want to. We’ll go home.”

She pulled her arm away, not looking at him, and he said desperately, “I’ll be gone by tomorrow night.”

“Come *on,* Gladys,” Ella said. “You can bring Bert.”

“Look,” Bert said to Gladys, “I thought we could go to the hotel for dinner. It’s Saturday; we could dance, too, for a while.”

Gladys looked at him. “I don’t want to,” she said.

“I brought you a bracelet,” Bert said. “I didn’t want to give it to you with all of them watching.” He touched her arm again. “Listen, Gladys,” he said, “I’m just going to be here for one night.”

“Wait a minute, then,” Gladys said ungraciously, and hurried to catch Ella. They talked for a minute while Walter waited impatiently at the door, and then Gladys said, “See you Monday, at my place,” and came back to Bert.

“It’s okay,” she said. “Ella doesn’t mind. They’ll get someone else for Walter.”

He took her coat down and held it for her to put on. “You’ll like it down at the hotel.”

She turned the corners of her mouth down again. “You *said*...” she began.

“Okay, okay,” Bert said quickly.

When they got out to the street it was dark, and Ella and Frank and Walter were already out of sight. Gladys started walking toward the brighter part of town, toward the hotel, and Bert caught up with her. “We’ve got to talk about this, though, seriously,” he said insistently.

She looked up at him and smiled. Then, as they walked along, she curled her hand under his arm and leaned up against him affectionately.

“Nice old Bert,” she said.

Homecoming

JUDITH WALKED UP the subway stairs and into the daylight with the tired, anticlimactic feeling that comes after something exciting and final is over. She tried to make herself believe that it was because she had gone to a movie, strangely, alone in the afternoon, instead of in the evening with the girls from her office. The next movie she went to, she thought suddenly, she would be with her husband again, sitting beside him in the darkness after such a long time.

She walked quickly down the street and stopped in front of her market, watching to see if her son, Robbie, was visible. He would be wearing his little blue overalls that fit like a sailor's pants, and he would be accompanied by Judith's friend Sally, who picked him up every afternoon after nursery school and watched over him until Judith got home.

After looking around for a minute, Judith turned and entered the market, thinking that shopping early might be easier, before the market's usual six o'clock rush. The market was almost empty; no one in this neighborhood shopped at four in the afternoon; they were there either at ten in the morning, if they were home during the day, or after five-thirty, on their way back from work. At the meat counter Judith stood uninspired before the trays of meat.

The butcher came toward her cheerfully. "What can I do for you?" he asked, smiling.

Judith smiled. "I wish I knew," she said. "What shall I have for dinner?"

"Nice chops?" the butcher suggested. "Some very nice pork chops."

"No, thanks," Judith said.

“Liver?”

“Give me a little piece for the baby,” Judith said. She hesitated. “I want a roast,” she said. “A chicken, maybe.”

The butcher was reaching into the counter, selecting a piece of liver. “Going to have company?” he said.

“Yes,” Judith said. “My husband’s coming home.”

The butcher stood up behind the counter and said, “Isn’t that fine. Now, isn’t that the best news I’ve had today.” He smiled at Judith. “You’ll want a nice chicken for sure,” he said. “Men like chicken.”

“I guess they do,” Judith said.

“Let me see,” the butcher said, turning over the chickens. “He was in France, wasn’t he?”

“In France,” Judith said.

“About four pounds?” the butcher said.

Judith looked up and found the butcher watching her expectantly. “I don’t know,” she said. “It doesn’t matter.”

The butcher leaned across the counter. “Listen,” he said, “don’t you worry. He’s coming back, isn’t he?”

“Tomorrow, I think,” Judith said.

“Then you got nothing to worry about,” the butcher said. “It’s the ones still over there you got to worry about. My wife,” he said, putting his elbows on the counter and still watching Judith, “my wife, you ought to of heard her when she thought I was going. I got turned down,” he added parenthetically. “High blood pressure. Anyway, she took on like I was being sent to jail, and I kept telling her, ‘Listen,’ I said to her, ‘fighting the Germans is no worse than fighting you,’ and she’d quiet right down. She didn’t have a word to say.”

“I shouldn’t think so,” Judith said.

"Not a word to say," the butcher said. "So you see you got nothing to worry about." He stood up and took hold of his knife. "Cut it up for frying?"

Judith stared. Then after a minute she nodded and said, "Please. Do you have any extra livers?"

"You going to save them for your husband?" the butcher demanded.

"Yes," Judith said.

"Then I got some," the butcher said.

Judith watched him put the tiny sharp knife into the chicken with a concerned expression on his face, and then she said hastily, "I'll just get my groceries," and turned away to the other side of the store. The clerk who came to wait on her was an old friend, and he greeted her cheerfully: "Got a quarter pound of butter for you," he said immediately.

Judith smiled at him. "I'll need it," she said, checking herself against the inclination to tell everyone, "My husband's coming home, you know." If I told him, I could get half a pound, she thought, and said quickly, "I'll need a dozen eggs." We'll have scrambled eggs and sausages the first morning, she thought, six eggs and one for Robbie, two to make a chocolate cake, if I haven't forgotten how; I can always throw it out before he gets home. "Do you have any cooking chocolate? And two containers of milk."

She discussed honeydew melons solemnly with the clerk: they were expensive. Were they ripe enough? Were they worth serving his first morning home, Judith wondered. She finally bought one, and a dozen oranges. Green peas to go with the chicken, carrots for her supper and Robbie's that night. Judith chose her vegetables carefully: one pound of peas — in case it was all a mistake, she thought crazily, she and Robbie could eat them; one bunch of carrots for dinner and enough left over for

Robbie’s lunch. “I don’t want to buy too much,” she said to the clerk suddenly.

The clerk was surprised. “What’s the matter?” he said. “You expect your victory garden to come up all of a sudden?”

Judith realized how silly she sounded. “Loaf of rye bread,” she said. “Small. And a pound of your special coffee, ground very fine.” I bought the last pound less than a week ago, she thought; I must be drinking a lot.

“That all?” asked the clerk.

Judith looked at the groceries piled on the counter. “It doesn’t look like very much,” she said, “and yet I spend all my money every week.”

“You’ve got to eat,” the clerk said.

“Cheese,” Judith said. “Give me a quarter pound of blue cheese.” I’ll try not to make it look fancy, she thought, but that will let him know it’s an occasion, cheese and crackers with dessert.

Judith paid the clerk and gave him the points for the butter and cheese. Then, carrying the large bag, she went back to the meat counter. There were one or two other customers there now, and it was a minute before the butcher got to her. Judith could see her package waiting for her and tried to figure out how much it would cost. She had spent more than she should have, as usual. But tomorrow was an old life recommencing, and she had now a faint feeling that since he’d left, she and Robbie had gotten along somehow without shopping, without food, ration points, or money. The butcher came up to her and handed her the package.

“Little bit excited?” he asked, smiling down the counter at his other customers. “I don’t blame you.”

As Judith walked out the door, she could feel the other women watching her go before they turned to the butcher, who was probably telling them, “Her husband’s coming home from France. Has a little boy, too, two and a half years old.” They would say, “How nice,” and “This is a big day for her,” and then one of them would tell about her sister, she had three children, and they took her husband, who had an ulcer.

Judith went up the steps to the house, still smiling. By the time she got up the stairs, she had carried the story of the sister with three children to the point where her husband was in Kentucky and hadn’t had a furlough in eight months. There was a note on the door: “Robbie and I have gone out to get tight on the money from Robbie’s penny bank. See you later, Sally.” Thinking gratefully of a few minutes sitting quietly by herself, Judith took the note off the door and unlocked her apartment.

Everything was standing quietly waiting for her. The furniture was still there, solid and at home with the walls and the fireplace. Beyond, through the doorway, the bedroom waited, shades at the windows drawn to exactly the same level, the blue curtains still over the windows, the bed big and restful and well made.

She set her packages down on the kitchen table and put the meat away. Almost everything went into the refrigerator. Gradually, over a period of months, her kitchen had been emptied of staples; she had bought flour and sugar and baking powder and salt in small quantities, and she and Robbie had slowly used them up. Now, with her husband coming home again, the shelves in the refrigerator and the cabinet were almost bare. Boxes of cereal for Robbie, a can or two of soup, the canisters shining and clean, looking empty from the outside. No extras; the box of candy someone had given her, standing unopened on one of the shelves, seemed suddenly like an outrage, a quiet offense against good taste. Most of these details she hardly realized, gathering from her kitchen only that it was necessary to start fresh from solid wood and plaster and enamel, to build again from there.

It was too early to start dinner. Judith went into the bedroom, wanting to take off her suit and put on something more comfortable, something that would make her seem a quiet woman in a quiet house, waiting by her son's bed for her husband to come the next day, or the next, or the one after that.

After thinking for a minute in front of her closet, she took out a dark green corduroy housecoat, clean and warm. Buttoning it down the front, she felt fresh and new. Carefully, she hung up her suit and put on low-heeled sandals in place of her dress shoes. Then, with her hair combed out and tied with a ribbon, she put away her best pocketbook and cleaned the little spot of powder off her dresser.

She felt neat and in order with her house when she walked in to straighten up Robbie's room. Robbie's heavy sweater and old blue denim overalls were gone; the clean suit he had worn to nursery school that morning was folded on the chair.

Judith put a fresh sheet on his crib, taking the old one out to the laundry hamper, and then she folded his blue blanket neatly and put it at the foot of the bed. The toys were in order, the way she and Robbie had left them when they cleaned the room together that morning. She pulled the shade halfway down and picked a thread off the floor. Everything was good.

When she had gotten Robbie's fresh sheet, she had left the door to the linen closet open; now, sitting down on the floor and looking at the neat rows, she felt that this was the center of her home. I have eight sheets, all heavy and wide, she thought, and eight pillowcases and four sheets for Robbie and four good tablecloths — everything is clean and it belongs to me.

This is the part of the house he never sees, that no one ever knows about. The laundry when it comes back, the wash on the line fresh from the tubs, belong to me and the part of the house that I live in. He will come into the kitchen, he will open the refrigerator, Robbie will climb on the furniture, but no one knows how many sheets I have but me.

These are the things that lie peacefully waiting to be picked up by someone who understands them: the sheets and the cases, the lace tablecloth set apart, wrapped like a wedding present, and the villain, a torn napkin. Women with homes live so closely with substances: bread, soap, and buttons. The crack in the kitchen linoleum is a danger to the structure; the well-spaced coolness of the sheets on the line is a sensual presentation of security. Judith knew so much about the things she owned and cared for: she knew how pleasant Robbie's bed would feel because she washed the sheets, how soft her table silver would feel to her hand because she polished it and put it away carefully. These are the things I live with, she thought suddenly, my blue dishes, my broom.

The sound of Robbie and Sally clattering up the stairs disturbed her. It would be embarrassing, she thought, if Sally came in and found me on the floor in front of the linen closet. As she rose to go into the living room to open the front door, a thought crossed her mind: I keep house like Sally, with the same ideas and the same objects, and even almost the same apartment, and I have my way of feeling about the things I own, and maybe she has hers; maybe she sits on the floor in front of her linen closet looking like a fool sometimes.

The first thing she said when she opened the door was "You ought to have a baby, Sally, really."

Sally looked up from the stairway, where she was standing behind Robbie, urging him on. "How about letting me have Robbie for good?"

Judith held out her hands to Robbie, who scrambled up the stairs shrieking happily. "Did you have a good time?" she asked him when he reached her. She picked him up and held him for a minute. “Did you have a very good time with Sally?”

“We walked miles,” Sally said. “Up and down every stairway in the block. And we had a dish of ice cream at the drugstore. And we saw a dog.”

“A lovely time,” Judith said. Robbie had his head on her shoulder and lay there quietly. She smiled at Sally. “You were terribly nice, as always, to take such good care of him.”

“He took care of me,” Sally said. “Did you have a good time?”

“Lovely,” Judith said. She held the door open for Sally to come in. With Robbie running in and out of the room and Sally sitting on the couch, the living room was no longer quiet; her house was being lived in. She said suddenly to Sally: “You know what I was doing when you came? I was looking at my linen closet.”

Sally smiled. “I have a pink taffeta bedspread in mine,” she said. “Someone gave it to us for a wedding present and I never used it; it just sits there.”

“I have a lace tablecloth,” Judith said.

“I think on the whole I’d rather have a pink taffeta bedspread,” Sally said critically. “It’s never even been unfolded but once. I’m going to give it to Robbie when he gets married.” She stood up. “Well,” she said. “This isn’t getting my dinner cooked.”

Judith rose to hold the door for her. “Thanks again,” she said.

“See you tomorrow,” Sally said to Robbie. He waved at her vigorously across the room. “So long,” Sally said to Judith.

Judith closed the door and stood beside it quietly for a minute. Robbie was playing in his room; she could hear the sound of blocks falling. Then she realized what she was really listening to: the familiar sounds that came from an awareness of her house with only the two of them in it, the quiet in the rooms, and the waiting.

Daughter, Come Home

THE HUGE FACTORY (formerly making watches, now operating day and night on a new product, one that caused the manufacturers to announce “If you cannot get that new watch this year, just remember that some soldier’s life might be saved by the delicate precision instruments…”) was blacked out for the night with blinds drawn against all of the great plate glass windows, but a few steps beyond and down the block, the Bar & Grill was bright and noisy. Workers who left the factory at midnight stopped in at the bar for a beer before going on home; people were drinking coffee before going in to work, and the homely girl who went from table to table playing requests on the accordion was working overtime on “Der Fuehrer’s Face” and “I’ve Got Sixpence.” Around the circular bar some soldiers and sailors — alone for the most part, sometimes with girls — mingled with the crowding factory workers. “I’m nonessential,” one of the two bartenders told a customer. “Next week I’ll be working up there at the factory with you guys.”

Toward one o’clock the door opened and a small, oldish, slightly drunk man entered and went directly to the bar. “Rhine wine,” he said to the bartender. “What, Jack?” the bartender asked over his shoulder. “Rhine wine,” the little man said. The bartender shrugged and went to the row of bottles lined along the center of the bar. He selected one, and poured a glass for the customer. “Fifteen cents, Jack,” the bartender said. The little man fumbled three nickels across the bar and picked up his glass. Carrying the glass, he left the bar and began to walk up and down between the tables. Occasionally he smiled hopefully at people sitting at the tables, but no one spoke to him or, in fact, even looked at him. Finally, the little man, still carrying his glass, went over to one of the booths and stood beside it, supporting himself against the edge of the table. Then: “Mind if I sit down here a minute?” he asked.

There were two girls sitting in the booth, drinking beer. One was a fashionably dressed blonde, with orange lipstick and carefully painted eyebrows; the other was a serious-looking girl in a brown tweed coat. They had been talking earnestly, but when the man spoke to them they turned and looked at him, at the glass in his hand, and then back to his face.

“Sure,” said the blonde. “You can sit down. No more tables?”

“It isn’t that,” the little man said carefully. “It’s just that I’d like to talk to you.” He spoke in the painfully clear manner of the inebriated.

“Go ahead, talk,” the blonde said. She turned back to her companion. “So I think I’d better get along and see if I can get it back,” she said. “After all, I don’t go so good in a factory, it gets me down; I should be back in the dancehall. And he always was a good guy to work for, that jerk.”

“You hadn’t ought to get out of a war factory, though,” the other girl said. She glanced at the little man, who was sitting quietly, holding his glass and listening, and then went on: “You ought to stay at work that’s…you know…for defense.”

“That’s true,” the little man agreed. “You ought to work at something that will help your country.” Both girls looked at him silently. The little man hurried on: “I hope you girls don’t mind this — my coming up here and just sitting right down without even asking you very well.”

“We don’t mind,” the blonde said.

“I guess you just wanted to talk to someone, or something,” the other girl said.

“That’s right,” the little man said. “Look, my name is Burton, Robbie Burton, but you can call me Robbie. What’s yours?”

“Well,” the blonde said, “I’m Lois, and she’s Elaine.”

“Pleased to meet you,” the little man said. “Look, this is how it is. I wanted to talk to someone and I saw you” — he gestured at the blonde— “and I just thought, There’s a girl that looks kind of like my daughter. I got a daughter as old as you are, looks something like you,” he said. “And so I thought maybe you wouldn’t mind if I sat down, not to start something or anything, but just because I wanted to talk, like you said.” As if very tired, the little man leaned back and sipped at his wine.

“Well.” Lois looked at her friend. “He says I look like his daughter.”

“I’ll bet,” Elaine said.

“Look,” the little man said, leaning forward again, “don’t you do like my daughter. You look like a nice girl, don’t you do like my daughter.”

“What did your daughter do?” Elaine asked.

“Never mind what my daughter did,” the little man said. “I’m just telling you, that’s all.”

“All right,” Lois said, winking at her friend. “I won’t. Okay?”

“Okay.” The little man looked at his empty glass. “Say,” he demanded, “how about I buy you girls a drink? Let me buy you two a drink, how about it?”

“We can buy our own,” Elaine said quickly.

“No,” the little man insisted, “let me buy you a drink. Because this girl here reminds me of my daughter and I’d certainly buy my daughter a drink. Please let me buy you a drink?” he appealed to the blonde.

“Okay, Pop,” she said. He got up and went over to the bar.

“Listen, Lois,” the dark girl said, “you hadn’t ought to let him buy you a drink. You hadn’t ought to have let him sit down here in the first place.”

"Poor old guy," Lois said. "He looked so lonesome. Let him talk for a while. Doesn't hurt to be nice to a poor old guy like that. Thinks I look like his daughter, anyway."

"Don't you go doing what his daughter did," Elaine said, giggling.

Lois giggled too. "Why not?" she asked. "But shut up, here he comes."

The little man came back, laughing when he saw that they were laughing. "Now we're having a good time," he said, putting the glasses down on the table.

"Hello, Pop," Lois said.

"I guess I could buy my own daughter a drink," he said.

"You sure could, Pop," Lois said.

"Tell us about your daughter," Elaine said. "What did she do, anyway?"

The little man lifted his face to her and glared. Then he relaxed. "Nothing," he said. "I shouldn't say; I don't know. Nothing."

"Cheer up, Pop," Lois said. "Drink up." She lifted her glass and touched his with it. "Long life," she said.

The little man picked up his glass and sipped at it. "You sure do look like my daughter," he said to Lois. "Don't you ever do anything bad." He looked at Elaine for a minute and then back to Lois. "Look," he said. "When I first came here a while ago I couldn't help but hear when you said you thought you'd leave your job and go back to working in a dancehall. Don't you do it."

"Hey, look," Lois said, pained.

"Don't you go working around no men," the little man insisted. "You stay right where you belong, not in any dancehall."

"I guess she doesn't need to ask you where she's going to work," Elaine said.

"I don't want you working for that guy you called a jerk," the little man said.

"He doesn't want me working for O'Halloran, that jerk," Lois explained elaborately.

"Don't you go fooling around men," the little man said. He pounded his hand on the table so that his glass trembled. "I don't want to hear of you going around any men. You're a nice girl, now, and you're a good girl and you treat your father nice, and you bring home your money, and don't you go throwing your life away on any men."

"Well, I'd certainly tell him to mind his own business!" said Elaine.

"Your old father's never done you an evil thing and never given you any bad advice, and when he tells you you better keep right on coming home every week with that money from the factory and not go taking anything from any men and not go throwing your money away on cheap clothes and friends, he's giving you good advice. Your old father deserves for you to treat him right, and he hasn't got anybody but you and no one to help him along in his old age, so you better listen to his good advice." The little man put his hand on Lois's arm and repeated, "You better listen to his good advice."

"Well, for heaven's sakes!" said Elaine.

"Hey," Lois said, "suppose you run along out of here, Pop."

"You listen to me," the little man said desperately.

"I'll call someone to throw you out, mister," she said.

"*I'll* call someone," Elaine said. She stood up and started to look around eagerly.

The little man watched her for a minute and then sighed. Pushing his glass aside, he put both hands on the table and lifted himself up. Elaine sat back against the seat, watching him warily. The little man stood at the opening of the booth looking at the girls sadly.

“You’ll be sorry some day,” he said. “You’ll be sorry you didn’t treat your poor old father better.”

Neither girl moved. The little man turned to Lois.

“And I want you home and in your own bed tonight, you hear?” he cried emphatically. Then he turned and made his way past the crowded bar and out the door. His empty glass still trembled slightly after he had gone, moving a little in the spilled wine on the table.

As High as the Sky

FOR REASONS OF her own, Mrs. Carrant had concluded that the doorbell was going to ring at 8:20 exactly; the train came in at 7:55, allow him fifteen minutes to get his bag or bags (he couldn't have *much* baggage, after all), a minute or two to get a taxi, and then only the ride downtown and home — eight or nine minutes at most. Eight-twenty.

She and the girls finished dinner and started waiting shortly after six; that was when Sandra put down her spoon and remarked, "I won't eat again till Daddy comes." It was not by any means a new idea; it had lived with Mrs. Carrant for a long time ("Three more dinners alone," "Two weeks from today it will seem as though he's never been away," "The next time the Martins call they'll have to invite us both"); even the baby had awakened that morning saying, "Daddy coming today." They had postponed the baby's third birthday party until Daddy could celebrate with them. Mrs. Carrant, at dinner, had leaned over and smoothed the dark curls from Sandra's forehead. "You'd better finish your dinner now," she said, "or you'll be hungry before Daddy gets here."

By eight o'clock (the train had come five minutes ago; Mrs. Carrant had called the station and it was on time) the girls were dressed and washed and their hair was tied back with fresh ribbons. Mrs. Carrant sat them together on the couch with a picture book and ran into her room to take a last look at her own hair, slightly damp from her doing the dishes and dressing the girls so quickly, but curling as theirs did, with no gray yet. She could hear Sandra reading to the baby in a voice quickened by the excitement of being up later than usual, "How many miles to Babylon? Three score miles and ten."

“Can I get there by candlelight?” Mrs. Carrant called happily. She realized suddenly that she had been humming.

There was a pause from the living room, and then Sandra giggled and said loudly, “Yes, and back again.”

Mrs. Carrant returned to the living room and inspected the picture her two daughters made on the couch with the book, with just the table lamp turned on in back of them, the light softly touching the tops of their heads and the bowl of flowers behind Sandra’s shoulder.

“You look very nice, you two,” she said. “If only you wouldn’t move before Daddy gets here.” It was five after eight.

The baby looked up from the picture in the book. “Where’s Daddy?” she asked.

“He’ll be here soon,” Mrs. Carrant said. “If it were only colder weather,” she said, “we could have a fire in the fireplace and it would look so comfortable and nice here.”

“It’s too hot for a fire,” Sandra announced.

“It *is* too hot,” Mrs. Carrant said absently. She was wondering if he would know which floor to come to; she must have another door key made.

“Daddy is coming home because it was end-of-the-war,” Sandra was saying to the baby. “My daddy is as high as the sky.”

“Not really, Sandra,” Mrs. Carrant said. “You remember what Daddy looks like.”

The baby turned around solemnly and inspected the picture on the mantel. “Daddy looks like,” she said.

“He’s going to touch the ceiling when he walks around,” Sandra said.

“He’s not so terribly tall,” Mrs. Carrant said, feeling vaguely that it was important to get their father’s description well established. “He’s not as tall as your Uncle George.” She thought. “He’s taller than you are,” she said.

"He's taller than I am. He's about as tall as—" Mrs. Carrant hesitated, her eyes moving around the room. (I never saw him in this house, she thought anxiously; I never saw him with this furniture, even.) "He's about as tall as the grocer," she said.

"I want some cookies," the baby said immediately.

"Later," Mrs. Carrant said. "When Daddy comes." It was 8:15.

The baby's face twisted up; it was long past her bedtime. "When Daddy comes," Mrs. Carrant went on quickly, "we'll all have cookies and milk, and Daddy will have presents for you. Remember what it said in Daddy's letter?"

"It said he was going to bring us presents," Sandra explained to the baby. "In Daddy's letter it said he had presents for all of us. Mommy, too."

If he hadn't stopped for his bags, or if he'd gotten a taxi quickly, or even if the train had been early, he might be starting to ring the doorbell now; Mrs. Carrant wondered for a minute if trains were ever early. They had said at the station that it was on time; Mrs. Carrant resisted an impulse to call the station again. As soon as I get on the phone, she thought, the doorbell will be ringing. Anyway, it's silly to call the station and ask if a train is early.

"Can I get down off the couch for a minute?" Sandra asked. "To get my doll?"

"That doll's so dirty," Mrs. Carrant said. "He should be here any minute, and you wouldn't want Daddy to see you with an old dirty doll."

"I *want* my doll," Sandra said.

"I want my bear," the baby said. Both the girls were beginning to stir uneasily on the couch, moving apart from each other, the book fallen untidily between them.

"The doll is dirty, but that bear is impossible," Mrs. Carrant said firmly. "You sit still for just one minute more." She went over and picked up the book and opened it neatly. “How many miles to Babylon?” she said as cheerfully as she could. “Three score miles and ten.” The doorbell rang, and suddenly Mrs. Carrant understood that it might be anything; it might be someone coming to see her, not knowing he would be here, it might be a telegram, it might be some sort of a mistake. She went to the door and pressed the downstairs buzzer.

“That’s Daddy?” Sandra said, looking at the door.

“We hope it is,” Mrs. Carrant said steadily, and went over to open the door.

She stood in the doorway watching him come up the last few steps. He had an embarrassed smile on his face, and Mrs. Carrant realized that she had the same embarrassed smile on her face.

“I thought I had the wrong house for a minute,” he said. He came up to her and set his bag down (only one bag, after all) and put his arms around her. She could hear him say “My God,” looking over her head into the living room.

Mrs. Carrant turned around. “Look at them,” she said. “The two of them.” Sandra and the baby were sitting perfectly still on the couch, regarding their father with wide, surprised eyes. They never dreamed anyone was really coming, Mrs. Carrant thought. Then Sandra slid down off the couch, shrieking “Daddy brought us presents!” as she ran across the floor to be picked up. He looks so tired, Mrs. Carrant thought, seeing him holding Sandra; his hair is thinning.

“Baby,” Mrs. Carrant said, “here’s Daddy at last.”

Still holding Sandra, he went across the room to the couch. “So this is my daughter Mary?” he said. “Will you come say hello to Daddy?”

The baby’s face twisted, and she screamed “Mommy!” She threw herself off the couch and ran to Mrs. Carrant, burying her face against her mother’s knees. Mrs. Carrant leaned over and picked her up.

“I guess I scared her,” he said uncomfortably. He reached out to touch the baby’s head, but she screamed again and hid her face.

“What’s the *matter* with her?” he said.

“She’s never seen you before,” Mrs. Carrant said sharply. “You can’t really blame her.”

“Baby’s scared,” Sandra said, leaning outward to look into her father’s face. “Maybe you better give her the presents right now.”

The baby had stopped crying, her head against her mother’s shoulder. “Now what’s wrong with you?” Mrs. Carrant asked, putting her head down against the baby’s. “What’s there to make a fuss about?”

“Santy Claus,” the baby said. “I want to see Santy Claus.” Her voice rose. “Where’s Santy Claus?”

“She thinks you’re Santa Claus,” Sandra explained to her father, “because you were bringing presents.”

“It’s going to take her a little while.” Mrs. Carrant looked hopefully at her husband across the baby’s head. “She doesn’t take to—” She stopped. “You see,” she went on carefully, “it’s hard for her, only knowing you from your picture.” She took the baby over to the mantel where the picture was. “Look,” she said. “Who’s that in the picture?” she asked the baby.

The baby looked up sullenly, and then said, “Daddy.” She reached over and took hold of the picture.

“It’s a picture of me, isn’t it?” her father said. “Do I look so different? It’s a picture of me and here I am standing here.” He turned to his wife. “What’s the matter with her?”

“She thought Santa Claus was coming,” Sandra said.

He set Sandra down on the couch and approached the baby again. “Hello, there,” he said.

The baby stared at him silently, holding the picture with both hands. When he put his finger out to touch her nose, she turned her head quickly to hide in her mother's shoulder. He shrugged.

"This the new furniture?" he said. "Looks pretty good. Can't you put her to bed or something?"

"I guess I'd better," Mrs. Carrant said. "You want to take Daddy's picture to bed?" she asked the baby.

The baby nodded, holding the picture.

"Tomorrow," Mrs. Carrant said. "Tomorrow you can get acquainted, and in a day or so she'll be all over you. She's tired now anyway."

Mrs. Carrant waited for a minute, looking at her husband. "After all," she said helplessly.

Murder on Miss Lederer’s Birthday

FROM THE KITCHENETTE where Miss Alliston was making breakfast came the pleasant sound of coffee percolating and the rather flat sound of Miss Alliston humming cheerfully to herself. It was not quite nine o’clock, and the sunlight had just begun to creep along the edge of the living room carpet; a breeze came gently through the half-opened window and stirred the petals of the geranium on the windowsill. It was an apartment clearly inhabited by two maiden ladies of a certain age; an unashamed rocking chair sat next to the radiator, with a tiny needlepoint footstool in front of it; on the mantel were two matched earthenware jugs, each saying SOUVENIR OF MEXICO CITY; all the chairs were daintily antimacassared. As though extremely conscious of the fact that he was a spot of local color, a large gray tomcat sat washing his face in the patch of sunlight on the floor.

Miss Alliston and Miss Lederer were schoolteachers (“the Two Musketeers of Houston High,” they called themselves privately, and they were given to wildly reckless dinners at Italian restaurants on Friday afternoons, with half a bottle of red wine and veal scallopine), and they had done their best to make their apartment homey. “I feel so sorry for those other poor girls,” they were fond of observing to each other, “living in furnished rooms or private homes, with none of our comfort, and none of our…well, dear…*freedom.*”

Miss Alliston was the senior by a year and a half; at forty-one, she’d given herself the position of leader. It had been Miss Alliston’s idea to go to Mexico one summer. It was to Miss Alliston, too, that the one souvenir ashtray belonged; she enjoyed an occasional cigarette after their Friday evening meal, although she disapproved of the habit for Miss Lederer. “I do so enjoy my smokes,” she would say sinfully, “but no one recognizes more clearly than I how filthy a habit it is.”

Miss Alliston and Miss Lederer took turns on Saturday mornings getting up and making breakfast. This morning, Miss Alliston was unusually cheerful, for it was Miss Lederer’s birthday and they had planned An Occasion. This morning they were going to the Museum of Modern Art, and in the afternoon to a theater matinee. The matinee was Miss Alliston’s treat, a birthday present for her friend.

Miss Alliston took the cinnamon buns from the oven and put them on the table. Then, taking off her apron and hanging it on the hook on the door to the kitchenette, she went into the bedroom.

“Paula,” she cried gaily, “top of the morning to you! And happy birthday!”

Miss Lederer stirred and opened her eyes. “Thank you, Evelyn,” she murmured. Miss Alliston began to sing, “Lazy Paula, will you get up, will you get up, will you get up…”

Lazy Paula sat up in bed and sniffed. “Evelyn, weren’t you sweet to make breakfast,” she said. (She had said it every time Miss Alliston had made breakfast since they’d been living together. On alternate Saturdays Miss Alliston woke up and said: “Paula, you dear girl! Did you really make breakfast for me?”)

“Come right away,” Miss Alliston said, “or everything will get cold.”

Miss Alliston threw Miss Lederer’s housecoat onto the bed and went back to fuss over the table. In a moment, Miss Lederer joined her, and the two of them sat down. Immediately the big gray cat leaped onto Miss Lederer’s lap, poking his head over the edge of the table experimentally.

"Good morning, dear," Miss Lederer said gaily to the cat. She broke off a tiny piece of cinnamon bun and held it out to the cat.

"Paula, you crazy girl," Miss Alliston said. "Anyway, he had his milk hours ago." There was a sound at the apartment door. "There's the paper," Miss Alliston added. "I'll get it. You sit still and finish your birthday breakfast."

Miss Alliston opened the door and picked up the paper. "What are the headlines, Evelyn?" Miss Lederer asked, pouring herself a second, and extravagant, cup of coffee.

"All about the war," Miss Alliston replied, reading the paper as she closed the door behind her and started back to the table. "The Russians are doing just marvelously, and there's good news from Africa, and Congress has done something or other….We'll go over it all later."

Both Miss Alliston and Miss Lederer were intensely interested in national and international affairs. They held heated discussions over political developments and had bought themselves a small mounted map on which they earnestly and devotedly plotted the campaigns of the war, with a good deal of disagreement and spectacular generalship. After the arrival of the morning paper, however, the world and the map had always to wait upon an enthusiastic survey of advertisements, particularly for household novelties, book sales (which they never attended), and news of prime importance, which was society, gossip, and murder. There was a murder this morning on the second page.

"My dear," Miss Alliston gasped as she turned the page, "such a ghastly affair!"

Miss Lederer went to stand next to Miss Alliston while they read the story.

"And attacked her!" Miss Lederer whispered, her hand to her lips. "How fearful!"

"Horrible," Miss Alliston confirmed, sitting back in her chair at the table with the paper.

"Read it all to me," Miss Lederer said.

"There's no more than this," Miss Alliston said, turning the pages haphazardly.

"Let me see if I've got it straight," Miss Lederer said. "This girl—"

"Alice January, her name was," Miss Alliston added, referring to the paper. "A dancer, a modern dancer."

"I'm not surprised," Miss Lederer said, nodding, "the way they live. And you say she was found in her apartment?"

"Her *luxurious* apartment, in Gramercy Park."

Miss Lederer shuddered.

"My dear," Miss Alliston said, leaning over the table, "aren't you *glad* I insisted that we live in the Village?"

Miss Lederer smiled gratefully at her friend. "Who found the body?"

" 'Miss January had retired early,' " Miss Alliston read, " 'telling the clerk at the switchboard she did not wish to be disturbed.'"

"That's exactly what I was wondering, Evelyn," Miss Lederer said significantly. "*Why* did she say she didn't want to be disturbed?"

There was a silence as they regarded each other. Then: "I do believe you're right," Miss Alliston said, nodding. "There's certainly more to it than meets the eye."

"Exactly," Miss Lederer said. "Read me the rest."

Miss Alliston consulted the paper again. " 'Her body was found by the manager. She had left word to be called at eleven o'clock in the morning, and when there was no answer to the bell he opened the door with a skeleton key, and found her lying naked in the bedroom, with thirty-one stab wounds.’ Thirty-one stab wounds!” she repeated. “Dreadful! Well, he locked the door again…”

“There’s another thing,” Miss Lederer interrupted. “What was *he* doing with a key?”

Miss Alliston looked dubious. “Well, managers always have keys for all the doors. To let plumbers in, and painters, and deliveries, and things like that.”

“Gracious!” Miss Lederer said. “I’m glad no one has a key to *our* home!”

“Anyway, they say she was practically…” Miss Alliston fanned herself with her napkin. “Heavens, I can’t read it, Paula.”

Miss Lederer took the paper and found Miss Alliston’s place. “ ‘Dismembered,’ “ she read. “I don’t blame you a bit for feeling faint, Evelyn. Shall I get you a glass of water?”

“No,” Miss Alliston said, recovering slightly. “Just don’t read any more of the horrible part.”

“Well,” Miss Lederer read on, “it seems the police are looking for ‘a man who was a frequent visitor to Miss January’s apartment, whom she described as her manager, and a woman who is generally supposed to be a near relative of Miss January’s, an elderly woman, probably an aunt.’”

“No more an aunt than I am!” said Miss Alliston vehemently.

“ ‘She was only wearing,’ “ Miss Lederer went on, breathlessly absorbed, “ ‘a pearl necklace—’ Oh, my dear, imagine, a pearl necklace on the money those dancers get! And then coming to an end like that, all hacked up.”

“And attacked,” Miss Alliston said.

“ ‘Sexually assaulted,’ “ Miss Lederer read from the paper. She looked up. “ ‘No one has been arrested as yet,’ “ she said.

“If we pick up an afternoon paper on our way uptown,” Miss Alliston said, “we might find out if there are any developments, whether the murderer has been caught, or anything.”

“I’m interested in this man she said was her manager,” Miss Lederer mused.

Miss Alliston looked at her watch. “Good heavens! Half past ten. Paula, do you know we’ve been sitting here chatting for more than an hour?”

“We’ll never get to the museum at this rate,” Miss Lederer said, not moving.

“The museum.” Miss Alliston’s voice was rather flat. “We won’t have much time there now, will we?”

“Evelyn,” Miss Lederer said hesitantly, “do you think we really *ought* to try and crowd the museum and a matinee all into one day? I’m not too enthusiastic about just rushing through the museum, frankly.”

“But, Paula, it’s your birthday, and I don’t want you to stay home because you think I don’t want to go.”

“Well, I’m not too enthusiastic about just rushing through,” Miss Lederer repeated, “but if you’d like to, I’m perfectly willing to go.”

“Well, personally, I’d really much rather just take my time and get to the matinee good and early.”

“I’m so glad, Evelyn, because I really *was* a little tired and didn’t like to say so, because I knew you were counting on it.”

“If you’re *sure* you don’t mind not going,” Miss Alliston said.

“But we mustn’t miss the matinee,” Miss Lederer said firmly.

“We certainly will not miss the matinee,” Miss Alliston confirmed. They smiled at each other proudly. “Suppose I just run downstairs now,” Miss

Alliston proposed, “and see if any afternoon papers have come out yet.”

Miss Lederer laughed. “You know,” she confessed, “I’m surprised at myself, really I am. Letting myself get so interested in a sordid murder, I mean. It isn’t *like* me, you know.”

Miss Alliston said, “Well, this one interested me, especially because it took place so near here.”

“I mean, I’m not one of those persons who insist on visiting the scene of a crime, or anything,” Miss Lederer insisted.

“I would never dream of going near the scene of a crime,” Miss Alliston said with dignity. “As it happens, however, this January murder was in a neighborhood I know slightly.”

“Really, Evelyn?”

“I used to visit friends in the vicinity,” Miss Alliston said, “but that was many years ago, naturally.”

“You didn’t ever know *her,* did you?”

“Alice? Certainly not!” Miss Alliston shook her head doubtfully. “I may have met her, Paula, you know; I can’t be sure. Perhaps I was introduced to her at one time. You know how it is with people you meet.” She got up and went into the bedroom. Miss Lederer began to reread the account in the paper.

“Dear, are you absolutely sure you don’t mind about the museum?” Miss Alliston called from the bedroom.

“Absolutely,” Miss Lederer said. “You know, I can’t help feeling there ought to be some clues, fingerprints or something.”

Miss Alliston returned with her coat on, and stood by the table snapping and unsnapping the fastener of her pocketbook. Finally she said, “Paula, why don’t you just make another pot of coffee while I’m gone?”

“Do you really think we should?”

Miss Alliston was brisk. “Yes. We’ll do without coffee some morning toward the end of the month, that’s all. We are certainly entitled to our small pleasures, especially on your birthday.” She moved to the window and looked out. “Such a lovely day; I wonder if we’re not silly to spend it cooped up in a theater instead of out of doors.”

Miss Lederer looked up. “You know, Evelyn, if you wanted to change the tickets for some other day, I wouldn’t mind at all. Of course it’s not my place to say anything, since it’s your treat, but somehow the prospect of a stuffy theater…”

“I just don’t feel in the mood for a play today, I guess,” Miss Alliston said. “They’re holding our tickets at the box office; I’ll just call the theater.”

“Get the papers after you do everything else, and then you’ll probably get a later edition,” Miss Lederer suggested. Miss Alliston, walking quickly, let the door slam behind her.

Miss Lederer started clearing the dishes off the table. She had the new pot of coffee percolating cheerfully when Miss Alliston returned, arms full of packages.

“It’s really *dreadfully* chilly out, dear,” Miss Alliston said. “You’ve no idea how wise we are to cancel our plans today.”

“Did you get the papers?” Miss Lederer asked.

Miss Alliston put the packages down. “All the papers,” she said, “and some potato salad and two codfish cakes and some rye bread, and, Paula, a tiny little bottle of Chianti! And I got myself a pack of cigarettes, too; the man said they were a very popular brand.”

“Good for you,” Miss Lederer said heartily. “You deserve a little treat after being so generous about giving up the matinee.” She took the coffeepot from the stove and stood it on the table next to the two fresh cups, then sat down. The big gray cat leaped up on her lap, and she petted him.

Then she selected a tabloid from the pile of papers Miss Alliston had brought and turned to the story of the murder.

Miss Alliston took her packages into the kitchen, then returned and sat down in her own place at the table. She opened her new pack of cigarettes carefully, lit one, and put it down beside her in the clean ashtray. Then she poured herself a cup of coffee and sat back comfortably.

“I saw in the headlines,” she said, “that they’ve found a new secret clue.” She picked up her cigarette and puffed vigorously. “Paula,” she continued through the smoke, “you know, I don’t think it would do any harm if we went out later for a short constitutional, and just ran over to Gramercy Park for a minute to see what we could see—”

Paranoia

MR. HALLORAN BERESFORD, pleasantly tired after a good day in the office, still almost clean-shaven after eight hours, his pants still neatly pressed, pleased with himself particularly for remembering, stepped out of the candy shop with a great box under his arm and started briskly for the corner. There were twenty small-size gray suits like Mr. Beresford's on every New York block, fifty men still clean-shaven and pressed after a day in an air-cooled office, a hundred small men, perhaps, pleased with themselves for remembering their wives' birthdays. Mr. Beresford was going to take his wife out to dinner, he decided, going to see if he could get last-minute tickets to a show, taking his wife candy. It had been an exceptionally good day, altogether, and Mr. Beresford walked along swiftly, humming musically to himself.

He stopped on the corner, wondering whether he would save more time by taking a bus or by trying to catch a taxi in the crowd. It was a long trip downtown, and Mr. Beresford ordinarily enjoyed the quiet half hour on top of a Fifth Avenue bus, perhaps reading his paper. He disliked the subway intensely, and found the public display and violent exercise necessary to catch a taxi usually more than he was equal to. However, tonight he had spent a lot of time waiting in line in the candy store to get his wife's favorite chocolates, and if he was going to get home before dinner was on the table he really had to hurry a little.

Mr. Beresford went a few steps into the street, waved at a taxi, said "Taxi!" in a voice that went helplessly into a falsetto, and slunk back, abashed, to the sidewalk while the taxi went by uncomprehending. A man in a light hat stopped next to Mr. Beresford on the sidewalk, and for a minute, in the middle of the crowd, he stared at Mr. Beresford and Mr. Beresford stared at him as people sometimes do without caring particularly what they see. What Mr. Beresford saw was a thin face under the light hat, a small mustache, a coat collar turned up. Funny-looking guy, Mr. Beresford thought, lightly touching his own clean-shaven lip. Perhaps the man thought Mr. Beresford's almost unconscious gesture was offensive; at any rate he frowned and looked Mr. Beresford up and down before he turned away. Ugly customer, Mr. Beresford thought.

The Fifth Avenue bus Mr. Beresford usually took came slipping up to the corner, and Mr. Beresford, pleased not to worry about a taxi, started for the stop. He had reached out his hand to take the rail inside the bus door when he was roughly elbowed aside and the ugly customer in the light hat shoved on ahead of him. Mr. Beresford muttered and started to follow, but the bus door closed on the packed crowd inside, and the last thing Mr. Beresford saw as the bus went off down the street was the man in the light hat grinning at him from inside the door.

"*There's* a dirty trick," Mr. Beresford told himself, settling his shoulders irritably in his coat. Still under the influence of his annoyance, he ran a few steps out into the street and waved again at a taxi, not trusting his voice, and was almost run down by a delivery truck. As Mr. Beresford skidded back to the sidewalk, the truck driver leaned out and yelled something unrecognizable at Mr. Beresford, and when Mr. Beresford saw the people around him on the corner laughing he decided to start walking downtown; in two blocks he would reach another bus stop, a good corner for taxis, and a subway station; much as Mr. Beresford disliked the subway, he might still have to take it, to get home in any sort of time. Walking downtown, his candy box under his arm, his gray suit almost unaffected by the crush on the corner, Mr. Beresford decided to swallow his annoyance and remember that it was his wife’s birthday; he began to hum again as he walked.

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He watched the people as he walked along, his perspective sharpened by being a man who had just succeeded in forgetting an annoyance; surely the girl in the very high-heeled shoes, coming toward him with a frown on her face, was not so able to put herself above petty trifles, or maybe she was frowning because of the shoes; the old lady and man looking at the shop windows were quarreling. The funny-looking guy in the light hat coming quickly through the crowd looked as though he hated someone…the funny-looking guy in the light hat; Mr. Beresford turned clean around in the walking line of people and watched the man in the light hat turn abruptly and start walking downtown, about ten feet in back of Mr. Beresford. What do you know about that?, Mr. Beresford marveled, and began to walk a little more quickly. Probably got off the bus for some reason; wrong bus, maybe. Then why would he start walking uptown instead of catching another bus where he was? Mr. Beresford shrugged and passed two girls walking together and talking both at once.

Halfway from the corner he wanted, Mr. Beresford realized with a sort of sick shock that the man in the light hat was at his elbow, walking steadily along next to him. Mr. Beresford turned his head the other way and slowed his step. The other man slowed down as well, without looking at Mr. Beresford.

Nonsense, Mr. Beresford thought, without troubling to work it out any further than that. He settled his candy box firmly under his arm and cut abruptly across the uptown line of people and into a shop; a souvenir and notions shop, he realized as he came through the door. There were a few people inside — a woman and a little girl, a sailor — and Mr. Beresford retired to the far end of the counter and began to fuss with an elaborate cigarette box on which was written SOUVENIR OF NEW YORK CITY, with the Trylon and the Perisphere painted beneath.

“Isn’t this cute?” the mother said to the little girl, and they both began to laugh enormously over the match holder made in the form of a toilet; the matches were to go in the bowl, and on the cover, Mr. Beresford could see, were the Trylon and the Perisphere, with SOUVENIR OF NEW YORK CITY written above.

The man in the light hat came into the shop, and Mr. Beresford turned his back and busied himself picking up one thing after another from the counter; with half his mind he was trying to find something that did not say SOUVENIR OF NEW YORK CITY, and with the other half of his mind he was wondering about the man in the light hat. The question of what the man in the light hat wanted was immediately subordinate to the question of *whom* he wanted; if his light-hatted designs were against Mr. Beresford they must be nefarious, else why had he not announced them before now? The thought of accosting the man and demanding his purpose crossed Mr. Beresford’s mind fleetingly, and was succeeded, as always in an equivocal situation, by Mr. Beresford’s vivid recollection of his own small size and innate cautiousness. Best, Mr. Beresford decided, to avoid this man. Thinking this, Mr. Beresford walked steadily toward the doorway of the shop, intending to pass the man in the light hat and go out and catch his bus home.

He had not quite reached the man in the light hat when the shop’s clerk came around the end of the counter and met Mr. Beresford with a genial smile and a vehement “See anything you like, mister?”

“Not tonight, thanks,” Mr. Beresford said, moving left to avoid the clerk, but the clerk moved likewise and said, “Got some nice things you didn’t look at.”

“No, thanks,” Mr. Beresford said, trying to make his tenor voice firm.

“Take a look,” the clerk insisted. This was unusually persistent even for such a clerk; Mr. Beresford looked up and saw the man in the light hat on his right, bearing down on him. Over the shoulders of the two men he could see that the shop was empty. The street looked very far away, the people passing in either direction looked smaller and smaller; Mr. Beresford realized that he was being forced to step backward as the two men advanced on him.

“Easy does it,” the man in the light hat said to the clerk. They continued to move forward slowly.

“See here, now,” Mr. Beresford said, with the ineffectuality of the ordinary man caught in such a crisis; he still clutched his box of candy under his arm. “See *here,*” he said, feeling the solid weight of the wall behind him.

“Ready,” the man in the light hat said. The two men tensed, and Mr. Beresford, with a wild yell, broke between them and ran for the door. He heard a sound more like a snarl than anything else behind him and the feet coming after him. I’m safe on the street, Mr. Beresford thought as he went through the door into the line of people; as long as there are lots of people, they can’t do anything to me. He looked back, walking downtown between a fat woman with many packages and a girl and a boy leaning on each other’s shoulders, and he saw the clerk standing in the doorway of the shop looking after him; the man in the light hat was not in sight. Mr. Beresford shifted the box of candy so that his right arm was free, and thought, Perfectly silly. It’s still broad daylight. How they ever hoped to get away with it…

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The man in the light hat was on the corner ahead, waiting. Mr. Beresford hesitated in his walk and then thought, It's preposterous, all these people watching. He walked boldly down the street; the man in the light hat was not even watching him, but was leaning calmly against a building lighting a cigarette. Mr. Beresford reached the corner, darted quickly into the street, and yelled boisterously "Taxi!" in a great voice he had never suspected he possessed until now. A taxi stopped as though not daring to disregard that great shout, and Mr. Beresford moved gratefully toward it. His hand was on the door handle when another hand closed over his, and Mr. Beresford was aware of the light hat brushing his cheek.

"Come on if you're coming," the taxi driver said; the door was open, and Mr. Beresford, resisting the push that urged him into the taxi, slipped his hand out from under the other hand and ran back to the sidewalk. A crosstown bus had stopped on the corner, and Mr. Beresford, no longer thinking, hurried onto it, dropped a nickel into the coin register, and went to the back of the bus and sat down. The man in the light hat sat a little ahead, between Mr. Beresford and the door. Mr. Beresford put his box of candy on his lap and tried to think. Obviously the man in the light hat was not carrying a grudge all this time about Mr. Beresford's almost unconscious gesture toward his mustache, unless he was peculiarly sensitive. In any case, there was also the clerk in the souvenir shop; Mr. Beresford realized suddenly that the clerk in the souvenir shop was a very odd circumstance indeed. Mr. Beresford set the clerk aside to think about later and went back to the man in the light hat. If it was not the insult to the mustache, what was it? And then another thought caught Mr. Beresford breathless: How long, then, had the man in the light hat been following him? He thought back along the day: He had left his office with a group of people, all talking cheerfully, all reminding Mr. Beresford that it was his wife's birthday; they had escorted Mr. Beresford to the candy shop and left him there. He had been in his office all day except for lunch with three fellows in the office; Mr. Beresford's mind leaped suddenly from the lunch to his first sight of the man in the light hat at the bus stop; it seemed that the man in the light hat had been trying to push him *onto* the bus and into the crowd, instead of pushing in ahead. In that case, once he was on the bus…Mr. Beresford looked around. In the bus he was riding on now there were only five people left. One was the driver, one Mr. Beresford, one the man in the light hat, sitting slightly ahead of Mr. Beresford. The two others were an old lady with a shopping bag and a man who looked as though he might be a foreigner. Foreigner, Mr. Beresford thought, while he looked at the man. Foreigner, foreign plot, spies. Better not rely on any foreigner, Mr. Beresford thought.

The bus was going swiftly along between high dark buildings. Mr. Beresford, looking out the window, decided that they were in a factory district, remembered that they had been going east, and decided to wait until they got to one of the lighted, busy sections before he tried to get off. Peering off into the growing darkness, Mr. Beresford noticed an odd thing. There had been someone standing on the corner beside a sign saying BUS STOP and the bus had not stopped, even though the dim figure waved its arms. Surprised, Mr. Beresford glanced up at the street sign, noticing that it said E. 31 ST. at the same moment he reached for the cord to signal the driver that he wanted to get off. As he stood up and went down the aisle, the foreign-looking man rose also and went to the door beside the driver. "Getting off," the foreign man said, and the bus slowed. Mr. Beresford pressed forward, and somehow the old lady's shopping bag got in his way and spilled, sending small items, a set of blocks, a package of paper clips, spilling in all directions.

“Sorry,” Mr. Beresford said desperately as the bus doors opened. He began to move forward again, and the old lady caught his arm and said, “Don’t bother if you’re in a hurry. I can get them, dear.” Mr. Beresford tried to shake her off, and she said, “If this is your stop, don’t worry. It’s perfectly all right.”

A coil of pink ribbon was caught around Mr. Beresford’s shoe; the old lady said, “It was clumsy of me, leaving my bag right in the aisle.”

As Mr. Beresford broke away from her, the doors closed and the bus started. Resigned, Mr. Beresford got down on one knee in the swaying bus and began to pick up paper clips, blocks, a box of letter paper that had opened and spilled sheets and envelopes all over the floor. “I’m so sorry,” the old lady said sweetly. “It was all my fault, too.”

Over his shoulder, Mr. Beresford saw the man in the light hat sitting comfortably. He was smoking, and his head was thrown back and his eyes were shut. Mr. Beresford gathered together the old lady’s possessions as well as he could, then made his way forward to stand by the driver. “Getting off,” Mr. Beresford said.

“Can’t stop in the middle of the block,” the driver said, not turning his head.

“The next stop, then,” Mr. Beresford said.

The bus moved rapidly on. Mr. Beresford, bending down to see the streets out the front window, saw a sign saying BUS STOP.

“Here,” he said.

“What?” the driver said, going past.

“Listen,” Mr. Beresford said. “I want to get off.”

“It’s okay with me,” the driver said. “Next stop.”

“You just passed one,” Mr. Beresford said.

"No one waiting there," the driver said. "Anyway, you didn't tell me in time." Mr. Beresford waited. After a minute he saw another bus stop and said, "Okay."

The bus did not stop, but went past the sign without slowing down.

"Report me," the driver said.

"Listen, now," Mr. Beresford said, and the driver turned one eye up at him; he seemed to be amused.

"Report me," the driver said. "My number's right here on this card."

"If you don't stop at the next stop," Mr. Beresford said, "I shall smash the glass in the door and shout for help."

"What with?" the driver said. "That box of candy?"

"How do you know it's—" Mr. Beresford said before he realized that if he got into a conversation he would miss the next bus stop. It had not occurred to him that he could get off anywhere except at a bus stop; he saw lights ahead, and at the same time the bus slowed down and Mr. Beresford, looking quickly back, saw the man in the light hat stretch and get up.

The bus pulled to a stop in front of a bus sign; there was a group of stores.

"OKAY," the bus driver said to Mr. Beresford, "you were so anxious to get off." The man in the light hat got off at the rear door. Mr. Beresford, standing by the open front door, hesitated and said, "I guess I'll stay on for a while."

"Last stop," the bus driver said. "Everybody off." He looked sardonically up at Mr. Beresford. "Report me if you want to," he said. "My number's right on that card there."

Mr. Beresford got off and went directly up to the man in the light hat, standing on the sidewalk. "This is perfectly ridiculous," he said emphatically. “I don’t understand any of it, and I want you to know that the first policeman I see—”

He stopped when he realized that the man in the light hat was looking not at him but, bored and fixedly, over his shoulder. Mr. Beresford turned and saw a policeman standing on the corner.

“Just you wait,” he said to the man in the light hat, and started for the policeman. Halfway to the policeman he began to wonder again: What did he have to report? A bus driver who would not stop when directed to, a clerk in a souvenir shop who cornered customers, a mysterious man in a light hat — and why? Mr. Beresford realized that there was nothing he could tell the policeman; he looked over his shoulder and saw the man in the light hat watching him, then Mr. Beresford bolted suddenly down a subway entrance. He had a nickel in his hand by the time he reached the bottom of the steps, and he went right through the turnstile; to the left was downtown, and he ran that way.

He was figuring as he ran: He’ll think if I’m very stupid I’d head downtown, if I’m smarter than that I’d go uptown, if I’m really smart I’d go downtown. Does he think I’m middling smart or very smart?

The man in the light hat reached the downtown platform only a few seconds after Mr. Beresford and sauntered down the platform, his hands in his pockets. Mr. Beresford sat down on the bench listlessly. It’s no good, he thought, no good at all; he knows just how smart I am.

The train came blasting into the station; Mr. Beresford ran into one car and saw the light hat disappear into the next car. Just as the doors were closing, Mr. Beresford dived, caught the door, and would have been out except for a girl who seized his arm and shouted, “Harry! Where in God’s name are you going?”

The door was held halfway open by Mr. Beresford's body, his arm left inside with the girl, who seemed to be holding it with all her strength. "Isn't this a fine thing," she said to the people in the car. "He sure doesn't want to see his old friends."

A few people laughed; most of them were watching.

"Hang on to him, sister," someone said.

The girl laughed and tugged on Mr. Beresford's arm. "He's gonna get away," she said laughingly to the people in the car, and a big man stepped up to her with a grin and said, "If you gotta have him that bad, we'll bring him in for you."

Mr. Beresford felt the grasp on his arm turn suddenly into an irresistible force that drew him in through the doors, and they closed behind him. Everyone in the car was laughing at him by now, and the big man said, "That ain't no way to treat a lady, chum."

Mr. Beresford looked around for the girl, but she had melted into the crowd somewhere and the train was moving. After a minute the people in the car stopped looking at him, and Mr. Beresford smoothed his coat and found that his box of candy was still intact.

The subway train was going downtown. Mr. Beresford, who was now racking his brains for detective tricks, for mystery-story dodges, thought of one that seemed foolproof. He stayed docilely on the train, as it went downtown, and got a seat at Twenty-third Street. At Fourteenth he got off, the light hat following, and went up the stairs and into the street. As he had expected, the large department store ahead of him advertised OPEN TILL 9 TONIGHT, and the doors swung wide, back and forth, with people going constantly in and out. Mr. Beresford went in. The store bewildered him at first — counters stretching away in all directions, the lights much brighter than anywhere else, the voices clamoring. Mr. Beresford moved slowly along beside a counter; it was stockings first, thin and tan and black and gauzy, and then it was handbags, piles on sale, neat solitary ones in the cases, and then it was medical supplies, with huge almost-human figures wearing obscene trusses, standing right there on the counter, and people coming embarrassedly to buy. Mr. Beresford turned the corner and came to a counter of odds and ends. Scarves too cheap to be at the scarf counter, postcards, a bin marked ANY ITEM 25¢, dark glasses. Uncomfortably, Mr. Beresford bought a pair of dark glasses and put them on.

He went out of the store at an entrance far away from the one he had used to come in; he could have chosen any of eight or nine entrances, but this seemed complicated enough. There was no sign of the light hat, no one tried to hinder Mr. Beresford as he stepped up to the taxi stand, and, although he debated taking the second or third car, he finally took the one in front and gave his home address.

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He reached his apartment building without mishap, and stole cautiously out of the taxi and into the lobby. There was no light hat, no odd person watching for Mr. Beresford. In the elevator, alone, with no one to see which floor button he pressed, Mr. Beresford took a long breath and began to wonder if he had dreamed his wild trip home. He rang his apartment bell and waited; then his wife came to the door, and Mr. Beresford, suddenly tired out, went into his home.

"You're *terribly* late, darling," his wife said affectionately, and then, "But what's the matter?"

He looked at her; she was wearing her blue dress, and that meant she knew it was her birthday and expected him to take her out; he handed her the box of candy limply and she took it, hardly noticing it in her anxiety over him. “What on *earth* has happened?” she asked. “Darling, come in here and sit down. You look terrible.”

He let her lead him into the living room, into his own chair, where it was comfortable, and he lay back.

“Is there something wrong?” she was asking anxiously, fussing over him, loosening his tie, smoothing his hair. “Are you sick? Were you in an accident? What *has* happened?”

He realized that he seemed more tired than he really was, and was glorying in all this attention. He sighed deeply and said, “Nothing. Nothing wrong. Tell you in a minute.”

“Wait,” she said. “I’ll get you a drink.”

He put his head back against the soft chair as she went out. Never knew that door had a key, his mind registered dimly as he heard it turn. Then he was on his feet with his head against the door listening to her at the telephone in the hall.

She dialed and waited. Then: “Listen,” she said, “listen, he came here after all. I’ve got him.”

Still Life with Teapot and Students

COME OFF IT, kids, come off it, Louise Harlowe told herself just under her breath. She smiled graciously at her husband, Lionel's, two best students, noticing with an edge of viciousness that they both held their teacups exactly right, and said lightly, "You're going to have a pleasant summer, then?"

Joan shrugged perfectly, and Debbi smiled back, as graciously as Louise had smiled, but with more conviction. "It will be about the same as the others, I guess," Debbi said. "Sort of dull."

They're both too well bred to tell me what they'll be doing, Louise thought, and asked deliberately, "You'll be together, of course?"

"I suppose," Joan said. She looked inquiringly at Debbi, and Debbi, who was the talkative one, said "We're going to my family's summer place, most of the time."

"You won't be home, then?" Louise said to Joan, a remark first to one, then to the other; how perfectly they guided her.

"Mom's in Europe, of course," Joan said. "I may go to my brother's for a while."

Joan's brother, Louise knew perfectly well, was the well-known painter. Her mother was the dress designer. Debbi's father owned the meatpacking company that provided all the tinned meat Louise Harlowe bought at her grocery. Another of Lionel's students was the daughter of the family that owned the newspaper Louise and Lionel read. Still another had a father who directed the movies Louise and Lionel saw when they could afford it. We must have been crazy to let Lionel take this job, Louise thought briefly, and smiled again at Debbi — was it Debbi's turn? — and said, "Going to do any writing this summer?"

Debbi grinned, her own grin and not the polite smile she reserved for tea parties with faculty wives. "I hope," she said.

It cleared the air a little; the question had been so patently ridiculous. Louise's own picture of the summer Debbi and Joan would find so dull involved a montage of sailboats, country club dances, expensive evening gowns, and good scotch. What cleared the air was that Debbi and Joan knew she knew.

"Okay," Louise said. "You know I can't offer you a drink. So you might as well drink tea."

"I'll have some more then, if I may," Joan said. No matter what happens, Louise thought, touching the teapot lightly with her hand to test the heat, no matter what happens, they can't ask for more tea without the grace of those years of training, that subtle polish that comes from a lifetime of custom, in houses where nothing is finger-marked and nothing is chipped and the tea is always hot.

"It's not awfully warm," she said to Joan, mocking herself for saying "warm" instead of "hot"; who do I think I am? she wondered — Mrs. Astor? *My* brother sells insurance in New Jersey.

"That doesn't matter," Joan said. She accepted her cup and set it down on the table next to her; it doesn't matter a damn, Louise thought, she just won't drink it.

"So?" Louise said, leaning back against the couch cushions.

"So?" Debbi said. She and Joan looked at each other again, almost experimentally. Louise watched.

"You still making passes at my husband?" Louise asked deliberately of Joan, and was gratified to see them both blush. "Well?" she said.

“Look, Mrs. Harlowe,” Joan said with a mild little laugh. “You know perfectly well—”

“I do indeed,” Louise said. She waited again, still watching. The girls were tense, but not as tense as she was; they showed it more because they were younger and unprepared, and all of their training had not taught them what to do when they were attacked, because none of their training had ever anticipated that they might be exposed for anything, anywhere, at any time.

“Look,” Joan tried helplessly, again. “Mrs. Harlowe, there’s nothing between—”

Debbi decided to attack in her turn. “I don’t think you have any right to say something like that to Joan, Mrs. Harlowe. After all—”

Louise laughed. “Listen,” she said. “If I were someone like Ellen Thorndyke, Joan and I would be having a little heart-to-heart talk right now. Wouldn’t we?”

Joan and Debbi both smiled reluctantly.

“Not that *that* did much good,” Louise said, and then they all laughed aloud.

“It didn’t, either,” Debbi said. “That girl Dusty was so mad after Mrs. Thorndyke told her to lay off that—” She stopped abruptly.

“Exactly,” Louise said.

“But, Mrs. Harlowe,” Joan said. “Really, Mr. Harlowe and I—”

“Never mind,” Louise said, perhaps a little too quickly. “Anyway, I won’t be seeing either of you again, will I? I probably won’t be at commencement tomorrow, and after that…”

“We won’t be doing any writing this summer,” Debbi said, with that same grin.

“I just wanted you to know,” Louise said slowly, “that I’m glad you’re going, even if I like you.”

"I know you are," Joan said. There was a small silence, and then she went on. "I mean, I can see where you'd be glad to have—" She stopped, floundering.

Louise laughed, her first genuine laugh since she had opened the door for them. "You won't ever get out of *that* sentence," she said to Joan.

"Mrs. Harlowe," Debbi began suddenly; Debbi had been thinking. "Can I ask you something? I mean, would you be offended?"

"I don't think so," Louise said. Now it comes, she thought; now if I can't carry it off, I'm through.

Debbi searched for words, her alert, pretty face worried. "Why?" she asked. "Why don't you and Mrs. Thorndyke and Mrs. Crown and all the others just overlook it? I mean, the students all graduate and go away and there's no more to it. I mean, it's not anything serious, ever, is it?"

Please God, Louise thought, in the split second she had before she answered. "No," she said slowly, "it's certainly never serious — at least not for the teacher. I know that Lionel has told me about you, Joan, without ever thinking I'd mind anything so harmless as his being obsessed over one of his students. I know that Ellen Thorndyke was concerned because she thought that the girl was getting seriously involved." Louise remembered Ellen Thorndyke's face and thought, I could kill all these girls. "And I suppose we all feel pretty much the same way. Even though many of us aren't really much older than you are, we've all lived with these men for quite a while and we know a good deal more about them than you do, only seeing them occasionally." Keep it light, she told herself; keep it faintly patronizing. "It's very possible, you know, for a girl your age to get herself into serious trouble — with the college, with her family—"

"With his wife," Debbi said. "Bill Thorndyke's wife was so jealous she couldn't see."

Louise ran her finger softly along the design in the couch cushion. “I don’t want to quarrel with you,” she said. “Ellen Thorndyke is worth the whole pack of you.”

“But she was jealous,” Debbi said. “Dusty told us she cried.”

I *could* kill them, Louise thought. “I hardly think that girl Dusty is any competent judge of emotions,” she said, hearing her voice go full of hatred.

“Well, we’ve talked about it a lot,” Debbi said seriously. “We’ve decided, among the students, that none of you could see your husbands go off to an office every day without worrying about his secretary. I mean, wives just *are* jealous, aren’t they?”

Come off it, come off it, Louise thought; in my own country I was accounted quite a killer. “You may be married yourself someday,” she said. “It’s just possible.”

“It’s because you don’t have anything to *do,*” Joan said. “Anything better, I mean.”

“What do *you* have to do?” Louise asked. Ellen Thorndyke was making a patchwork quilt, Jean Crown was growing orchids, Roberta Ewen had gone back to the piano. Suddenly Louise was aware that she had said all she had to say, that any more talking would destroy the handsome invulnerability she had set up for herself with such care, and she shrugged, as perfectly as Joan had shrugged a few minutes ago. “Well,” she said. “There’s no point in our arguing about it. After all, you two are leaving tomorrow.”

She gave them the correct pause of attention to indicate that they might go. They needed no prompting — not two girls who were going to spend the summer drinking scotch on yachts. They both rose, getting out of their chairs as though they were at home and the chairs were handsome antiques. They both said “Thank you so much” in the correct tones and, without looking at each other, got themselves gracefully to the door. It was clearly understood between them that before they left they were going to have to say goodbye for good; Debbi started it.

“Mrs. Harlowe,” she said, “I do want you to know that we appreciate all you’ve done.”

“You’ve been very tolerant and sympathetic,” Joan said.

“I’ve enjoyed it all so much,” Louise said. “Being here at the college has been quite an experience for both Lionel and me.” She laughed. “I think a year is enough, though.”

“Lionel says he won’t ever give up teaching,” Joan said innocently.

Louise smiled at her beautifully. “Lionel,” she said, emphasizing the word heavily, to make sure it carried to Joan, “Lionel has apparently been flattering you,” she said.

She closed the door behind them, feeling ashamed of herself and afraid of seeing Lionel. There was still time for them to get to him before he came home; there was still time for Joan to tell him sweetly, “Mrs. Harlowe asked me—”

She went out into the kitchen and made herself a drink. So I did it, she told herself defiantly. He can’t say a word without admitting everything. No more respect for his wife than that, she thought, every fat-faced little tomato who walks into his class. She took her drink back with her to the couch, and picked up the history book she was studying.

The Arabian Nights

ALICE WAS TWELVE; to be precise, Alice was twelve and a day when she went to a famous nightclub with her mother and father and Mr. and Mrs. Carrington. The Carringtons were friends of her family's, and had just arrived that day from Chicago. "So Alice was twelve years old yesterday?" Mr. Carrington had said, looking down at Alice and grinning. "Don't you think that calls for a little celebration?" Mr. Carrington was big and cheerful and red-faced; when he said "a little celebration" it meant he wanted to spend money and show someone a good time.

Mrs. Carrington had red hair and was big and cheerful, like Mr. Carrington; Alice was very fond of both of them. "A girl's only young once," Mrs. Carrington had said. "This ought to be the finest celebration this old city has ever seen."

Alice's mother and father were cheerful people too, and they had seen to it that Alice had a very pretty twelfth birthday party; her father gave her a charm bracelet with a tiny silver cocktail shaker and glasses on it, which made her feel daring and sophisticated, and her mother gave her a manicure set with natural-color polish. Because Alice was an only child she felt very close to her mother and father, in spite of an uneasy feeling at times that they had a complete life apart from her. She knew that they were immensely popular people, that their friends were witty and charming, and that their books were good and their ideas modern; only occasionally did she wonder what they talked about all the time when they were with their friends, since they had so little to say to each other.

“Alice has never had a real grown-up celebration,” her father said. He reached for Alice, who was standing next to him, and pulled her down onto his knee. “She’s not a little girl anymore,” her father said. “She’s a young lady. What am I going to do,” he asked Mr. Carrington, “when some young man comes along and wants to take her away from me?”

“Make sure he’s rich,” Mrs. Carrington said. “If I had a daughter I’d make sure she married a man who could support Charley and me in our old age.”

“Stop mauling the child, Jamie,” Alice’s mother said. “She’s too big, and it’s undignified.”

“Two days ago I could still hold her on my lap,” Alice’s father said, “but now that she’s twelve I can’t?”

“On my fiftieth birthday,” Alice told her father, “I’ll come around and sit on your lap.”

Alice’s father began to laugh. “See, honey,” he said to his wife, “not everyone thinks it’s undignified to sit on my lap.”

Mrs. Carrington said quickly, “But what about this celebration? I propose that all of us go out somewhere to dinner, wherever Alice wants to go.”

“I want to go to the Arabian Nights,” Alice said, quickly. Everyone looked at her, and she blushed.

“What on earth?” her father said. He turned Alice’s face around. “Why do you want to go there?”

Mr. Carrington was trying very hard not to laugh. “I don’t blame her,” he said. “I’d like to go there myself. Always did want to.”

Alice held her breath. The Arabian Nights was a very big, very noisy, very famous nightclub; if she went there for dinner she could wear her new bracelet and her nail polish.

Alice’s mother was laughing too. “She must have heard Jamie talking.”

“I always wanted to go there,” Alice said to Mr. Carrington.

“If that’s where you want to have your birthday celebration,” Mr. Carrington said. “Only there must be places you’d *rather* go?”

“Nowhere else,” Alice said breathlessly. “I’ve been reading about it and hearing about it for a long time.”

Mr. Carrington looked at Alice’s father, and Alice’s father nodded. Then Mr. Carrington looked at Alice’s mother, and she hesitated, and then shrugged and smiled at Mrs. Carrington. Then Mr. Carrington turned to Alice. “I guess that’s it, then, Alice,” he said. “Shall I phone for a reservation?”

“Wear your blue dress,” Alice’s mother said, “and the bracelet your father gave you.”

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Alice sat between her father and Mr. Carrington with her nails shiny and pink beyond the bracelet, in the lavishly decorated Arabian Nights, at a table that had been especially reserved. She sat with her elbow on the edge of the table, and her chin in her hand, with her shoulders pulled tight together, and she looked disdainfully at the people sitting nearby. They’re just like everyone else, she thought; I’m not afraid of any of them. When everyone had a drink — Mr. Carrington had ordered a glass of sherry for Alice — she picked it up and took a sip from it just like everyone else, and she watched how her mother toyed with the stem of her glass, and did the same thing. Seen through the glass, her fingers were long and thin.

When the floor show started, Alice had just begun her soup; her father and Mr. Carrington ate right on through in the almost-darkness and so did she. It’s canned tomato soup, like at home, she thought with surprise. They were sitting very close to the stage, and everyone had taken care that Alice should sit where she could see everything. The comedians embarrassed her because it was necessary for her to pretend not to understand them when she saw her mother glance at her and then tighten her lips to keep from smiling. Her father and Mr. Carrington were watching her too, and she was proud when she realized she was acting exactly like everyone else. The dancers delighted her; one of them came down to the edge of the stage with a bowlful of gardenias to throw to the audience, and he saw Alice and tossed her one.

"We should have thought to get her some flowers," Mr. Carrington said as he pinned the gardenia onto Alice's shoulder.

Intermission arrived just in time for Alice to eat her steak. The lights all went on again, and everyone turned to Alice at once and began to talk.

"Do you like the show?" her mother said.

"How are you enjoying yourself?" Mr. Carrington asked.

"Want to go home yet?" her father said.

"You look very pretty, Alice," Mrs. Carrington said. Alice looked around at everyone and said: "I'm having a wonderful time. Everything's wonderful."

"Cigarette?" Mr. Carrington said to Alice very solemnly. Alice looked at her mother, and her mother shook her head. I suppose I can't have everything, Alice thought. "No, thank you," she said to Mr. Carrington. "I don't smoke." And Mr. Carrington, smiling, put the cigarette case away.

Alice's mother was staring off at the entrance, her eyes narrow and interested, and at the same time her hand was feeling around on the table for her bag; when her hand found it, she took out her compact, still without looking, then her lipstick and comb. Finally she dropped her eyes and hurriedly opened the compact and looked at herself, touched her nose with the powder puff and her hair with the comb, turning the compact to see the sides of her hair, and then she put on a little more lipstick, and raised her eyes again to the entrance. While she looked, her hands were busy again, putting everything back into her bag and the bag back onto the table. Then suddenly she turned to Mrs. Carrington. “Look,” she said excitedly, “isn’t that Clark Gable, coming in with that party? Over *there.*” She gestured for Mrs. Carrington to look. “About three tables in back of Alice? I’m certain it is.” Mr. Carrington and Alice’s father were listening by this time; Mrs. Carrington gave one quick glance to the side.

“It certainly does look like him,” she said.

Alice’s father and Mr. Carrington both looked. “Sure, it’s him,” Mr. Carrington said.

“Major Gable,” Alice’s father said, “volunteered to be a top gunner during the war.”

“Frankly, my dear, I don’t give a damn,” whispered Mrs. Carrington to Alice’s mother.

Alice didn’t turn around, because everyone else at the table had; people all over the room were looking too, and she felt oddly conspicuous because she was so close to Mr. Gable and at a table where everyone was turning around to look.

“How soon does the floor show start again?” she asked her father.

“Pretty soon,” her father said absently. He was looking sideways at the famous man’s table.

“I’ve always thought I’d like to be an actress,” Alice’s mother said gaily. Everyone laughed.

“Look over here, Gable,” Mr. Carrington said softly, “I could use a million dollars.”

“A man like that means glamour to a lot of people,” Alice’s father said. “Made six, eight movies with Jean Harlow!”

“I remember you playing Romeo in college,” Alice’s mother said. She took her eyes off the nearby table for a minute and looked at Alice’s father. “You might be pretty,” she said, “but you sure can’t act.”

Alice’s father laughed again, unhappily. “I never had a chance to learn to be an actor anyway,” he said. “By the time I was married and had a wife and baby—”

“Shh,” Alice’s mother said, “he’s looking this way.” She looked at Mr. Carrington and smiled vivaciously. “Aren’t we silly,” she said, and threw back her head and laughed. Mrs. Carrington joined in, nudging Mr. Carrington, and Mr. Carrington sat back and guffawed. Alice’s father didn’t laugh; he sat quietly with one hand over his eyes and the other before him on the table. Alice reached out and touched his hand. When he looked up she smiled embarrassedly, and he sighed and dropped his head to his hand again. Suddenly, Alice’s mother stopped laughing and sat back in her chair. Mrs. Carrington looked around once, then picked up her glass and took a long drink from it.

Alice’s mother said across the table to Alice’s father: “You look like you just lost your last friend.”

Alice’s father dropped his hand from his eyes and sighed. “Just thinking,” he said.

“About what you might have been if you hadn’t had a wife and baby?” Alice’s mother asked. Alice looked up, surprised at her mother’s voice.

“ ‘It seems too logical…I have missed everything, even my death,’ “ Alice’s father said softly. He looked at Mrs. Carrington. “Cyrano,” he said apologetically, then laughed sadly again.

“It’s all right,” Alice’s mother said. “He isn’t looking this way anymore.”

“I’d like to meet that man,” Mrs. Carrington said. “He looks so intelligent.”

Alice's father looked up. "Alice!" he said, and everyone listened. "Why don't we have Alice go over and ask Gable for his autograph?" he said.

"She's only a child, she could do it," Alice's mother said.

"Say, you might even ask him to join us," Mr. Carrington said to Alice. "You know, just for a drink or something."

"Charley," Mrs. Carrington said reprovingly, "how could the child ask a man like that over for a drink? Anyway, he wouldn't dream of coming."

"He might," Alice's father said.

They're all thinking he'd look over here anyway, Alice thought, and see all of them and notice them, and maybe even bow to them on his way out. "I couldn't do that," she said.

"Don't be silly, darling," her mother told her. "You're only a child, it wouldn't look funny."

"She could say her mother — her mama — didn't want her to come over," Mrs. Carrington said, "but it's her birthday and she wanted to meet Clark Gable."

"I won't do it," Alice said.

"Alice!" her mother said.

"When I was your age," Mrs. Carrington said heavily, "little girls minded their mothers."

"Yes, indeed, Alice," her mother said. "You're not usually a disobedient child."

"Honey," her father said, "it's just a joke. You only pretend, don't you see?" He looks like the devil, she thought.

"I couldn't pretend to want his autograph," Alice said.

"Just tell him it's your birthday, then," Mr. Carrington said.

"I should think," Mrs. Carrington whispered, "that when a little girl gets taken out to a nice party and then someone asks her to do something, she'd do it and not be so silly about it."

"He's leaving," Alice's mother said in a flat voice. Everyone turned around to look. Then they looked back at Alice.

"It's too late now anyway," her father said.

"Well, it doesn't matter after all," Mr. Carrington said finally. "It wasn't important, Alice. Don't worry about it."

"I'm sorry," Alice said to her mother.

"It doesn't matter," her mother said.

The lights began to dim for the second half of the floor show. Alice put her hand on Mr. Carrington's arm. "Mr. Carrington," she said, "I've got a lot of algebra to do for tomorrow, so as soon as we finish dinner could we go home?" Mr. Carrington was moving his chair to see the floor show, but he stopped for a minute and looked at her. Alice put her hands under the table and began to work the fastening of the charm bracelet. "I've got all my French to do, too," she said.

Mrs. Spencer and the Oberons

THE FIRST SIGN that the Oberons were coming might have been early blossoms on the peach tree, but Mrs. Spencer did not know until she got the letter. It came on Thursday, when Mrs. Spencer was already beginning to feel the first tensions of anxiety over the day, with guests invited for dinner and Donnie's dentist appointment at three — itself requiring split-second timing at the school — and then there was the shopping to be done and the flowers to be arranged and the lemon cream to be made *early* this week to avoid the near catastrophe of last time, when people actually had to eat it with spoons. Now here was a strange letter in the mail.

Mrs. Spencer distrusted letters on principle, because they always seemed to want to entangle her in so many small, disagreeable obligations — visits, or news of old friends she had conveniently forgotten, or family responsibilities that always had to be met quickly and without enjoyment. If she had not persuaded herself that it was ill-bred to throw away a letter without opening it, Mrs. Spencer might very well have given up mail altogether, except for important things like Christmas cards from the right people, and announcements for the Wednesday Club, and invitations correctly engraved.

The letter from the Oberons looked, even on the outside, as though it carried some request, and Mrs. Spencer regarded it with distaste. The address straggled across the envelope, there was a dirty finger mark on the flap, and the stationery was obviously cheap; sighing, Mrs. Spencer opened it daintily. "Why would anyone with handwriting like this try to write a letter?" she asked irritably, and frowned up at her husband. "I can't even *read* it.” Annoyed, not wanting to touch the letter, she threw it down onto the breakfast table.

Harry Spencer, who breakfasted in a mingled fragrance of good coffee, good shaving lotion, and the printers’ ink of his morning paper, reached for his orange juice and said lazily, “Couldn’t be anything very important, anyway.” He smiled pleasantly at his wife. “Throw it away,” he said.

“Nothing is *ever* important to *you.*” The lemon cream, and the dentist, and the flowers, and the silver to be polished; Mrs. Spencer sighed. “I have enough on my mind for one day,” she said. “*You* read it.”

Mr. Spencer reached over and took up the letter and looked curiously at the sharp black handwriting. “It’s not really so bad,” he said. “A kind of puzzle, actually. He makes his *e*’s Greek style, and that funny little wiggle is an *s.* John Oberon — who is he, anyway?”

“*I* certainly could not tell you. No one I know, I’m sure.”

Mr. Spencer laughed. “You may *get* to know him,” he said. “This fellow wants you to find him a house.”

“A house?” Mrs. Spencer stared as though she had not spent all her life in one house or another, adorning, cleaning, enriching. “A *house*?”

“They liked our town when they drove through,” Mr. Spencer said, studying the letter. “Old friends of your sister’s.”

Mrs. Spencer set the marmalade down abruptly. “Of *Charlotte’s*?”

Mr. Spencer glanced up at her briefly, curiously, and then back to the letter, and Mrs. Spencer sighed again. “I can’t *help* it,” she said, almost apologetically. “*You* know I’m fond of my sister, and I do have them here every Thanksgiving, and I’d do just anything in the world for them—”

Mr. Spencer glanced up again. “I never said a word,” he remarked mildly.

Mrs. Spencer looked away. “It’s just,” she said helplessly, “that I feel it’s important for you, and your position at the bank, to have a house and a family you can point to with pride. I’m really *terribly* fond of Charlotte, you *know* I am, but even I can see that she’s not exactly the sort *we* want to know socially, and her husband is loud and coarse and vulgar and—”

“I always liked him,” Mr. Spencer said.

“Really? Would you want him working with you in the bank?”

“He hasn’t asked me.” Mr. Spencer smiled across the table. “Never mind,” he said. “Throw the letter away if you want to.”

“Some people really have no consideration for other people,” Mrs. Spencer said, touching the letter with one finger.

“They only want to know if you’ve heard of any summer places nearby,” Mr. Spencer said. “Three bedrooms.”

“Really,” Mrs. Spencer said. “*Really,* Harry.” She pushed away her half-finished coffee. “What earthly *right*…”

“That old house down by the river is for rent,” Mr. Spencer said idly. “I heard the other day that Mrs. Babcock is very anxious to get a tenant this summer, and heaven knows she could use the money. Might just ask her,” he told his wife.

“But why?” she demanded, staring. “Why?”

Mr. Spencer gathered his newspaper and rose. “I don’t know why,” he said, not looking at his wife. “Why does anybody do anything?”

Obscurely troubled, somehow defensive, Mrs. Spencer watched as her husband gathered his letters and left the breakfast room. “Don’t forget we’re having guests for dinner,” she said after him, but he did not turn. “Today, of *all* days,” she told herself, and took up the intruding, unreadable letter and carried it out to the garbage pail. She was putting the dishes into the washer when Mr. Spencer called goodbye from the front door, and she answered him absently, thinking lemon cream, silver, flowers; when she dropped the coffee grounds into the garbage pail the unreadable letter was covered, safely hidden away. I must try to get in a half hour of rest sometime during the day, Mrs. Spencer was thinking; I really cannot drive myself like this.

The phone rang at about eleven, when the lemon cream was safely in the refrigerator and the living room was dusted and the silver polished, and she answered it upstairs, where she was mending a tiny rip in her dinner dress. Mrs. Spencer never allowed her clothes, which were expensive, to fall into disrepair, and the tiny rip infuriated her, since it had not been there before she sent the dress to the cleaner, and this meant that now she would have to remember to speak sharply to the cleaner's delivery man when he came on Monday. When the phone rang she immediately assumed that it was Harry calling from the bank to say that he would be home for lunch after all, and that would be too much, altogether too much, this day of all days. "Yes?" she said into the receiver.

"Mrs. Harry Spencer? Long distance calling."

Her sister, Charlotte, had been in the back of her mind since breakfast, and Mrs. Spencer told herself that if this was really Charlotte calling just to chat over family news she would absolutely hang up; Charlotte ought to have more consideration, she thought, and tapped her finger irritably against the phone table. I will tell Charlotte frankly, she thought, I will tell her frankly that I simply have no *time* for —

"Hello?" The voice was far away, truly a long-distance voice. "Hello?" it asked faintly.

"Charlotte?" Mrs. Spencer said. "Hello?"

"Maggie?"

No one except Charlotte called Mrs. Spencer “Maggie” anymore, not since she had implored her husband to introduce her to his friends in this new town as Margaret. *Margaret Spencer,* it said on her stationery and her personal checks, *Mrs. Harry Elliott Spencer.* “Hello?” she said.

“Maggie? It’s John. John Oberon.”

“Who?”

“Driving home today…” The voice was really very faint; perhaps there was something wrong with this upstairs phone. Mrs. Spencer raised her eyes to heaven, thinking, I will have to call the man to check the phone. “Drop in about four…say hello…”

“I can’t hear you,” Mrs. Spencer said, speaking louder. “I really can’t hear you, I’m sorry. We must have a bad connection.”

“Just a minute.” The voice came more faintly still. “Rosie wants to say hello.” Distantly, like that of tiny people talking thinly in a dollhouse, or a dream, the little voice said, “Here’s Rosie.”

“I really cannot hear you at *all,*” Mrs. Spencer said firmly, and put the receiver down on the small little “Hello?” from a long, long distance. “Good heavens,” she said aloud, “why people think they have the *right*...”

She rarely lunched improperly, because she felt that it was important to do things correctly even if one was alone, and she had her pretty salad and her cup of tea every day by the kitchen window, where it was sunny. Today, however, with the shopping and the dentist still to do, she had only a cup of tea, standing up to drink it, looking out over the handsome wide lawn that surrounded the house, making a mental note to locate the Carter boy and get him to trim the edges *correctly* next time if he wanted his money. After her cup of tea she forced herself to lie down on her bed for half an hour, dutifully going over in her mind the things she still had to do.

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The Oberons must have come while she was waiting for Donnie at the dentist's office, chafing over the magazines, impatient at the leisurely, reassuring tone of the dentist's voice and Donnie's half-nervous giggle. She had bought Donnie his usual ice cream cone on the way home and he was still toying with it, delighted that with the novocaine freezing his lip he could not feel the cold ice cream. When she drove into the driveway and hurried him out of the car to play on his swing until the ice cream was gone, she was brought up short by the sight of a note tacked to her front door. It had been put up with a pin, and there was a tiny scratch on the white paint where the pin had gone in; she set her lips thinly and tore down the note, remembering at once the angular, unreadable black writing. "Those *frightful* people," she said, and then, to her son, "Look what they've done to our door."

Donnie pressed closer and his ice cream dripped onto the steps; it was really too much. Mrs. Spencer never slapped her children, or permitted them to be abused with any violent punishment, but today of all days she almost raised her hand to Donnie. Finally — because of course taking out one's annoyance on children was unfair, and unladylike — she wiped up the ice cream with her handkerchief, which she must now remember to drop into the hamper when she went by it, and sent Donnie quietly around to his play set in the back. The note she had taken from the door she dropped into the kitchen wastebasket without trying to read it.

The trash would not go out to be burned until morning, so the note stayed there, covered by the papers from the groceries and the wrapping from the candles for the table, and eventually Harry's evening paper. Mrs. Spencer gave Donnie and her daughter, Irma, their supper, and chilled the wine, and checked the lemon cream, which had come out admirably, and got the steak ready to broil, and whipped the potatoes, and made shrimp sauce. When she went upstairs to dress and say good night to her children, her kitchen was immaculate, dinner preparing invisibly, her table set and lovely in a quiet stillness of shining glass and white damask, and her living room, charming and so very like Margaret Spencer, people said, ready for the entrance of guests.

By the time her first guests arrived, Margaret Spencer's children slept, clean and warm and dreaming correctly, and she was waiting in the hall, as calm and lovely as always, gracious and elegant. "How well Margaret always manages," her guests told one another on their way home. "Entertaining seems no effort to her, somehow; she's done wonders for Harry's position in town." And one or two of the women reflected that Margaret Spencer might really be a very good choice for president of the Wednesday Club.

Before she went to bed, Margaret saw to it that the ashtrays were emptied and the glasses washed and the chairs moved back where they belonged, and she put salt on a wine stain on her tablecloth (and even if the tablecloth was permanently stained, it was a small loss, since the wine had been spilled by old Mack Ramsey; this was the first dinner invitation the Ramseys had accepted from the Spencers, and Mrs. Ramsey had really been *most* gracious about the living room drapes) and checked that the windows in the children's bedroom were open four inches from the top.

She had not remembered to tell Harry about either the telephone call from the Oberons or the note on the front door. She had so completely forgotten the Oberons by the next morning that she only stared blankly when Mrs. Babcock — a plain woman, and not one of the sort who dined with the Spencers — stopped her on the street by actually putting a hand on her arm. "I was going to call you," Mrs. Babcock said. "I saw the Oberons —" She waited, but Mrs. Spencer, moving her arm slightly away, still stared. “I thought I’d ask you,” Mrs. Babcock explained, “seeing as they’re friends of yours, and your family. About the *house.*”

“What house?”

Mrs. Babcock laughed. “I guess they never told you they looked at it, even though I thought they were pretty taken with it. My old house down by the river. Heaven knows it’s big enough for them, and they thought having the river right there would be nice for the children. Not,” she went on consideringly, “that it’s any kind of a fancy, dress-up place, but then they didn’t look to me like fancy people.” She glanced quickly at Mrs. Spencer and then away. “But of course I like to make sure,” she finished.

“I’m really afraid—”

“I thought,” said Mrs. Babcock, as though spelling it out, “that I would ask you what kind of people they are, these Oberons. They said they are old friends of yours, and it’s not as though I’d need references or anything, with the kind of people they seemed to be, so nice and friendly and all, but I did think I ought to mention it to you and you could tell me if you know anything against them. Anything that would mean I oughtn’t to rent them the house.”

“Really,” Mrs. Spencer said. Mrs. Babcock was a dreadful person, she thought, always coming and putting her hands on people. “I assure you,” she said, “I know nothing against these people.”

“Well, then, that’s all right, isn’t it?” Mrs. Babcock was clearly relieved. “It’s a nice house,” she explained, “and we’ve put some work in it, fixing it up, and it’s belonged to Carl’s folks for over a hundred years, and I wouldn’t want to see anyone living there who might let it go down.”

“Yes, I can quite understand,” Mrs. Spencer said. “Goodbye.” I am such a busy person, she thought, moving quickly down the street; why does everyone come to me with their problems? Irma had to have shoes, the lawn furniture must be repainted; would it be wise to look around for a new dress to wear when the Ramseys returned the dinner invitation, or would a new dress look ostentatious, eager? She sighed, and hurried.

She always did her own shopping, checking quality and price with care; it did not pay, she believed, to buy food for a family without considerable caution, and with prices on clothes and furniture and magazines and even Harry's newspaper going up all the time, a good housekeeper had to watch carefully to be sure she was not cheated, or deceived, or foolish. Consequently, when Mrs. Spencer went into the supermarket across the street from Harry's bank, she did not move idly but neither did she seize exciting novelties from the shelves or hurry to snatch the top head of lettuce or the special for the weekend. She walked slowly, pushing the shopping cart with the pride of one performing perfectly an exacting and delicate chore, and hesitated and debated and even, when the clerk was not looking, prodded at the melon with the tip of her gloved finger. It would not fit her position as Harry's wife to serve poor food to her family. Her children must bear visibly on their faces the healthy evidence of the very best; no unripe fruit must mar the smooth curve of little Irma's cheek or the growth of Donnie's sturdy legs. Rapt, devoted, Mrs. Spencer was considerably annoyed at the interruptions from her neighbors, who bade her good morning or asked about her health or stood in her way before the shelves. When she moved to the counter where old Sanson added and made change, she answered his good morning with only a nod; did that can of peas look slightly swollen? had she by some chance taken down a faulty container?

"That can doesn't look sound, Mr. Sanson. Will you please get me another?"

He glanced up at her, so briefly that she barely saw, and left the counter to fetch her another can of peas. "It's such a nuisance," she said to the woman waiting behind her in line. “These days, everything’s so poorly made.” The woman turned her head aside and looked impatient; *she* doesn’t care what she feeds her family, Mrs. Spencer thought, and shrugged as Mr. Sanson returned with a sounder can of peas. As he added up the prices of her groceries, she followed his gestures for any absentminded blunder; he might charge her twice for something, perhaps for two cans of peas. Then, at last, surveying the slip that listed the items, checking as each went into the box for the boy to carry to her car, she was astonished when Mr. Sanson said, as casually as he took her money, “Friend of yours was in yesterday, Mrs. Spencer. Moving into town for the summer.”

“A friend of mine? Of *mine*?”

“Mrs. Oberon. Nice-talking lady.”

“A friend of *mine*?”

“Said she was.” His old eyes lifted, shrewd. “She didn’t have any money with her,” he said.

“Really—” Mrs. Spencer gasped, shocked. “You don’t expect *me* to pay…?”

Mr. Sanson smiled oddly. “Seen a lot of people come through here,” he said, looking past Mrs. Spencer to the woman waiting behind her. “Back when this was a little country store, I used to know the ones I could trust. Still do. Can tell them every time. *Her,* I could trust. Being,” and he looked again at Mrs. Spencer, “as she was a friend of *yours.*”

“I absolutely refuse—”

“Besides,” Mr. Sanson went on reasonably, reaching past Mrs. Spencer to pull the cart behind her, “Liz Babcock rented them Carl’s old farm down by the river, and I guess they’ll be around for a while.”

—

"Those new people moved in," Mrs. Finley said, breathing heavily as she leaned to take up the pail and mop. "Thought sure you'd be down there helping out."

"What new people?" Mrs. Spencer asked. "I want all those shelves washed today, Mrs. Finley."

"Those friends of yours. Down to Liz Babcock's old man's farmhouse."

"Those people are not—"

"Half the town's down there anyway. They likely don't need *you.*" Mrs. Finley's eye, on the bare edge of insolence, turned to her mop. "Nice folks," Mrs. Finley said. "Easy to get along with, I'd think."

Mrs. Finley is really too old and too heavy for this kind of work, Mrs. Spencer thought; I ought to start looking around for someone younger.

"New kid in my class," Donnie announced over his supper. "Nice guy."

"Donnie, dear. 'Guy' is not a civilized word."

"Nice fellow," said Donnie primly. "He's got a two-wheel bike. And a microscope. And a dog. A *dog.*"

"Animals are very well for the open country, dear. But with our lovely lawns and our pretty flowers — Imagine what a dog would do, digging and scratching!"

"And he's got a big brother who's teaching him to pitch. He's already the best marbles player in the school."

"What's his name?" Irma asked. "Donnie? What's his name? Donnie?"

"Irma glirma," Donnie said. "Irma dirma epiglirma."

"Donnie? Donnie?"

"Joe," Donnie said, reverently. "Joe."

"Joe what, dear?"

"*I* don't know. Joe something. You know what? He's got a baseball with all the Yankees' autographs on it. He's going to bring it to school."

"Really, Donnie." Mrs. Spencer spoke with some distaste. "Do you know what his father does? What kind of clothes does he wear? Does he speak nicely?"

"Sure," her son said, "sure," and bent his head over his pudding.

—

After considerable hesitation, and without quite knowing why, Mrs. Spencer brought herself reluctantly to speak to her husband. She put her slim dessert spoon down on the edge of her plate, touched the handle of her coffee cup, and said, not raising her eyes, "Harry, I'm worried about something."

"Money?" He looked up, concerned. "Money, Margaret? Surely there's no need—"

"No." She smiled, a little. "Not money, Harry. No, I'm worried about these people, the ones who have just moved into town."

"The Oberons?" He was puzzled.

"You *know* them?"

"Sure," he said. "Joe and Rosie. They've been in the bank. What worries you about *them*?"

"They've been using my name. Nothing serious, of course, and I'm sure everyone around town knows me well enough to recognize the kind of people I know, but they told Mr. Sanson at the market that they were friends of mine, and today I was disturbed when the florist just happened to mention that Mrs. — what *is* the name? Oberon — was buying white roses because they were my favorite flower and she was expecting me to call—"

"You ought to, as a matter of fact," Harry said. "Common courtesy."

"But I don't even *know* them," Mrs. Spencer said.

"If they're friends of your sister's—"

"Really," Mrs. Spencer said. Her fingers tensed on the handle of her coffee cup. "Harry," she said, then stopped. Finally she said, "If I call on them, then they'll expect to visit *here.*"

"Why not?" Harry said. "You could buy *her* favorite flowers. They are very pleasant people, anyway."

"Introduce them to *my* friends?" Mrs. Spencer was astounded. "*My* friends, Harry?"

"Then do as you think best," Harry said slowly. "I just thought they were very pleasant people."

Mrs. Spencer lifted her chin regally. "I do not call on people who capitalize on my name," she said.

Harry glanced up, sardonically. "It's my name, too," he said, "and I'm honored."

—

Pamela Worthington was quite surprised, she told everyone, to find that the Spencers had not gone to the Oberons' housewarming; it was certainly *the* party of the summer, although probably the Oberons would surpass it themselves, the summer being young. At any rate, one would surely have expected the Spencers, of all people, to be there with their old friends.

"I simply couldn't understand it," Pamela Worthington said at last to Mrs. Spencer. "You, of all people."

"We were not invited," Mrs. Spencer said. "We don't know the people."

"Margaret, *honestly.* Rosie Oberon will simply *die* when she hears you thought you weren't invited. She'll simply *die.*"

"We were not invited."

"But, my dear, *of course* you were invited. Rosie told me herself she was expecting you, and all evening they were absolutely *watching* for you."

"We do not know the people."

Pamela stared. “But Harry *introduced* me to them, right there in the bank.” Then she stopped, and lowered her voice. “Really, Margaret,” she said, “whatever this is all about, I *do* think you’re making too much of it. I don’t know what they ever could have done to offend you.”

Mrs. Spencer snapped her pocketbook open, and then shut, with finality. “Furthermore,” she said, “I do not *want* to know them.”

“It’s your business, after all.” Pamela’s tone had grown definitely colder. “I always knew you could carry a grudge, Margaret, but I do think that in this case you’re just carrying one too far. Rosie Oberon is one of the sweetest people I ever met, and I just don’t see how it’s *possible* to carry on a feud with her.”

Mrs. Spencer turned away. “I said I do not know the people,” she said. “That should be enough for any of my friends.”

“Maybe,” Pamela said, perhaps not quite loud enough to be heard, “maybe you don’t have that many friends to spare.”

—

The blossoms fell from the peach tree and were swept up by the boy who did the Spencers’ lawn; dandelions sprang up, Donnie and Irma were released at last from school, the weather turned almost warm enough for swimming. On a Thursday, just two weeks after the Oberons’ first letter had come, Mrs. Spencer was late getting home, held up by a tiresome woman who could not understand why the country club dances had to be kept small and exclusive and thought an important committee meeting was the place to argue about it; people should be more discriminating, Mrs. Spencer had been telling herself crossly all the way home; after all the work we’ve done to keep things nice, someone always turns up without any appreciation or understanding. Because she was angry and in a hurry she ripped her stocking getting out of her car, and *that* meant she would have to change stockings before dinner, and that meant she would be even later; almost running, she went quickly into her house. Surely one might get by without these petty irritations, she was thinking.

"Dorothy?" she called. "Dorothy?"

The high school girl who watched over Donnie and Irma in the afternoons when Mrs. Spencer had her committee meetings and her book club meetings and her Wednesday Club meetings unwound herself from a chair in the living room. She had been watching television, Mrs. Spencer saw with one shocked glance; there was an apple core in the ashtray on the end table. "*What?*" Mrs. Spencer said, gasping, "*Dorothy?*"

"Mr. Spencer—"

"Garbage in my living room? Where are the children?"

"They're not here," Dorothy said. Carefully, daintily, she took up the apple core. "I'll wash the ashtray if you like," she said sweetly.

"Watching *television*?"

"I only stayed around," Dorothy said, giving Mrs. Spencer one level, rude stare, "because Mr. Spencer asked me to. He said to tell you that he had taken the children out to the picnic. He said to tell you that they would be expecting you to join them when you got back. That," said Dorothy, "is what I stayed here to tell you."

"A picnic?"

"Everyone in town is going. At the Oberons'. I'm going too." For a moment Dorothy's voice trembled with adolescent outrage. "I could even be late," she said, "just because I wanted to do you a favor."

"Really, Dorothy." Mrs. Spencer lifted her chin. "I don't need people doing me favors. You could have left a note."

"Mr. Spencer asked me to, and I could have been at the picnic a long time ago." Dorothy stopped, schoolbooks and jacket in her arms, one hand fumbling for the front doorknob. “My mother says I don’t have to babysit for you anymore if I don’t want to,” she said, with enormous dignity. “So I just guess I won’t be back anymore.”

“Just as you please, Dorothy,” Mrs. Spencer said, but the door slammed behind Dorothy and her words trailed off. The house was very still; Mrs. Spencer’s planning had somehow never taken into account the fact that someday she might come home and not find Harry and the children. Uncertain, she turned toward the stairs, thinking to go and change her stockings, and then hesitated. She had told Harry and the children, had she not, that the Oberons were socially unacceptable? This was just like her sister, this pushing and climbing and refusing to take no for an answer, until nice people were forced to visit out of sheer weariness; they will be making a great fuss over Harry and the children to get at *me,* Mrs. Spencer thought; I must go at once and put a stop to it.

Running again, not even sparing time to change her stockings, she went out to her car. It’s like everyone back home, she was thinking, picnics and last-minute invitations, and everything confused and grimy and noisy, taking people away from their homes and their dinners without ever stopping to think how inconvenient it might be for the orderly routine of their houses. Mrs. Spencer remembered, with a little shiver of fury, the troops of laughing friends her sister was always apt to bring home, always, somehow, when the house was freshly cleaned and things put in order.

Potluck, Mrs. Spencer thought, as though it were a word from a nightmare. A picnic at dinnertime. Children being fed all kinds of things they shouldn’t have. Grown-ups laughing and drinking and probably never getting anything to eat until all hours. People trampling through the house, wrinkling rugs, upsetting ashtrays, pressing into the kitchen to help make a salad, dropping cigarettes, putting glasses down on polished furniture, making noise. It’s vulgar, Mrs. Spencer whispered fearfully to herself, vulgar and untidy and nasty.

She did not often drive along the river road; many of the houses along there were only shacks set by the water, and Mrs. Spencer had been on a committee that stopped the people living in them from throwing their garbage into the river. She had to follow the main highway to the edge of the town, and then turn off, and as she came to the entrance of the river road she slowed down, watching for the abandoned, derelict gas station that marked the turn; it’s just *like* them to live along here, she thought, just *like* them.

She could hear the sound of a waterfall through the still night, even over the soft sound of her car. She had not perceived how dark it had grown until she realized that the moon was rising; under other circumstances she might have slowed down briefly to admire the light across the water, as she admired all things done in an orderly manner, but tonight she had to hurry. The thought had crossed her mind that one of these days she might open her front door to find the Oberons and their friends crowding in for a visit, expecting hospitality in the style of their own; she could not get Harry and the children away quickly enough.

Driven by the thought of the Oberons crossing her trim threshold, Mrs. Spencer drove faster. The Oberons’ house on the river was not far past the waterfall, but tonight — perhaps because of the darkness growing steadily along the road, with only an occasional glimpse, now, of the moon through the trees — it was difficult to find. Once, Mrs. Spencer slowed down at a curve in the winding road, thinking she heard voices singing, and saw lights through the trees, but when she stopped her car there was nothing but silence, and she drove on.

The Oberons' house was set back from the road, down the slope to the river, and only a ramshackle fence post marked the turnoff that served as a driveway; peering through the darkness, Mrs. Spencer went on, and then found herself without warning on the broad highway that marked the end of the river road on this side; this highway would only lead her back home, alone. She had come too far, and must turn and go back. As she started back, she decided that she had taken enough. Tomorrow she would tell Mr. Sanson at the store, and Mrs. Babcock, and the florist, and all the rest that the Oberons were not to be trusted. "They used my name without any authorization from me," she would say. "I wouldn't let them owe *me* money; you may be sure that Mr. Spencer and I do *not* accept responsibility."

The winding road was very dark now, and she had to turn on the car's headlights; all they showed her were trees and quiet leaves. Far away was the sound of the waterfall and then, even more distantly, laughter. Mrs. Spencer stopped her car again and listened. She thought she could hear what might be children shouting, even one high voice that could have been Donnie's, and above the thin noise of the children was music, perhaps a radio, with that peculiarly clear sound that music has near water. She sat in her car, head bent forward intently, and heard — she was positive — Harry's voice singing. "Oh, my darling," he was singing, "oh, my darling, oh, my darling Clementine," and the children's voices joined him, rising in glad disharmony, "Oh, my *darling* Clementine…" and the laughter went on.

Unsteadily, Mrs. Spencer opened the door of her car and got out, the stones of the road hard and rough under her thin high-heeled shoes. Somewhere along here, she thought, and moved, stumbling, to the side of the road. Even if she could not see the lights of the house through the trees, the driveway must be along here somewhere, and time was pressing; she could not, *could* not, endure to hear her husband singing and her children laughing somewhere down there at the Oberons' house.

There was a fence going along the side of the road, almost certainly a fence that led to the post that marked the driveway, and she took hold of the top rail — she had forgotten her gloves — to steady herself as she followed it. Even with the car's headlights shining it was dark on the side of the road, among the trees, and the distant singing and laughter faded sometimes until it was only the sound of a very soft breeze going through the leaves. Walking almost blindly, Mrs. Spencer made her way along the fence, slipping into a ditch once, almost losing a shoe in a pile of dead leaves, straining to see lights down by the river. Then, turning at a curve in the road, she was halted; the fence ended in a tangle of fallen boards, and there ahead was the derelict gas station, and the other road home.

I've been going the wrong way, she thought, realizing that there were tears on her face, I've walked all this time the wrong way; the way in is somewhere behind me. Groping, she found her way back to her car, and sat for a minute on the seat, the door open beside her. When she sat still she could hear the singing distinctly, "Oh, my darling, oh, my *darling* Clementine," and a voice — surely Irma's — shouting, "Popcorn! Popcorn!" I'll have to turn around again, she thought; I must have missed it somehow. Her shoes were ruined, she knew, and it was just as well that she had not changed her stockings; her hands were filthy and scratched from the fence; she knew that her hair was draggled and her lipstick worn away. All of this the Oberons will pay for, she thought. The Oberons will suffer for every single bit of this; I'll have Harry run them out of town tomorrow; you just wait and see, she told the Oberons silently, you just wait and see what I am going to do with you.

She started the car then, fired with anger, and turned around by the gas station and started back along the road, driving very slowly and close to the side of the road. When she came to the spot where she had heard the singing she went even more slowly, her head partly out of the car window. It was possible — considering the haphazard Oberons, it was even probable — that the fence post that marked the driveway had been allowed to fall down, but even so, the driveway ought to have been visible as an opening between the trees. From far away she could still hear the laughter and the singing, as though the guests wandered now all along the river, perhaps in boats, going up and down the river and singing. If those people have put my Donnie into a boat, she thought fiercely, they'll have to account to me — and found herself again at the end of the river road where it joined the other highway home.

Why can't I find it? Why can't I find the house where the Oberons live? Everyone else has gotten there all right. No, she thought, sitting and staring at the streetlights going along in order toward her home, no, it isn't possible.

Then, beginning to feel frantic, she turned her car quickly and drove back along the road until she came again to the other end, to the abandoned gas station, and, turning again, back once more to the lighted highway. Once, she stopped, hearing first only silence and then, far away, the voices singing and the laughter. It seemed to her that she had spent hours, perhaps years, searching up and down a dark and empty road, following the distant merriment, never able to find a way to get closer to it. At last, tired and worn, tears drying on her cheeks, she accepted the highway home and left the river road behind. They will be waiting for me at home, she said over and over, they will be there waiting for me, they will have been waiting all this time.

The town was deserted; only an occasional light showed on a porch or in a hallway, as though most people had gone off by daylight, forgetting that it might be dark when they came home. No one was walking on the sidewalks, and Mrs. Spencer wondered if the movie theater and the restaurants and the drugstores and the bars downtown would all be empty, closed and dark, because all the town was down by the river laughing and singing and dancing. I'm the only one who didn't go, she thought with dismay; they all went off and left me behind.

In her haste she had not left any lights on in her own house, and it was dark and forbidding as she drove into the driveway and walked up to the front door. No one was waiting for her. She looked eagerly, pointlessly, through the downstairs rooms, calling "Harry? Donnie? Irma?" into the silence, then sat tiredly on the bottom step of the staircase. More than anything else, more even than welcoming her family home, she wanted to shower and change, make herself clean again, and yet she had not the will to get herself upstairs; I'm the only one who didn't go, she thought again.

At last she moved, alert, hearing suddenly the sounds of movement; cars going down the street, people walking, voices calling to one another. They're back, she thought, everyone has come home again; I must hurry and change before they get here. Harry and Donnie and Irma must not find Margaret Spencer sitting bedraggled on the bottom step of her own staircase; she must be neat and ready for them, and then, running up the stairs, she realized that they would be coming home dirty and sticky and perhaps wet from the river, perhaps tracking mud across the white doorsill, putting grimy hands on the stair rail, bringing their filthy shoes into the living room, and she sighed irritably. It's too *much,* she thought; it's more than I can stand. I spend my whole life keeping things nice for them, and what thanks do I get?

She heard Harry’s car pull into the driveway, and doors opening and closing.

Then, irrepressibly, Irma giggled and said in what was almost a whisper, “Oh, my darling Clementine,” and Donnie began to laugh and then Harry was laughing too. “Oh, my *darling* Clementine,” they said to one another, as Harry unlocked the door, and then they were all inside.

Watching them helplessly, angry and bewildered in the face of their joyful, happy laughter, Mrs. Spencer could only think, It’s too much, it’s too *much;* I spend my whole life keeping things nice for them, and this is the thanks I get.

It Isn't the Money I Mind

IT WAS A sunny afternoon, and the park was nearly full. Old men and women sat on the benches; mothers sat idly beside baby carriages or watched children run shrieking over the grass. There were a lot of dogs walking up and down the paths on leashes or lying next to the benches. Except for the children, there was little conversation and not much noise.

A man came into the park from one of the side entrances. He stopped just inside the entrance to pat a dog on the head and speak to the owner, and then walked on slowly, looking for a place to sit down. He was middle-aged, partly bald, and, judging by his clothes, not very well off. As he walked he watched the people in the park with a bright interest, stopping to listen to an argument between a mother and child, and later to pick up a ball for a group of older boys. One of them said, "Throw it back here, mister," and held out his hands. The man threw the ball clumsily and it bounced twice before the boy scooped it up. The boy said, "Thanks," and turned and threw it easily far across the grass to another boy.

The man watched for a minute and then walked on. Finally he stopped in front of a bench with an empty place at one end. Beside it sat a woman with a baby carriage. "May I sit here?" he asked. She looked up and said, "It's not taken," and the man sat down. He sighed and sat still for a minute before reaching into his pocket for a cigarette.

The woman looked at him irritably and then turned away. A baby was lying in the carriage on its stomach, asleep, wearing only a diaper. The baby's back was brown, except for a sharp white edge where the diaper began. The woman was tirelessly rocking the carriage back and forth.

"Will the smoke bother the baby?" the man asked.

"I just got her to sleep," the woman said. "Just about anything wakes her."

The man leaned over and dropped the cigarette onto the ground and put his foot on it. "She looks like a fine, healthy baby," he said.

The woman smiled. "She's only six months old," she said, "and never even had a cold."

"A fine baby," the man said. "You see so many around here looking pale and white."

"They're not healthy," the woman said. "Some of the children in this park are really unhealthy."

"It's hard for children in the city."

"Their mothers should keep them out of the park if they have things other children can catch," the woman said.

While he was talking, the man had been fingering his billfold, riffling through the papers in it absentmindedly. Now he pulled one out — a magazine clipping. "Want to see my little girl?" he asked.

The woman reached out with the hand that was not rocking the carriage. "Of course," she said. "I could tell from the way you talked that you had one of your own."

The clipping was of a little blond girl of about six, with a pretty, adult face and a lot of makeup. "She's lovely," the woman said. "She has such a sweet face."

"She's a nice kid," the man said. He hesitated. "Know who she is?" he asked finally.

The woman shook her head.

"Her name's Angela Foster now."

"Of course," the woman said. "In the movies!"

"That's right." The man took the clipping and looked at it fondly. "It used to be Martin — that's my name. Her mother changed it. Angela Martin's not good for the movies," he said.

"What a lucky little girl!" the woman said, reaching over to adjust the hood of the carriage. "In the movies!"

"She'll be a second Shirley Temple someday," the man said. "She's got talent — everything."

"You must be very proud of her."

"I'll tell you," the man began carefully, "I'm proud of her, of course. And it isn't the money I mind, either. She's making plenty right now, and I don't grudge it to her. But it's like this. Before her mother took her out to Hollywood, I was always kicking about the dancing lessons and the singing lessons and the costumes and the late nights when her dance class gave a recital. And now I know I just didn't have sense enough to see the baby had talent."

"It's hard to tell," the woman said. "All children have a natural sense of rhythm. Even at six months—"

"It isn't the money I mind," the man said again. "I don't think a six-year-old girl *should* have to support her father."

"Well, there's a lot of luck connected with it," the woman said.

"I saw this article about her in a movie magazine," the man went on. "It said she was five years old, but she must be six now. And she's already getting fan mail."

"Really?" the woman said.

"I thought of writing to her and asking for a picture," the man said. "Her own father."

"I'm sure you'll be very proud of her," the woman said. He reached into his pocket again for his cigarettes, and she frowned and shook her head. The man rose.

“I’ll just finish my walk while I smoke this,” he said. He smiled at the woman and leaned over the carriage for a minute. “Such a pretty baby,” he said. He bowed slightly to the woman and went rapidly down the path.

—

When the man got around the next turn, he began to walk more slowly. A little boy just learning to walk staggered out from a bench and grabbed him by the leg. The man said, “Where you going, champ?,” turned the little boy around, and started him back to his mother. The man stopped for a minute to watch a checkers game and then went on again, only to stop a minute later and help a little girl of about two push her stroller around a difficult turn. The man called her “honey.” Her mother, who was standing nearby, thanked him, and he said, “Lovely little girl.” The mother smiled and went on, pulling the little girl and talking to her as she went.

The broad circle the man had been making had by now taken him back in the direction he had come. As he passed the group of boys playing ball, he saw the ball strike a tree and bounce in his direction. He scooped it up awkwardly and, holding it in his hand, walked over to the boys. They were waiting impatiently for the ball, and as he stepped across a low railing and handed the ball to the nearest one, he smiled apologetically and said, “Don’t have the muscle I used to.”

“Thanks,” the boy said. He threw the ball, and the boys began to scatter. One of them caught the ball and threw it to another. The man said, “Bud,” and the nearest boy turned around. The man, taking out his billfold, said, “Know who this is?” He pulled forth a newspaper clipping and held it out to the boy.

The boy glanced over his shoulder at his friends and then went over to the man. “Sure,” he said, looking at the clipping, but without making any attempt to hold it. “Nicky Lopez. The middleweight challenger.”

A couple of the boys nearby had also turned when the man called, and now they came slowly over. “Nicky Lopez,” one of them said. “Let’s see Nicky Lopez.” The man handed him the clipping, and the boy looked at it and said professionally, “There’s a guy that can fight.”

“He’s pretty good,” another of the boys said, taking the clipping in turn.

“I used to manage Nicky,” the man said, watching the boys’ heads turn slowly toward him. “Yeah,” he said reminiscently, “I used to manage Nicky, until the syndicate got him away from me.” He looked around at the boys and then went on, “It isn’t the money I mind, you understand, but I sure hated to lose that boy.”

Company for Dinner

MR. SHAPIRO CAME whistling down the street, swinging his briefcase cheerfully. Getting dark early these days, he thought; mustn't forget to tell Marjorie what Hargreaves said to me today. "Hi, fellows," he said to the kids sitting on the curb, their faces turned around to watch him go down the street. Streetlights are on already, he thought, sure gets dark early these days. He trotted briskly up the steps of number 1018, saw that the door was open a crack, let himself in, and slammed the door behind him.

"Dear?" he called experimentally toward the kitchen at the end of the hall.

The sound of the can opener stopped, and she said, "That you, dear? Dinner's almost ready."

"Good," said Mr. Shapiro, and stopped at the hall closet to hang up his coat. Gray hat's getting sort of shabby, he thought, looking at it where it sat on the shelf; wish I could persuade Marjorie to hang up her coat in here instead of leaving it on the bed. Have to speak to Marjorie about getting a new gray hat. Wonder what's for dinner.

"Dinner almost ready, dear?" he called as he passed the kitchen door.

"Ready in a minute."

Dining room looks pretty good, he thought, on his way to the living room. He took an olive from the dish on the table, then stood looking at the table, thinking: Something different, something. New long scratch in my chair, must be the kid; something else different, though. New dishes? New silverware? Clean tablecloth? That's it, best tablecloth. Company for dinner? Only three places…Probably the laundry didn't come.

Must speak to Marjorie about the laundry, he thought, going into the living room, three of my handkerchiefs last week…” ‘Lo, fella.” The little boy in the middle of the living room floor was making a toy dump truck go back and forth, back and forth, and barely looked up. “ ‘Lo,” he said.

“Got a kiss for Daddy?” Mr. Shapiro asked.

“No,” the little boy said.

Mr. Shapiro sat down in his chair. Something wrong, he thought. The whole house is on edge tonight. Pictures a little crooked, chairs not quite in place, carpet a little more faded near the window. Bridge club come today? he thought; no, that’s Thursday. Girl, that’s it. Girl came to clean.

“Dinner almost ready?” he called out.

“Yeah, when’s dinner?” the little boy yelled. “When’s dinner, Mom?”

“It’ll be on the table in a minute.”

“Meat loaf tonight,” the little boy said.

“Good,” Mr. Shapiro replied absently. He was looking at the books on the table next to his chair. *They Were Expendable* — must have brought that home from the office, he thought, must have brought that home a few nights ago and meant to read it. Ought to read that book tonight, talking about it at lunch today.

“Dinner’s on the table!”

“Yaaay,” the little boy shrieked, shooting past Mr. Shapiro, who walked slowly through the dining room. “Got to wash my hands,” he explained to the kitchen door.

“One night in your life you might wash your hands before I…” Her voice followed him into the bathroom, and he closed the door gently on it.

When he reached the dinner table and pulled back his chair, his eyes fell onto the bowl at his place.

“Didn’t we have tomato soup last night?” he asked. He lifted his eyes to the woman at the head of the table, and then turned to the little boy. They were staring at him.

The woman rose. “I *thought* you were early tonight,” she said blankly.

“Why…” said Mr. Shapiro. He put down his napkin, went over to the hall closet, and took out his coat and hat. Gray hat looks a little shabby, he thought. The woman and the little boy watched him until the door closed behind him.

Mr. Shapiro went swiftly down the steps and then up the steps of number 1016. He let himself in with his key and slammed the door behind him.

“Dear?” he called out. “The funniest thing…”

The sound of the can opener stopped, and she said, “That you, dear? Dinner’s almost ready.”

I Cannot Sing the Old Songs

THE GREATEST GUY in the world, she thought, looking at her father. She glanced over her shoulder a moment. The couch, she thought. I sat there last time.

“I think you owe us an explanation,” her father said.

The easy start, she thought. Allowance for excitement or backtracking. Better not say anything.

“Your mother and I are terribly disappointed in you.”

The catch in the voice, she thought, the appropriate quaver.

“I don’t suppose there’s any way we can tell you how we feel; you don’t seem to have any consideration for us or for anything but your own selfish plans.”

Don’t get mad, she thought. They’re only just starting to work on me.

“I suppose you think it was very gracious of you to come home for two days to tell us about this young man?”

A long pause. Better say something, she thought. This is getting one-sided.

“You knew about him a long time ago,” she said.

“But why do you have to—” her mother asked. She began to cry.

“We think you could have shown us a little more consideration, that’s all,” her father said.

The greatest guy in the world, she thought. And he’s letting her crying work on me for a while right now. Better not talk again for a few minutes.

“After all,” her father was saying again, “you know that we don’t like this young man.”

What do you want me to do? she thought, say okay, the whole thing's off, I won't get married?

"If it were only someone—" her mother began again.

"Well, Mother," her father said, "I never thought we'd be ashamed of her, did you?"

Wait now, she thought. Go very slow on this one. Her mother was crying again.

"Why, for God's sake?" her father said, slamming his hand down on the arm of the chair. "If it were only someone fair and honest and aboveboard…"

He just thought up those words, she thought. Take it very slow.

"I want to be proud of you," her father said. "I want to be able to tell the whole world how proud I am of my daughter. And now—"

Okay, she thought. Take it now. "I'll leave tonight," she said, "if you're too ashamed of me." I can work up a good quaver too, she thought.

"No, please, listen," her mother said.

"Don't get high-handed with me, young woman," her father said. "I won't listen to that sort of talk from you. You're still my daughter, you know, until…"

As long as she could hold on with both hands she could keep from laughing. You can't just walk out in the middle of it, she thought. They'd have to say it all to each other, then.

"Mother," her father asked, "what are we going to tell our friends?"

The greatest guy in the world, she thought. Jesus, you poor old man.

The New Maid

IT WAS THE first golden week of spring, and Mrs. Arthur William Morgan was almost completely unaffected by it. To begin with, she rarely saw the spring weather anyway, since she got on a commuter train every morning before the weather had rightly settled itself for the day, and took a commuter train home again in the evening, after everything the weather could do with itself in one day was over with, and spent the time in between in her fancy air-conditioned office designing clothes for fashionable women to wear the following autumn.

On Saturdays and Sundays, Mrs. Morgan frequently caught a passing glimpse of the weather between getting up and running off to somewhere to see someone, but spring weather is a thing to soak in, and it had no time to do any real affecting of Mrs. Morgan. Mr. Morgan, who habitually caught a commuter train four minutes later than his wife's in the morning, and seven minutes earlier than his wife's in the evening, could hardly have been expected to call his wife's attention to the soft air, the gentle sun, or the warm breeze.

At any rate, in this first really golden week of spring, Mrs. Morgan had hired a new maid. Not actually hired, that is, and she wasn't really a maid, if you stopped to think about it, but Mrs. Arthur William Morgan was so indiscriminate about the persons in her employ, since they all merged in her mind, eventually, into one inferior character, that you might as well say that Mrs. Morgan had hired a new maid, and be done with it. The person had come in answer to an advertisement in the local paper: "Wanted, housekeeper and governess for twin children, seven years old. Good salary. Best of references required. Write for appointment."

Out of all the letters, Mrs. Morgan had selected one neatly written in a fine, old-fashioned hand on heavy, expensive paper; anything expensive appealed to Mrs. Morgan. She had gone so far as to give up one of her precious Sunday afternoons to an interview, and perhaps in some subtle way the spring weather touched Mrs. Morgan that day, because the applicant was no sooner seen than hired, and Mrs. Morgan felt that she had made her usual good bargain. The applicant was a smiling, cheerful woman, perhaps a shade older than Mrs. Morgan expected, but she certainly seemed lively enough to keep up with seven-year-old twins.

And, although it was not important, the twins liked her too. As Andy said to Anne, that strange spring night when the lights were out and only the moonlight enabled them to see each other, sitting up in their twin beds, "*I* like her because she smiles a lot."

"*I* like her," said Anne, "because she has candy in her pocket."

"Always thinking about candy and stuff," Andy said scornfully. "Anyway, she said she *always* has candy in her pocket."

"That's a good thing," said Anne. "I wish it was already tomorrow," she added wistfully. "I'm going to be tiny and live in the dollhouse all day."

"I'd like to be a squirrel, I guess," Andy said. "Maybe a bear, or a cowboy, only that's way out west, and I guess I better stay around home the *first* time. Maybe a tiger. Or I guess a squirrel."

"You could be a pig," Anne suggested hopefully. "I wish it was tomorrow. She said we could do anything we liked, and I'm going to be tiny and live in the dollhouse. Maybe you want to be a puppy?"

"Old Anne," Andy said.

"Or a cow?" Anne was getting sleepy. "Or a horse?"

"Old Anne." They began to giggle softly.

"Or a cat?"

"Old Anne."

"Or a pig," Anne said, her voice muffled in the pillow. "Pig," she added, and was asleep. Andy, with his masculine superiority, outlasted her valiantly; he heard her take two deep breaths before his own eyes shut. "Squirrel," he said, and smiled in his sleep.

Downstairs, Mrs. Arthur William Morgan said to her husband, in that soft and persuasive voice wives use sometimes, "After all, I have my work, too. Please let's not forget, dear, that my work is *almost* as important as yours. Almost," she said again, and her voice, slipping away into silence, implied strongly that she was being wonderfully flattering to his work.

"Aren't I ever going to hear about anything but your work?" Mr. Arthur William Morgan looked at his wife irritably. "I'm *tired* of hearing about your work."

"Not half as tired," Mrs. Morgan said softly, stepping into the advantage, "as I am, sometimes."

"All right," her husband said. "So you've got a very important job and you're a very important woman and everyone thinks you're wonderful, and no one, not even your husband, is allowed to think any different. Except sometimes," he added bitterly, "I get to wishing I had a wife who wasn't *quite* so important and who stayed home sometimes and—"

"I suppose you wish you'd married someone else?" his wife asked, still using her same soft voice. "I suppose you wish you'd married—"

Their argument, begun in a familiar strain, went on in channels already so smoothly worn by years of bickering that neither of them bothered any longer to think about what they were saying. Mr. Morgan remarked that other wives found it possible to stay home and care for their homes and children; Mrs. Morgan pointed out that other wives did not have important, responsible positions. Mrs. Morgan added to this statement its usual corollary, which was that other wives did not have weak-kneed husbands who couldn't take on half the responsibility their wives did. Mr. Morgan retorted that he personally didn't see what was so damned important about Mrs. Morgan and her tiresome work except that it seemed to make Mrs. Morgan feel she had the right to tell everyone, Mr. Morgan in particular, what to do. Mrs. Morgan said that *some*one had to tell him. Mr. Morgan said that he was capable of taking care of himself. Mrs. Morgan said that she had never felt that subservience was necessary in a wife. Mr. Morgan said…Their voices went on and on.

In the kitchen, the new maid, her pocket full of candy and her eyes twinkling wickedly at some secret knowledge, listened first to the voices of the children as they drifted down from the open window of their room; when there was silence upstairs, she was forced to listen to the monotony of the argument going on between Mr. and Mrs. Morgan. After she had put the last dish away, given a final polish to the sink, and surveyed her new kitchen one last time to make sure that everything was in perfect order against the morning, the new maid smiled at the door behind which Mr. and Mrs. Morgan were bickering and went soundlessly upstairs to the room where the children slept in identical positions, as befitted twins. They had both kicked their blankets off, and she covered them. Andy said *"Blugh?"* inquiringly, and Anne answered him, *"Mnh."*

Then the new maid, who had that day, by Mrs. Morgan's authority, been given full charge of the children, the house, the cooking, the laundry, and presumably the mice in the pantry and the pumpkins in the garden, went soundlessly on her small feet to the room Mrs. Morgan had assigned her and where she had unpacked her belongings that afternoon. Much, much later, Mr. and Mrs. Morgan resolved their argument at the same point of mutual weariness at which it had been resolved so many times before, and went to bed.

In the morning, the sun rose as usual, and sent its usual impertinent rays to glitter on the eyelids of Mrs. Morgan. She opened her eyes, stirred uneasily, blinked, and sat up in bed. The room was full of sun, it was emphatically spring weather, and Mrs. Arthur William Morgan leaped out of bed with a firmness and resiliency she had not employed for a very long time. She slid expertly through the formality of washing, dressed quickly, not bothering with her shoelaces, gave her hair a civil pat with the brush, and ran downstairs. It's morning, she was thinking, the sun is bright, the sky is blue, and I am hungry. She ran into the kitchen, and said, as she ran, "Can I please have a cookie?"

"No cookie," said the new maid, looking severely at the plates she was setting onto the kitchen table. "Not before breakfast."

"*What*'s for breakfast?" said Mrs. Morgan. "Can I have mine now, right away, quick?"

"You can have it when it's ready," said the new maid. "Not before."

"But I'm *hungry,*" said Mrs. Morgan. "I'm *starving.*"

The new maid half smiled. She set a bowl of hot oatmeal down at one place, and beckoned with her head at Mrs. Morgan. "There you go," she said.

Mrs. Morgan sat down, twisted her feet comfortably around the rungs of her chair, and said "Oatmeal? Oatmeal *again*?" She slid her napkin out of the ring and onto the floor, bent to retrieve it, and dropped her spoon. "I *hate* oatmeal," she said. "I want to put my *own* sugar on."

"You mind your manners," said the new maid, "or you won't have any sugar at all."

Mrs. Morgan ate half her oatmeal in three spoonfuls, then lingered over the other half until it was clammy. She bit largely into a piece of toast, and broke the rest of the toast into small pieces, some of which she dropped into her fruit juice glass; some of them she hid inside her napkin ring. “Can I please be excused?” she asked finally.

The new maid looked down at the dish of oatmeal, sighed, and said, “Three more spoonfuls and you can run along.”

Mrs. Morgan dawdled over her three spoonfuls until she was excused without them, and then, free of the ritual of breakfast and possessed of a cookie, she ran out into the garden. She wandered for a while just looking; the grass was unbelievably green, the flowers just beginning to show color in the bright spring morning. The sky was so blue it hurt Mrs. Morgan’s eyes to look into it. When she looked up once, she saw a gray squirrel race happily up the trunk of the tallest tree in the garden; when he reached a high branch he stopped, looking curiously around and down at Mrs. Morgan, and winked his eyes at her amiably.

“Come on down, squirrel,” Mrs. Morgan said. She held out her hands and called to him, “*Come* on, *come* on. I’ll give you some peanuts,” she added winningly, but the gray squirrel only winked mockingly at her and ran on, up the tree and out of sight.

Mrs. Morgan went on undiscouraged through the garden; when she turned a corner of the path she saw, suddenly, a small boy staring back at her. For a minute they regarded each other soberly, and then the small boy said, “Who’re *you*? Think you’re big?”

Mrs. Morgan stood on one foot and swung the other back and forth. “I’m bigger’n *you,*” she pointed out. “I’m better’n you, too.”

“I’m smarter’n *you,*” the small boy said.

"I'm smarter'n *you,*" Mrs. Morgan said, "and I can boss you if I want to."

"You can *not,*" said the little boy.

"Let's play house," suggested Mrs. Morgan. "I'll be the daddy and you'll be the mommy and I must come home from my office and you must be cooking dinner and I must say—"

"I don't want to play house," said the little boy. "I want to play army."

"How do you play army?" said Mrs. Morgan.

"First I kill you and then you kill me," said the little boy, reasonably.

"I don't want to play *that,*" said Mrs. Morgan. "That's a silly, silly game."

"It is *not,*" said the little boy.

"It is *so,*" said Mrs. Morgan.

She turned and ran away, through the garden and back into the kitchen. "Can I have another cookie?" she asked.

After lunch she was tired and ready for a rest, but the minute she was put into her room with the shades drawn and the door closed she got out of bed and crept softly in her bare feet over to the dresser. There she opened all the jars and bottles of powder and cream and perfume; most of these she rubbed onto her face and into her hair. She carefully removed all of her clothes and then, as carefully, put them on again, but backward. Then she wriggled under the bed and played there until the new maid came and said she could get up from her rest. And, the new maid added, tightening her lips, Mrs. Morgan could just keep her clothes on backward for the rest of the day.

Later in the afternoon, as she played and danced among the flowers, Mrs. Morgan met the little boy again in the garden, and he yelled at her from a distance, "Nyah, nyah, *youuuu* can't boss *meeee.*" She chased him, but he escaped her and stood behind a bush and jeered at her, as the squirrel capered above their heads in the late afternoon sunlight. Mrs. Morgan began to cry, finally, and ran away herself, into another part of the garden. It occurred to her that she could go into the house and ask for another cookie, but she had just turned the corner to the front steps when the sun, which had been meditating on this scene unnoticed for quite a while, went down.

Mrs. Morgan, her foot on the first of the steps, turned when she heard a sound behind her, and saw her husband.

“Evening, Agnes,” he said formally.

“Arthur,” Mrs. Morgan replied as formally. Together, in silence, they went up the steps to the front door. He held the door open for her and they went inside. In the living room the lamps were on, and Mrs. Morgan thought briefly how comfortable and warm it looked after the chill that had followed the sun’s setting. Then Mr. Morgan said, “Why, look at you. You’ve got everything on backward.”

“Well, you’ve got mud all over yourself,” she said angrily. After one more mutually disapproving glance, they turned their backs on each other.

“Dinner is served,” said the new maid, from the doorway.

Mrs. Morgan sat down at the table, looked deeply into her bowl of consommé, and said, “Heavens, I’m tired.”

“So am I,” said her husband, as though the fact surprised him.

“What *do* you do all day?” asked Mrs. Morgan maliciously. “I mean, to get so tired?”

“More than you do.” His voice rose to its familiar argumentative tone. “If you think—” he began.

“I think,” Mrs. Morgan cut in smoothly, “that you are speaking to me as though I were one of your secretaries or some such thing. Remember,” she pointed out icily, “you are not my—” She stopped abruptly.

"Well, you can't boss—" he began, and then he, too, stopped speaking. His face went crimson, and Mrs. Morgan, her own face reddening, stared back at him. "You can't boss me," he finished weakly. His mouth stayed open as he stared at his wife.

"*You,*" Mrs. Morgan said helplessly, "can't boss *me,*" and then they both began to laugh, guiltily at first, and unwilling to look at each other, but then, finally, holding on to each other weakly while the tears rolled down their cheeks, until they were no longer able to laugh out loud but could only gasp.

"Arthur," Mrs. Morgan said finally, barely able to speak. "Oh, Arthur."

Mr. Morgan wiped his eyes with the back of his hand. "And your clothes!" he said, "Agnes, your clothes!" Together they burst into laughter again.

The new maid, peering through the swinging door between the dining room and the kitchen, watched the couple for a quick minute, and then, grinning, returned to her dishwashing. From upstairs, the voices of the children drifted down to her through the open windows.

"And when you're right on top, in the little tiny branches" — Andy's voice rose— "you can swing, and hold on tight, and swing way out over the ground!"

Anne giggled softly. "I had five cookie crumbs and a grape," she said. "You know the little cups in the little tiny china closet? Well, they leak. Everything leaks out of the bottoms of them. And the beds look soft, but really they're not."

"And the ground looks so far far far away," Andy went on dreamily, "and you have to hold on tight."

"And I rode on the little fire engine," Anne said. "She wound it up for me and I rode around and around and around the playroom, and it's miles and miles and miles…” Her voice faded.

“Swinging back and forth, up in the sky,” Andy said. His voice softened abruptly. “Up in the sky,” he said once more, and then all was quiet.

The new maid finished her washing, took the untouched soup bowls off the table in the dining room, and glanced into the living room, where Mr. and Mrs. Morgan sat on the couch holding hands and talking earnestly, and still laughing occasionally.

When the kitchen was clean and tidy, the new maid took off her apron and hung it up with a sigh. She went upstairs soundlessly, stopping at the room where Anne and Andy slept in identical positions. When she covered them, Anne said *“Graa?”* inquiringly, and Andy reassured her, *“Wssh.”*

Then the new maid went back downstairs, still without sound on her small feet, to the room Mrs. Morgan had assigned her and, stopping now and then to smile wickedly to herself, began to pack.

French Is the Mark of a Lady

SHE CAME IN very quietly, standing in the darkness of the huge polished room until I noticed her. She was very small, and her dark curls were tied up in a red bow. When she walked, the bow shook back and forth on her head.

"Hello," I said to her politely.

"What do you want here?" she asked.

"I've come to see your mama."

"My *mother*" — the emphasis was very marked— "is still dressing."

"I know. I'm waiting for her."

"Have you come about a charity?"

"No. I used to know your mother a long time ago, and now I've come to see her."

"Did she invite you?"

"No."

The red bow shook vigorously. "My mother doesn't talk to people unless she invites them here."

I was annoyed. "Nevertheless, I strongly suspect that your mother will be down to see me in a minute."

"Oh." Large dark eyes regarded me steadily. "Why do you want to see my mother?"

"I used to know her a long time ago."

"How long?"

"Oh…ten years. Before you were born."

"I'm eight."

“I’ve known your mother since she was a little girl.”

The topic seemed to bore my companion. She stood perfectly still, her eyes looking over my shoulder. When I finished speaking, she looked at me again and said: “I’ve got a boyfriend.”

I didn’t laugh. “Aren’t you rather young?” I asked.

“No.”

I tried again. “What’s his name?”

“John. He drives a car.”

“How old is he?” I was a little startled.

“Thirty-three.” She nodded vigorously. “He drives me around.”

“That’s very convenient.”

“I need someone to drive me around,” she said, looking at me.

“Where do you have to go?”

“Everywhere.” She made a vague gesture with her hand. “I have to go around everywhere.”

A sudden thought struck me. “I suppose you have a great deal of charity work to do, like your mother.”

Her voice took on a heavy lifelessness. “It’s such a bore,” she sighed.

“But tell me about your boyfriend,” I said. “What else does he do besides drive you around?”

“He delivers ice,” she said.

I kept my face sober. “That must be very interesting.”

“Sometimes it is,” she said. “Sometimes it’s inconsistent.”

I thought. “Do you mean inconvenient?” I asked.

“Inconsistent,” she said firmly.

“Oh. Well, are you going to marry your boyfriend?”

“What?” she said blankly.

“No. Well…what does your mother think of him?”

"She thinks it's good for me."

"What, your having a boyfriend?"

"She says she used to ride on ice wagons when she was a girl."

"She did," I said. "I used to ride on them with her. But I don't recall our having any boyfriends among the drivers. We always felt that they were a little…well…old. I recall that we preferred younger men…say, the boys we met in school."

"They're so puerile," she said.

I jumped. "I suppose they are," I said faintly.

"It's nice having a *man* around," she added.

"Has your mother met him?"

"No," she said, looking at me. "You don't deliver ice to the front door."

"Where do you go to school?" I asked desperately.

"I go to a private school," she said. Her voice took on that lifelessness again. "School is such a bore," she said.

"What do you learn there?"

"French. And music."

"Do you like French? I remember I used to hate it, in college."

She looked at me severely. "French is the mark of a true lady."

"Your mother doesn't speak French. Is she a true lady?"

"My mother does so speak French. She learned when we were in Paris after her divorce. She said she would have to know a few words anyway. You don't need more than that."

"And music?" I said.

The opening of the door interrupted her, and we both turned to see her mother entering. The little girl held out her hand to me, and I shook it weakly, and then, smiling at her mother, she went to the door, stopping to say: "Mother, this lady and I have had such a nice chat, while we were waiting for you." Then she smiled again at me, and closed the door quietly behind her.

"Such a sweet child," I said.

"And so clever, too," murmured her mother. And then to me, gaily: "But, *you,* my dear! How are *you*?"

Gaudeamus Igitur

ALTHOUGH SHE WENT first of all to the hill beyond the old cemetery, it was too wet to sit on the ground and there were children walking sedately up the hill in a long line, following one another in solemn procession; five of them. She put her scarf on a rock and sat down, realizing it would be difficult to sit there for even as much as the few minutes she owed the hill, seeing already as she sat down the uneasy perching, her feet braced in the mud, and the ungraceful rising, with the hem of her dress caught in the grass, her self-conscious duty completed, nothing solved.

I've got to think, she had told herself; decide what to do. Go somewhere and sit down quietly and think sweetly and logically and come home at peace. Not, however, on this wet, windy hill with children eyeing her cautiously in a long row against the sky. Five of them, three boys and a girl and a small, unidentifiable one; she disliked getting up from the rock while they watched her.

Now, she thought, putting her shoulder up to hide the children. Now what are we going to do? There was nothing to do, turning to see if the children were still watching, nothing to do but what she was going to do anyway. "Might as well go ahead, then," she said aloud, and stood up quickly, realizing when she was standing that the children were watching and her skirt was swinging mud against her stockings. "Nothing to do," she said as loud as she dared, and started down the hill, hurrying, as she felt the children moving down slowly to inspect the rock where she had been sitting, possibly shouting something unkind after her.

She knew how to go, and where, but she minded going with her hair uncombed and mud on her clothes. “They’ll have to get used to it,” she said, and felt her footsteps going slower on the pavement. There was no one around she knew; she might be going to call on someone in the city, or to the American consul in a strange country. The houses passed by her quickly; they registered faintly against her mind, trying to delay her. She had been inside many of these houses in three years; as she passed them, her mind swiftly set up a partial interior for each: one had heavy walnut furniture and antiques in a dark room; another was just a hall, with a copy of *Life* on a table; one was a room cleared for a fraternity dance, a punchbowl set on a bench against large windows, and lights around the walls.

On the corner was the house she was going to, smaller than the others, but her mind refused this one, stopping obstinately with a picture of the front door set back in its narrow white frame, solidly closed around the familiar rooms within. “It will all be different now,” she said, and hesitated at the foot of the path across the lawn. No one had seen her; she could walk right on past, except then where would she go? Not back to the hill, and she felt the five children following her, so vividly that she turned and looked behind her, but there was nothing but the row of houses she had been in.

I’ll look like a fool now unless I do, she thought, and walked up to the door, stopping to admire the front of the house as though she had never seen it before, had not come here many times in wonderful fear and excitement. In the small panes of glass on either side of the door she saw halves of herself; her untidy hair clouded her glimpse of the hall within, but the oak umbrella stand was still there. (“It makes me look academic,” he had told her once; they were reading Keats.) I’ll say I’ve been out walking, she thought, and rang the bell.

He opened the door himself and she said “Hello, Mr. Harrison,” very timidly, not knowing if he would feel right about letting her in; realizing, suddenly, that she had come alone.

He was pleased to see her, he said, happy she had come; they had returned only a week ago, he said, had she come only today? Ashamed to say that she was here to see them her first day back, she let him lead her into the living room, too quickly for her to be prepared to meet his wife again.

Barbara was just getting up from the couch; she was wearing an unfamiliar blue dress. (Back in the dormitory, only last year, she had worn a tweed skirt and a sweater; she used to have a black dinner dress with a full net skirt.) “Gloria,” she said, “I’m so glad you came.” They had been reading; his book was open on the arm of his chair, and Barbara was putting her magazine down on the table. “You’ve no idea how happy I am to see you,” Barbara said. She looked at her husband, and then said, “Sit down, won’t you, Gloria?”

For a minute it was easy to say, “I wanted to be the first to congratulate you. And welcome you back,” and then he was pushing a chair up to her and she sat down, suddenly, and there was a long silence.

Barbara said, “I was hoping you’d come right away. I’ve been so eager to see all of you. But Stephen said…” And she stopped.

“I was eager to come,” Gloria said. I sat on that hill wondering if I ought to, her mind went on.

“Can’t we offer our guest some tea?” he said abruptly. “I’d like to have tea.”

“Of course,” Barbara said, and stood up. “I’ll get it right away.”

Gloria was beginning, slowly, to realize that the house was still the same: There was a bowl of asters on the mantel now, but the bookshelves still stood firmly on either side; the chairs were still wearing green-and-white chintz, although Barbara's black leather pocketbook now lay on one; the windows still looked over the lawn to the college street. "It's so nice to be here again," she said, leaning back.

"I'm always glad to get back," he said. "Summers are fine for a week or two. Always happy to get away from enthusiastic young students." They both laughed. "But I'm glad to be back," he said. "I was out west all summer wishing I were sitting here in my own house."

"I thought Barbara would have this whole room changed around by now," Gloria said.

"She always did like it this way." He seemed surprised. "I don't know why it should be different."

"I was writing you a letter this summer. Just before Barbara's letter came, with the news. Then I didn't know whether I ought to write you or not, so I kept the letter."

"I'd like to see it," he said. "What was it about? You could have sent it."

"I finished my long poem," she said, watching him to see if he remembered. "I wrote asking if I could send it to you, or if you'd rather have me wait and show it to you this fall. I wasn't sure what to do, so I kept the letter."

"Barbara wrote you?" he said. "She didn't tell me."

"She wrote all of us," Gloria said. "We were all very close friends last year in the sorority, and she thought we'd like to know."

"She should have told me," he said. "So you finished the poem; when will I see it?"

Barbara was coming into the room managing a large tray awkwardly through the doorway. Gloria lifted the magazine and an ashtray from the coffee table and stood holding them while Barbara put the tray down. “I thought you were going to drop it,” she said.

Barbara, sliding onto the couch behind the table, nodded and said, “I thought I was too.” She began to pour the tea, eagerly, and as though she were very conscious of being a hostess. “Sugar?” she said, looking up at Gloria.

“Please,” Gloria said, and Barbara smiled.

“I remember, of course,” Barbara said. “Stephen?”

Gloria balanced her teacup carefully; it’s important to Barbara now, she thought, remembering how they would put full cups on the floor of their room between books and ink bottles and never think about it, and she stirred her tea cautiously.

“In Arizona,” Barbara began gracefully, “we used to have cocktails every day on the balcony of our room, because it was the only cool place we could find. Stephen, wasn’t that fun?”

“Lemon?” he said suddenly.

“How did you like Arizona?” Gloria asked. “Did you learn to ride a horse? Did she, Mr. Harrison?”

“She learned to ride quite well,” he said. “Lemon, Barbara?”

“I thought I brought some,” Barbara murmured, leaning forward to look over the tray. “I knew you wanted it, Stephen,” she said.

He hesitated and then said, “Never mind.”

“You got a beautiful tan,” Gloria said to Barbara. They both looked at him, pale against his dark hair, quiet, never dared by the sun. “Stephen never tans,” Barbara said gaily.

“I was on the beach all summer,” Gloria said, “and lost it all after a couple of weeks in New York.”

Barbara’s hand moved nervously from the teapot handle to the spoon in her saucer, then up to her hair, smoothing it back over her ears. “We were in New York for a few days.”

He put his cup delicately on the table, and the small sound encouraged Gloria to put her cup down too, next to his. “I ought to be getting back. I haven’t even unpacked.” I came here right away, she thought, before I opened my suitcase.

“Did you do any writing at all this summer?” Barbara asked. “We thought of you so often.”

She looked at her husband expectantly, and he said, “We haven’t finished unpacking even after a week. Barbara shipped back boxes of junk from the west.”

“Souvenirs,” Barbara said. “Everything they sell tourists.”

Gloria stood up, feeling again the mud on her skirt, her hair still wild from the wind outside. “I went up and sat on the hill past the cemetery,” she said to Barbara. “It was cold and wet and horrible and a pack of kids chased me away.”

“You’ll come to see me, won’t you?” Barbara said. “I want all of you to come.”

She rose and followed Gloria into the hall, and stood waiting with her husband while Gloria hesitated, her hand on the door latch. “I’d love to come, if I may,” Gloria said. They looked incredibly married, she thought, standing there next to each other. “I’ll see you in class Monday, Mr. Harrison?”

“Try to get to my office Monday afternoon,” he said, “and bring my letter. I worry,” he went on, “that Barbara is already afraid of being bored living as a faculty wife, out of touch with her old friends.”

“*Will* you come see me?” Barbara asked urgently.

"Of course," Gloria said, smiling. "We all want to — Mrs. Harrison," and realized as she said it how dreadful it sounded.

"You were so nice to come," Barbara said.

Gloria felt the door close behind her; it doesn't matter anymore how I look, she thought, I can go unpack now. She thought of the children on the hill perhaps still waiting, expecting her back, and it pleased her to disappoint them by turning down the street toward the campus.

It doesn't make any difference at all, she thought, as she walked quickly away from a house that was a warm living room full of books, past a house that was a hallway and a copy of *Life* on a table; he hated having her ask about my writing.

The Lie

JOYCE DUNCAN'S DECISION to go back was crystallized by the receipt of a letter from her mother, saying, in part, "Dear, your last letter sounded so lonely and sad; remember they say that whenever a woman feels low she can always cheer herself up by buying a new hat or a new dress, or both, so am enclosing a small check. Buy yourself something *silly.*" The check was just small enough not to matter enormously against the rent or the phone bill, and just large enough to make the trip a reality instead of the dim temptation it had been for so long.

"Jed," she said, "I think I *will* go back. Just for a day or so."

"It's your money," he said, not even lifting his head to speak to her.

Perhaps if I can explain somehow, she thought, relate it to something *he* understands; perhaps then when I come back there might be a way we can start to talk to each other, perhaps even start over…"You see," she said inadequately, "everything is so *wrong,* somehow. Maybe if I went back to where I started from, just for a while…"

"Go ahead," he said.

"Maybe I'd be happier if I tried it," Joyce said. "You see," she went on, not wanting to explain but hoping that somehow it might make him turn at last and look at her, "there's a sort of mix-up that happened a long time ago that I'd like to straighten out. A…a lie."

"I didn't know one lie more or less mattered to *you,*" he said, and turned a page of his book.

She knew by now that if she let the tears come into her eyes or her voice, Jed would only take his book and go into the bedroom to read. Helplessly she said, "I can't help feeling that if I go back and straighten things up *there,* maybe things *here* will be better. Maybe I've been off on a wrong track all these years just because of that one thing. Maybe when I come back, maybe you and I can…"

He stood up, his finger between the pages of his book. "Look," he said tiredly, "maybe if you go back to that town, wherever it is, and un-lie yourself, you'll cancel out every lie you've told since. You might even cancel out all the unkind things you've *done* since. But I doubt it."

"If you'd try to understand—" she began, but he closed the bedroom door so gently that he might not have heard her. I'll leave early in the morning, she thought; I'll leave before he's up and he can make his own stupid breakfast, and when I come back…

—

In the car the next morning, headed finally back exactly the way she had come here nearly ten years before, she found herself almost chanting, in a rhythm made up partly of the sound of the car wheels on the pavement, and partly the pulse of her own excitement: I'm going back, I'm going back. I should have done it much much sooner, she thought suddenly; things wouldn't have been as bad as this if I'd gone back before. Once it's done, she realized with triumph, I won't ever need to go back again. She tried to imagine what Jean Simpson's face was like, and found she thought instead about the pictures on the wall of the office; she thought she could remember Jean Simpson's voice, but all she could hear when she tried to think about it was her own voice, level and positive, saying "I saw her, it was Jean Simpson. I recognized her."

I will tell her, she thought, recognizing that although she was driving on a wide and nearly empty highway she was going very slowly; I will tell her that I am more sorry than I can say, that I was wrong, that I realize now the injustice I did her. I could offer a public apology, she thought, and then: No, why submit her to that?

Milltown. Seventeen miles to Prospect, and it was barely ten-thirty. Perhaps Jean Simpson had moved away? Her family could not have afforded to leave Prospect; the only way a girl like that could get out of town was to move into a worse environment, and Jean had never been — this thought was oddly reassuring — a particularly *good* girl, not at all the sort of person one might be concerned about for the past ten years. She was not, actually, worth a second thought, but nevertheless Joyce Duncan, scrupulously honest, was coming back after all this time to right an old wrong.

I'm being ridiculous about this, she thought, driving more slowly still past Milltown and East Milltown; I'm thinking in terms of a major disaster and it *was* only a trifle. Perhaps I ought to take her something, some small thing to show I hold no grudge, a pretty scarf, perhaps, or a box of candy? She could hardly expect me to give her *money,* but perhaps a couple of pairs of stockings? Better let it wait until I've seen her, she told herself; she may be angry still and not want anything from me.

She had thought she would not remember this town after ten years, but she turned automatically onto the street that led to her old house without recognizing anything strange about her memory of it. When she stopped the car, she found it hard to look at the old house and imagine that it could have changed. "So that's it," she said, half aloud. "Still here, after all."

Until she stepped out of her car it was difficult to imagine herself as a stranger, trying to go back, but the minute she put her foot down onto the familiar sidewalk in front of her old house it was suddenly so surprising, so odd a combination of ten years gone and yet still present in her mind, that she had to turn and rest her hand upon the side of the car to steady herself.

Joyce Richards, she thought, little Joyce Richards, not Mrs. Jed Duncan at all.

She felt wary of going too close to her old house, although she had been anxious to see it again; perhaps if she came within its reach it would capture her again, and never let her go this time. Or perhaps it was only because she was embarrassed about being seen by people looking out their windows and telling one another, “There’s Joyce Richards come back. Thought she was doing so well in the city?” The sight of the house had reminded her of Mrs. Random, so she turned on the sidewalk and started up the path to the house next door. Once on the overgrown little path with Mrs. Random’s house ahead of her, she realized at last that this was indescribably real, and it seemed to her for a moment that perhaps all this time she had been living in unreality, and waiting to awaken here again, where things were solid and the colors of the sky and the flowers and even the path were actual, real, unfaded. The door of the house was blue, and she thought that for years she had not known how blue that color could truly be.

Going up the path, she almost tasted the richness of color and form, and stopped — which she could never remember having done before — to look at, and finally touch, a rose, which bent slightly toward her and gave back to her touch a strong and soft pressure. She bent to see if it smelled as she remembered roses ought to smell, and it was heavy, rich, and lovely. Even the white doorstep amazed her eyes, and the knocker — had she ever seen another one like it? — was possessed of an actual weight of its own, so that it fell back from her hands and crashed loudly in the still morning.

Waiting on the shiny doorstep — was there city dirt on her shoes to soil its whiteness? — she listened to the odd, echoing house inside, and thought that within the city there was never any sense, even though people lived so close together, of that intimate knowledge of walls and floors and ceilings, and she remembered the distant sharp sound of voices in another room when she was a child and supposedly asleep in bed. She heard a footstep inside and then the door opened.

“Hello,” she said, wondering at the sound of her own voice, “it’s Mrs. Random, isn’t it?”

“Yes.” The eyes were not precisely suspicious; wary, rather, as of one who had dealt with personable salesladies and been taken in by supposed bargains.

“I’m Joyce Duncan. I used to be Joyce Richards.”

“Yes?”

“Don’t you remember me?”

“No.”

“I used to live next door.”

The information was taken in and discarded. “Did you?”

“I used to play in your yard.” Desperately, she was spending information she had meant to use sparingly, dwelling on each remembered moment, hoping Mrs. Random might help her reconstruct her lost childhood. “Don’t you remember?”

“So many people.” Mrs. Random waved vaguely at the house next door. “Can’t remember *every*one, you know.”

“Well, I remember *you.*” She looked again at the clean housedress, pink imprinted with thousands of small flower sprigs, and thought that in that long-dead time Mrs. Random had worn either this, or one astonishingly like it, and that the same wisp of white hair had been lying against her cheek for all these years; had Mrs. Random, she wondered, then been this vague-eyed creature, hiding nervously behind her own door? “When my mother was sick you brought us a little roast chicken, and you came over when my father died,” she said, unwillingly. She was forced into this conversational coin; one had always collected news of deaths and miscarriages and broken legs for Mrs. Random's pleasure. She thought deeply. "I had pneumonia," she added.

Mrs. Random's interest was caught and she frowned, trying to remember. "Williams?" she asked.

"Richards. I was Joyce Richards. My father was John Richards, and he was the clerk in the railroad station. You used to say that I could hardly wait to get away from town, the way I used to spend all my time at the station watching the trains."

"Richards?" said Mrs. Random wonderingly. "You must have gone away at last, then," she added intelligently. "I heard it said you were in the city."

Joyce smiled, thinking that her smile, warm and proud and altogether the secret pleasant smile of a woman happy and secure, was not entirely a lie; by Mrs. Random's standards she had certainly done very well for herself. "I'm married now," she said, still smiling. "My husband's a wonderful man."

"Girls ought to get married," Mrs. Random said, with a sudden odd, perceptive glance at Joyce. "Keeps them out of trouble. Your old house is still there," she went on, "but no one's living in it. Probably open."

"I may still have a key to it," said Joyce, ashamed to admit that she had carried it on her key ring all these years.

"Go on in, then," said Mrs. Random generously, free with any invitation except one into her own house. "Been a lot of people in and out of there, all these years."

Joyce lingered on the doorstep, even though Mrs. Random showed signs of wanting to withdraw and close the door. "Whatever happened to the Collinses, used to live on the other side of us?"

“Collins?” said Mrs. Random vaguely. “Can’t recall the name. It was Williams lived *there.*”

“The Cartwrights across the street?”

“Moved, I suppose,” said Mrs. Random.

“And Bob Cartwright?”

“Now,” said Mrs. Random, “I *do* recall a Bob Cartwright. Married that plain girl. Got a little grocery or some such down on Railroad Street.”

“Bob is married?”

“I get *my* groceries at Wingdon’s,” Mrs. Random pointed out, as though it were necessary to establish this fact clearly and immediately. “Come back again sometime,” she said.

This time she closed the door flatly, obviously having concluded that otherwise there would be no end to this conversation, and perhaps feeling that there was no harm in closing the door against the face of someone she would probably never see again.

The roses turned slightly away from Joyce as she went down the path, and she wondered that she had ever felt free with them or if it could be true that she had once been punished for the desecration of picking one. She could see the house next door, but the hedge between had grown so dense that it did not seem likely her private path through it still existed. Nothing, she realized now, had been tended for years; she could see that on the house next door a second-story window frame sagged against the shingles, and bricks were gone from the chimney.

I certainly won’t go in there *now,* she thought, not with Mrs. Random peering out from behind her curtains to see if I’ll try to steal the doors or make off with part of the fence; I’ll come back later. Perhaps, too, if she visited other old acquaintances and checked on other landmarks, she might approach this house again, later in the day or perhaps even tomorrow, more in the spirit in which she had left it, less as a stranger whom Mrs. Random could not remember. She realized that she had not asked Mrs. Random about Jean Simpson, and wondered if there were anything about her that Mrs. Random might have remembered.

She got back into her car, aware of Mrs. Random's critical eye from the downstairs window, and drove down the street, thinking, as she passed the streetlights and the curbs and the paths into gardens, of how many times, and always alone, she had walked and run and scuffled and skipped rope down this street. She would idle with one foot in the gutter and one on the curb, stepping gingerly in high-heeled shoes, hoping someone would notice her and speak to her, afraid sometimes, and sometimes elated, on her way to school, or to play alone in the park, and always thinking of the time when she would be rich and successful and would come back to walk with scorn past the people who had never noticed her then.

She had always come this way, because the street ended shortly beyond her old house and fell away into fields and trees, although it might be that they had put a road through there now, since there were certainly new houses farther down the street than she remembered. Even though she was driving, which she had never done here before, she found that she was turning the car along the same old ways. She watched along the sidewalk, as she drove slowly, for her old footprints, perhaps even expecting that — as though they had told her that the old Joyce had gone on ahead, and could probably be caught up with on the way — upon turning a corner she might see, halfway down the block ahead, herself in a pink sweater and a white linen skirt, on her way to the library, carrying a book or a white patent leather purse, striding along — was she not always a little bit late? — and not turning to look at cars passing by. "Joyce," she wanted to call, "Joyce, wait a minute, I want to tell you something."

Abruptly, because these streets were shorter and narrower and less alive than she had once known them, she turned a corner and found the high school facing her, and she felt swiftly, without at all wanting to, the old familiar dismay; was she late for class, were they all looking at her, was she being laughed at? Then, stopping the car and putting her chin down on the wheel, she looked the high school slowly up and down, half-smiling, as one whom it no longer had power to terrify. “So there you are,” she told it, “and I’m safe from you now, forever. I got away after all, didn’t I?” The high school stared back, square and blank and uncommunicative, as though even now what happened to Joyce Richards was unimportant.

Beyond the red brick and the wooden facings of the school building, she could see the straight lines of the goalposts on the football field, and the long wooden bleachers. She remembered walking quickly along the path alone, on her way to a game, knowing that she went to the games, even alone and without friends, because the mere sense of being where everyone else was made her feel somehow almost a part of the crowd. Names came into her mind, and she smiled again. Katharine, she thought, pretty Katie. Married some local boy, probably, and is sitting somewhere in this town today with a pack of children and lines in her face….Dot, the most popular girl; had she stayed popular and successful, or failed miserably at some appealing career?…Was it actually possible that all these girls (Katie wearing her green skirt, Dot always a cheerleader, sarcastic Marian, and Wendy) had wandered off in different directions, and perhaps married and had children, and lived in different houses, unfamiliar and remote? Was it possible that those girls were no longer a source of laughing danger to Joyce Richards, that they were now powerless? Then what had they known, so long ago, that Joyce had not known? What power had they ever really had?

She shook her head, amused at her own silliness, and restarted the car. No sense parking in front of the high school, where everyone would only pass by and wonder what you were doing, and she did not think that she could safely sit here and watch the new Katies and Dots and Marians come arm in arm down the walk, staring at her briefly and curiously, before turning to go toward the village. Perhaps, though, it might be Jean Simpson who came down the walk, proudly and not turning her head; not, in fact, seeming to hear anything said to her, although it was always clear from her face that she had been crying.

Hastily, Joyce drove the car around the corner at what was almost a dangerous speed and turned onto the main street of the village; was it possible that in all these years the brightness of the Sunrise Dairy had not faded? She could see its sign halfway down the main street, past the jeweler's, and she could see the railroad station beyond. "I should have come by train," she told herself unreasonably, "like the way I left." She parked the car halfway down the main street, directly in front of the Sunrise Dairy, and stepped out onto the hot, unshaded sidewalk, remembering as she did so that farther up the street, near the gas station, there was a handprint in the cement and the initials JRS. The younger children had always believed that the unknown JRS had been sent to prison for defacing the sidewalk, and the more sophisticated older children told one another cynically that he had later been elected the town's first mayor.

The Sunrise Dairy, with its black and white tiles and its familiar smell of chocolate syrup and toast and strawberry ice cream, was for a moment loud with remembered voices, and then suddenly quiet with a late-morning silence. As she sat down at the counter she saw that actually she was alone in here, except for the counterman — could it still be Red, after all these years? — busy with something at the far end of the counter. "Lettuce and tomato and a chocolate shake," she said, without thinking. Perhaps she had ordered these things in soda shops and drugstores and restaurants during the past ten years, but it was certain, as she said the words and then smiled reminiscently, that the correct inflection had been missing ("*let*tuce and tom*a*to and a *choc*olate shake"), and she wondered if perhaps the general inferiority of lettuce and tomato and chocolate all these years had been due to that lost rhythm.

"Lettuce and tomato and a chocolate shake," the counterman said in confirmation, and she knew that she could not have forgotten his voice with its faint lisp, so she said, "It *is* Red, isn't it?"

"That's right," he said.

"I thought I remembered you. But I imagine you've forgotten *me.*"

He looked at her, his head to one side, frowning; she realized that she had remembered him as lean and young, but he was stouter now, as though the dairy had done well since she left, and his red hair was graying. "Mary?" he said. "Mary Something?"

"No," she said, unwilling to let him guess names she perhaps would not like to hear. "I used to be Joyce Richards."

"Joyce what?"

"Joyce Richards."

He shook his head and smiled. "Well, you know," he said, "I guess a hundred people come in here every day. And all those kids from the high school—"

"I used to go to the high school."

"Sure," he said.

He turned away to make her sandwich, and because he was not looking at her she said boldly, "I'm trying to get in touch with a girl I used to know. Jean Simpson."

He selected a piece of lettuce and looked at it thoughtfully. “Simpson,” he said, as though she had ordered something.

“Jean Simpson. Has she left town or anything?”

“I couldn’t say, I really couldn’t say.”

“You see,” she said, “she got into trouble once, and it was my fault, and I wanted to come back and sort of fix it up with her.”

He nodded approvingly, and laid another piece of tomato on her sandwich. “Right thing to do,” he said. “What kind of trouble was it?”

“Nothing important, just something I’d like to get straightened out.”

“Look,” he said, glancing up at her, “what do you mean, trouble? You fight over some fellow or something?”

“No, no,” she said.

He hesitated, pausing with her sandwich in his hand. “Nothing serious, I suppose?”

She thought that perhaps he would not give her the sandwich until she told him, so she said, “Well, she made a kind of mistake, and it turned out that I had to be the person who told on her.” That’s as much as he deserves to know, she thought, and it isn’t a lie if I don’t tell *him* the truth.

“I *did* hear,” he said elaborately, “that there was a girl couple of years ago got into trouble with some man out at that roadhouse.”

“It certainly wasn’t anything like *that.* Is that my sandwich?”

“Lots of girls—”

“Nothing serious,” she said. “If you don’t know her, it wouldn’t even interest you. It happened a long time ago.”

“Jean Simpson,” he said reflectively. “Now you mention it, it seems to me that I heard she did something pretty bad. Not *killing* anyone, you understand.” He looked at her eagerly. “I might just happen to know what it was, after all,” he said.

"You couldn't know," she said. "I don't believe anyone knows anymore."

He grinned unpleasantly. "Never mind," he said. "She got into some kind of trouble and you're back now to try and fix it up. What do *you* get out of it?"

"Don't be silly," she said. "It's a trifle, and all I want is to see that it's straightened out."

"Oh, sure," he said knowingly, and set the sandwich down before her. "You wouldn't be here trying to square it unless it was something pretty important," he said.

"It's a private matter," she said, and tried to smile at him; surely it was not going to be necessary to discuss this with people like Red? If he did not remember Jean Simpson, was there any reason for telling him about old scandals? Why, after all, should she and Jean Simpson suffer because Red was curious? "You know how these things are," she added stupidly.

"Sure," he said. "Right. I know." And he winked at her.

She lifted half of her sandwich; was not the lettuce faded and the tomato yellowed? "What do I owe you?" she asked, sliding off the stool.

"Ninety. Might be able to help you, after all, if you'd let me know what *happened.*"

"It doesn't matter," she said. "Nothing happened. Keep the dime."

"Thanks, lady," he said ironically as she went toward the door. "I'll be asking around for your Jean Simpson."

Next time I'll know, she thought, jabbing her key viciously at the car's starter; next time I'll know not to open my mouth and not to humiliate myself, and not to order lettuce and tomato, and next time I won't even come back, and Jean Simpson can take care of herself. Next time, she thought, I hope Red is dead, or gone crazy or poor and starving or something.

Well, she thought further, in a moment of utter clarity, I've seen my old hometown and I've visited my old neighbor and my old school and Red's, and there isn't another soul in this town who'd remember me, and *that*'s what I came back for — to see a crazy old woman and a gossiping old man and a fallen-down old school, and I haven't even told Jean Simpson I'm sorry.

There might be one more place to look, and she realized that she might have saved time and gone there earlier, as she turned the car toward the railroad station. A little grocery down on Railroad Street, Mrs. Random had said.

Trying to fix the probable location of the grocery in her mind, she found that although she could remember the station side of Railroad Street very clearly, she had only the dimmest picture of what the other side of the street looked like. She knew that the station offices and the post office should be on her right as she approached the station, but on the left she could remember only a row of dirty little houses and perhaps a bar and grill. Hadn't Jean Simpson lived in one of those houses? It seemed reasonable, at any rate, to turn left when she reached the station, and as she swung her car around the corner she saw ahead of her a faded sign, stiff and colorless under the hot sun. SQUARE DEAL GROCERY, it said. MEATS.

Now, she told herself, sitting in her car in front of the grocery and staring straight ahead to where the railroad tracks disappeared between the quiet hills, now I am Joyce Duncan who used to be Joyce Richards, and I am twenty-nine years old and I live in the city with my husband. I am not nineteen, and I do not live in this town, or owe anyone here any kind of loyalty, and I do not have any crush on any Bob Cartwright, and all I am doing is trying to perform a generous act that nine people out of ten would never think about doing. I am here, she told herself, sitting in the car and not looking out at the grocery, because a long time ago I did a silly thing where I lost my head and said Jean Simpson took that money. She has every right to think I deliberately tried to get her into trouble just to save myself, and even if this *is* Bob Cartwright's store he is probably married, and I am certainly married, and I am going inside only to see if he knows how I can find Jean Simpson.

I hope he isn't in the grocery, though, she thought, deliberately fixing her mind on a picture of him in a white apron, holding a butcher's cleaver, probably haggling over small change; I hope the store is closed for the day.

It was dark inside, and for a minute she hesitated just within the store, making out vague shapes, which were of course a counter and bins of fruit and vegetables, and rows of cans on the shelves. Then, as she let the screen door close behind her and moved toward the counter, a woman emerged from the back room brushing her hair out of her eyes and not looking up. "Yes?" she said.

What was there to say? I would like a can of corn, please; how much do you charge for hamburger? "I'm looking for Mr. Cartwright."

The woman looked up at her and then away again. "He's not here. I'm his wife."

It was not possible to stop and think, to remember Bob Cartwright and how he had once been too proud to speak to Joyce Richards. It was only possible to stop for a second and look again at the woman, at her dull hair and her dirty dress. But the woman was waiting, and her stance suggested strongly that unless this business with her husband was legitimate, it might be better to hurry and do whatever purchasing was necessary and then leave at once. "I actually wanted to ask him," Joyce said hesitantly, "that is — perhaps you could tell me — I want to know whatever happened to an old friend of mine, a girl named Jean Simpson."

“My name used to be Jean Simpson,” said the woman. “Was it me you wanted?”

“I guess it was,” said Joyce Duncan, dazed. Although she had never really intended to run up and embrace her long-lost friend, the idea that they might not recognize each other had not, up till now, occurred to her. “I didn’t remember you,” she said, with a false little laugh.

“I don’t remember *you.*”

“My name is Joyce Duncan now. I used to be Joyce Richards.”

“That so?” said the woman indifferently. “Doesn’t come back to me.”

“I guess you’ll remember when I tell you what I came for.” Now it was surprisingly easy to say. “Before I left this town, ten years ago, I did something I’ve always been sorry for, and I’ve been hunting for you all day to try and fix it up.”

“What’s it got to do with me?” The woman glanced at the back room from which she had come, as though she wished this interminable conversation over and herself safely back in her rocking chair, or on her bed, or watching her soap operas on TV.

“You don’t remember? The money that disappeared during gym class during senior year, and I said I saw you take it?”

“I never took any money.”

“I know you didn’t,” said Joyce Duncan. “I took it. It was two dollars and seventy cents and I spent it on a pair of stockings and a box of candy and a cheap pearl necklace from the five-and-ten. I said I saw you take it because I was scared, and they almost expelled you from high school. It was the dues from the Girls’ Club.”

“We run an honest store,” the woman said. “Business is tough, but we’ve always been honest.”

"I know. What I mean is, I once accused you of stealing, and you didn't, and even though it wasn't important I wanted to come back and tell you I was sorry."

"We give people a square deal," said the woman dully, "and they mostly give us a square deal. That's why we call it the Square Deal Grocery. Because we give—"

"Don't you mind anymore? I mean, I remember how you must have felt that day in old Martinson's office when you kept saying you didn't and I kept saying I saw you, and they believed me because they knew you wanted the money more than I did."

"I guess everyone wants money," the woman said, with what was almost a smile.

"But I want to make it up to you," Joyce said helplessly.

This time the woman did smile. "Seems as though I did remember your face there for a minute," she said. "I remember once just seeing you come up to some other girls at some class party or something and they laughed and walked away and you were just standing there. I just remember your face there for that minute, just standing there."

"Really?" said Joyce. "Well, of course, *now*…"

"Why worry about it?" said the woman. "I never did anything I'm sorry for, and me and Bob, we got our own little business here, and even though costs—"

"Well, I'm sorry anyway," Joyce said irritably. "Will you give my regards to Bob — if he remembers me, that is?"

"I don't suppose he would remember you," the woman said thoughtfully. "Seems like he would of mentioned you sometimes if he did."

Joyce hesitated, half turning away, and then thought that it was not enough to leave like this. "Are you *sure* you don't remember?" she asked, and the woman, already turning toward the other room, said wearily, “Look, lady, we keep a grocery here. I already told you that whatever’s bothering you is *your* worry, not mine.”

“Well, perhaps I’d better get some cigarettes before I leave,” Joyce said. “I’ll take a carton, please. And one of those boxes of candy and a dozen oranges.” She watched silently as the woman put them into a bag. “How much is that?”

“Two-thirty.”

Looking around desperately, Joyce said, “Then give me — oh, say, eight — ten packs of gum.”

Without comment, the woman counted them out and put them into the bag with the candy and the cigarettes and set the bag next to the bag of oranges on the counter. “How much?” asked Joyce.

“Two-seventy-three, with tax.”

“Fine,” said Joyce. She gave the woman a five-dollar bill, and counted the change carefully, thinking, after all, a person who has once been accused of stealing doesn’t always worry afterward about being *too* careful.

“Will that be all?”

“Yes, thank you.”

“Come again,” said the woman tonelessly, and this time she moved purposefully toward the other room and waited in the doorway while Joyce went to the outer door and the street. Is she afraid that *I’ll* steal something?, Joyce wondered, and called back, “Don’t forget to give my regards to Bob.”

“I’ll tell him.”

She doesn’t even know my name any longer, Joyce thought, how could she ever tell him? She put the packages into the backseat of the car and sat down gratefully behind the wheel. “Well,” she said aloud, “*that*’s done.”

It was not until she was almost in Milltown, nearly seventeen miles from Prospect, that she recalled that she had not returned, after all, to look at her old house again. I'll never see it now, she thought, knowing that she would never go back again, but everything's all right anyway; I didn't need to worry at all; I told that woman I took the money, but it was a long time ago and she doesn't even remember my name. Lucky I didn't take her any flowers or anything; she would have been suspicious.

Stopping the car in front of her own apartment and seeing the light upstairs that meant Jed was home, she laughed aloud, thinking of her triumph, and she ran upstairs because the elevator would be too slow.

"Jed," she said, as the door opened before her, "it's all right, I fixed it all."

He raised his eyes calmly to regard her. "No more lie?" he asked.

"I saw her and I told her all about it and she said it was perfectly all right, and she wouldn't take the money so I bought some cigarettes and things — she runs a little grocery, I forgot to tell you — and gave her the money back *that* way. And we can always smoke the cigarettes."

"I hope you got our brand," Jed said without humor.

"Of course, idiot. And what do you think? She married my old boyfriend, and I went back and saw my old high school and my old house and a few old neighbors, and I told everyone about how I was married and everything."

She looked at him, at his serious eyes apparently waiting for her to say something more, and her voice faltered. "So now," she said, "everything's going to be all right — isn't it?"

She Says the Damnedest Things

"SHE'S BATS, THAT girl," said Dottie. "I mean, honestly, bats. She does the *damnedest* things."

"She must be charming," I said.

"Honestly, though!" said Dottie. "You should see her. She'll sit down here and talk about the craziest notions she's got, like buying the university and turning it into a pig farm because no one would ever notice the difference."

"Already I like her," I said.

"Yeah," said Dottie, "and she'll read all the time, or go banging away on that damned old typewriter of hers, and then she'll talk and talk. She can spout poetry by the hour, honest."

"When can I meet her?" I asked.

"God, you don't wanna," said Dottie. "She says the damnedest things, honest. She's liable to get you into an argument on some screwy subject like religion, and then make you talk all night, or she'll tell you about some damned book she's been reading, about logic or pyramids or some other crazy thing, honest, and you'll go nuts."

"That strikes a chord," I said.

"Really," said Dottie. "But she can tell some swell stories, I'll say that for her. She's all the time got some wild line about something. Honestly, you'd die if you heard her."

"She sounds familiar," I said.

"Oh, and yeah!" said Dottie. "I almost forgot the screwiest thing of all. She's gonna be a writer! Honest — can you imagine? A writer? God, the things some people will think of. She’s some screwy dame, I’m telling you, honest.”

“I think I know her,” I said.

Remembrance of Things Past

MR. WAGGONER CAME wearily into the living room. His wife was sitting by the fireplace, knitting. Mr. Waggoner realized with some surprise that he had forgotten his wife's name.

"Good morning, my dear," Mr. Waggoner said to his wife.

"Good morning, William," his wife said.

Mr. Waggoner sat looking at his wife, wondering what her name was. He found himself thinking of a lot of names, none, he knew, belonging to his wife.

Sandra?, he thought tentatively. He wished he had married a girl named Sandra.

"Was your breakfast all right, William?" Mrs. Waggoner asked casually. "I told the maid only one egg this morning. You ate a little too much last night."

"I had an excellent breakfast, thank you, my dear," Mr. Waggoner said. Annabelle?

"And what are you going to do today, William?" Mrs. Waggoner asked.

"I really hadn't thought." Clarice?

"A little gardening, perhaps? Or some golf?"

"I played golf yesterday," Mr. Waggoner said, annoyed.

"You want to be playing your best when we go south this year, William."

Like birds, William thought. What *was* the woman's name?

Lucrece?

This has gone far enough, Mr. Waggoner thought. His first concern had changed to anger. This woman had no right to go on being anonymous.

“My dear,” he said.

“Yes, William?” said his wife.

Mr. Waggoner thought deeply. “You remember when we were first married?”

Mrs. Waggoner thought deeply. “Not very well,” she said.

“*You* know,” Mr. Waggoner said. “When we were first married.”

“Yes?” Mrs. Waggoner said.

Mr. Waggoner took a deep breath. “Remember how silly we were? What did I used to call you?”

Mrs. Waggoner frowned. “I used to call *you* Bubbles,” she said.

Mr. Waggoner winced. “Ah, but what did I used to call *you*?” He made his voice deliberately coy.

Mrs. Waggoner compressed her lips. “Bumpo,” she said.

“I see,” Mr. Waggoner said. “Well…” he began.

Evidently considering the subject closed, Mrs. Waggoner said briskly, “I had a letter from Becky this morning. She and the baby will be here on the tenth.”

“Very nice,” Mr. Waggoner said. Becky. Rebecca. That was his daughter. Had she been named after her mother?

Reba?

“You must get your hair cut this week,” said Mrs. Waggoner.

Delilah?

The phone rang.

“Will you answer it, William, my dear?” said Mrs. Waggoner.

William my dear went to the phone. “Hello,” he said vaguely.

“Oh, *William,*” said a female voice. “May I speak to Jane, please?”

Jane. Jane. Furiously angry, Mr. Waggoner put down the phone.

“Jane,” he bawled. “Telephone. Oh, *Jane…*”

Let Me Tell You

(An Unfinished Story)

Let me tell you about this girl, she's prettier than I am, but she's my best friend. We have fun together. When we go to a party or to the country club dancing or horseback riding — we ride at Becket's; no one rides at Wilson's anymore — or ice skating or even just out for a walk, we make jokes together and tell each other everything. She's got dark hair and dark eyes and she wears black a lot; her mother doesn't mind. Her name's Hilda. She's fourteen, like me, and neither one of us believes in going steady. That's no fun.

I try to do a lot of the things she does, but of course she's always better. When I steal something from a store I always get caught and they call my father. Hilda has lots of things like slips and sweaters that she's stolen from stores, and once she even stole a coat but of course she never wears it. We get all our clothes from the fashion shop. Everybody does. You just don't wear a coat from anywhere else. She's allowed to drink gin; her father's a psychiatrist. I'm allowed champagne and a pink lady if my father makes it. My father's a lawyer. It's important what your father is. Also it's important to have a swimming pool, only not the biggest swimming pool. One family moved into our part of town and right away they built the biggest swimming pool of all and of course no one would dream of going near it. But the most fun Hilda and I have is with the common people. The riffraff. The hoi polloi.

The way we have fun is this: We get a ride into town with someone, usually Hilda's mother or mine, when they are going into the doctor's or to a matinee, or on one of their shopping trips. Then we make all kinds of promises about when we will be home, and how, and usually when to meet somewhere to get home. Then we take a streetcar to some part of town where the common people live and go around and eat and talk and all the other things that people without advantages like them do. They drink beer — we've watched them do that — and buy clothes in department stores, and they talk to each other a lot. That's where we have our fun, talking to the common people. They all have bad teeth. They don't take care of themselves. They bathe, of course — everybody does, after all — but they don't know how to cook. They eat hamburgers and French fries.

One day we rode into town with Hilda's mother and said we would meet her on the corner of Nation and Main at five o'clock, and I guess she thought we were going to a movie. She said did we have enough money and Hilda said sure, and then she said well, have a good time, and we said sure. She never worries about our meeting bad men or something the way my mother does. My mother always wants to know exactly where we've been and whether any dirty men spoke to us, and Hilda and I always have to think of something to tell her, although I don't remember ever seeing a dirty man in my life. Once we told her a man had spoken to us because Hilda had read about it in a book. She's allowed to read anything she likes. My mother told my father and for a while they wouldn't let me go anywhere except with people they knew. Now that I'm fourteen, though, my father says it's time I got used to the idea of the world being the way it is. My mother just says if any men speak to us we must run, unless there is a policeman nearby. Hilda's mother doesn't care, Hilda's allowed to speak to anyone she wants to.

This day Hilda's mother drove us into town, she was annoyed because Hilda was wearing her brown coat, and Hilda couldn't tell her that where we were going she couldn't wear her fur. Anyway she let us off and said did we have enough money? and then she drove away, and Hilda and I stood on the corner for a minute arguing. I wanted to go downtown to some of the stores first, but Hilda had it in her mind that she wanted to go far out on the streetcar to the end of the line. Hilda won, of course; she always does because she says she won't be friends anymore. We got on the streetcar and Hilda sat down next to a girl about twenty who was really dressed in a most ghastly fashion and I sat down next to an old man who smelled. We never got to the end of the line because Hilda kept looking at the girl next to her out of the corners of her eyes and kind of smiling, and when the girl got up to get off Hilda waved her head at me and got up and we followed the girl off the bus. We like to follow people sometimes and this girl had taken Hilda's fancy. "Did you ever see such clothes?" Hilda whispered to me when she got off the streetcar and I had to admit I never did. She was all kind of cheap perfume and everything too tight. "I think she's a prostitute," Hilda said, "and when we follow her we'll find out where prostitutes go."

She was a very disappointing prostitute if she was one because she didn't stop anyone or talk to anyone or anything, just went on down the street, and we walked along some distance behind her, talking and trying to pretend we weren't following. We were in a very common neighborhood; there were little dirty stores and little dirty houses, and everything close up together and dirty in the streets. There were a lot of people, probably because it was a Saturday afternoon, and Saturday afternoon is when the common people come out and sit on their front porches and watch ball games on television and drink beer. The girl we were following went right down the street without stopping and then she turned suddenly as though she had just thought of it and went into a little grocery store, so we hurried and went right into the store after her. It was a small store, and dark, and we stopped near the door because there were quite a few people inside and our girl was standing waiting her turn.

I don’t much care for getting up close to people, and I certainly don’t like being close enough for them to touch me, but Hilda doesn’t care about anything, so I kind of stayed near the doorway while Hilda went a little farther in, kind of touching things and looking as though she had something she wanted to buy. Hilda has nerve, and she’s fun, and I wouldn’t do some of the things she does. If my mother ever found out, I wouldn’t get a car for my birthday.

Anyway, Hilda was poking at loaves of bread and taking down cans and putting them back and no one was paying any attention to us because they were all talking and even the girl we followed had turned around to listen because one woman was doing most of the talking and she was mad.

“No right,” she kept saying, “they hadn’t any right. I never knew the boy myself but his mother and father were decent people and they brought their kids up decent and no one had any right to accuse him without the facts.”

“They go to church, the Andersons,” someone else said, and the girl we followed said, kind of hesitating, “Wasn’t it in the paper? They found some of the stuff in his room?”

“He never did a thing,” the woman who talked so much said. “I know for a fact that boy was brought up right, and when he says the other kids gave him those watches, I for one believe him.”

Now I’ll show you how Hilda has fun. She kind of stepped up to the woman talking and shook her head, and when the woman noticed her, Hilda said, very little-girl, “Please, I couldn’t help hearing what you said, and I guess you don’t know everything about it because we used to know the Anderson boy and he stole things all the time.”

“What?” said the woman, and then, “I just simply don’t believe it.”

“It’s true,” Hilda said, nodding. “When I saw about it in the papers I just said, ‘So they caught him finally.’ He used to steal anything he could find.

He stole from other kids. And once he tried to steal his own father's car but he couldn't get it started. I was right there and I saw him."

"I don't believe it," the woman said. "I just don't believe it." Then she turned to Hilda and said, "What Anderson boy are you talking about? Are you sure you mean Johnny Anderson?"

"I certainly do," Hilda said. "The one who stole the watches and said the other boys gave them to him and it was all in the paper. I used to know him and he stole things all the time."

"Hard on his people," another woman said, and someone else said, "No matter how much you try to bring kids up right…"

"Well, I just never would have believed it," the first woman said. She sighed and turned away to look at some things on a shelf. "He was always so polite, too."

Someone started asking to have oranges weighed and the grocery clerks were putting things into bags, and Hilda came over to me. "Come on," she said, and we sneaked out. No one paid any attention to us, of course, and we went on down the street and Hilda squeezed my arm hard. "How was that?" she said, and I said, "Ghastly," which of course is our word meaning pretty wonderful. "Let's do some more," I said, and then Hilda said, "Well, it's your turn next," and I began to get nervous because I can't do it anywhere near as ghastly as Hilda.

I thought I would try the newsstand on the corner because usually they're easy, and I cheated by using an old game although of course it's always fun. Hilda kind of stood back and I went up to the newsstand and the man behind it was selling a paper so I waited till he finished and then when he looked at me I said, "Please, we're lost, my friend and I. We don't have enough to telephone."

He looked at Hilda standing a little in back of me, and then he looked at me again and finally he said, “Well, where do you live?”

I told him on Manica Street, which was all right because we had been there once and people lived there, and he looked surprised and said, “Well, what are you doing all the way out here?”

This was where Hilda was always better. She would tell him something like we were trailing her father’s divorced wife, or we had seen a man kill someone and we were following him, and maybe he wouldn’t believe her but he’d kind of laugh and give in. I never had that kind of courage, so I’m not as good as Hilda. All I could think of to say was “We got on the wrong streetcar and kept thinking it would be time to get off at the right corner, but it was going the wrong way.”

You could tell he thought I was kind of foolish at my age to get on the wrong streetcar and come so far away from home, but there was no real reason for him not to believe me, so at last he said, “What do you want me to do?”

“We don’t have enough to telephone,” I said.

He looked at Hilda again and then at me and finally he reached into the moneybox under the stand. “Well,” he said, “I guess your folks will be worrying.” He took out two quarters. “Think you can find your way home without getting lost again?” he asked me, and I could tell he was still a little doubtful because I had done it so badly. I took the quarters and said, “Oh, thank you, mister. We can get home now.”

“See that you go straight home, too,” he said.

“Thank you,” I said, and Hilda said, “Thank you,” and we went off toward the streetcar stop because he was still looking at us. “How did I do?” I said, and Hilda said, “Ghastly,” but we both knew it really wasn’t because no matter how I try I can never think of things the way Hilda can.

“I’m going to do a house,” Hilda said all of a sudden, and that really scared me because in all the time we had been having fun we had never tried a house before, but then I saw the house she was going for and I could kind of see what she had in mind. This was a little house, and it was unusual, because instead of being right on the street with a little fence and all it was set far back, and it had almost a garden, and on one side of it was a house that was clearly empty with no one living there and no curtains and the steps falling down, and on the other side was just a vacant lot.

Bulletin

(Ed. Note: The time travel machine sent out recently by this University has returned, unfortunately without Professor Browning. Happily for the University Space Department, however, Professor Browning's briefcase, set just inside the time travel element, returned, containing the following papers that bear ample evidence of the value to scientific investigation of sending Professor Browning on this much-discussed trip into the twenty-second century. It is assumed by members of the Space Department that these following papers were to serve as the basis for notes for the expected lecture by Professor Browning, which will now, of course, be indefinitely postponed.)

(From a newspaper, torn, heading reading only "…ld Tribune, May 8, 2123":)

…indifference in high quarters which has led so inevitably to this distressing result. Not only those directly affected — and they are many — but, indeed, thoughtful and reasonable persons everywhere, must view with extreme alarm an act which has given opportunism an advantage over intelligent planning. It is greatly to be regretted that, among those in power who were in a position to take action, none except the unpopular Secretary chose to do so, and his opposition was, as so frequently it must be, disregarded. In any case, let us unite in hope that the possible consequences will not take place, and prepare to guard ourselves with the utmost vigilance against a recurrence of such incidents.

(From what appears to be a private correspondence:)

June 4

Dear Mom and Dad,

I am haveing a fine time at camp. I went swiming and dived, but Charley didnt. Send me a cake and some cokies and candy.

Your loveing son,

Jerry

(A mimeographed sheet:)

American History 102

Mid-Term Examination

April 21, 2123

1. Identify twelve (12) of the following:

Nathan Hale

Huey Long

Carrie Chapman Catt

Merry Oldsmobile

Cotton Mather

Robert Nathan

George Washingham

Oveta Culp Hobby

Sinclair (Joe) Louis

Alexander Hamilton

Grover Cleveland

Woodrow Wilson I

Joyce Kilmer

Edna Wallace Hopper

Chief Sitting Bull

Old Ironsides

John Philip Sousa

Sergeant Cuff

R. H. Macy

2. The historian Roosevelt-san has observed that "Twentieth-century man had both intelligence and instinct; he chose, unfortunately, to rely upon intelligence." Discuss.

3. Some of the following statements are true, some are false. Mark them T and F accordingly:

A. Currency was originally used as a medium of exchange.

B. The aboriginal Americans lived above-ground and drank water.

C. The first American settlers rebelled against the rule of Churchill III and set up their own government because of the price of tea.

D. Throat-scratch, the disease which swept through twentieth-century life, was introduced to this country by Sir Walter Raleigh.

E. The hero Jackie Robinson is chiefly known for his voyage to obtain the golden fleece.

F. Working was the principal occupation of twentieth-century humanity.

G. The first king in America, George Washingham, refused the crown three times.

H. The cat was at one time tame, and used in domestic service.

4. Describe in your own words the probable daily life of an American resident in 1950, using what you have learned of his eating, entertainment, and mating habits.

5. In what sense did ancient Americans contribute to our world today? Can we learn anything of value by studying them?

(A narrow card, identifiably from a machine:)

YOUR WEIGHT AND FORTUNE

Your weight is…186

Your fortune for today: Expect permanent relief in minor domestic problems, but avoid too-hasty plans for the future. Try not to dwell on the past. You are determined, clear-sighted, firm: use these qualities. Remember that you can be led but not driven.

(Ed. Note: This last item seems of great significance. It is well known that Professor Browning's weight when he left the University in the time travel element was better than 200 pounds. The evident loss of weight shown indicates clearly the changes incident to time travel, and points, perhaps, to some of its perils; there is possibly a hint here of an entirely different system of weights and measures than that currently in use. We anticipate that several learned and informed papers on this subject are already in preparation.)

Family Treasures

ANNE WAITE WAS a most unfortunate girl, although she was, of all the girls living in the small women's dormitory, the only one who might not be persuaded to agree that she was unfortunate. More than any of the other girls in the house, Anne felt herself to be free and unconfined, accepting the ordinary regulations of institutional community life as a concession to the authorities, rather than as an imposed obligation. The university was large, and Anne was small, yet the university was more strictly bound by iron rules than Anne, and was, on the whole, Anne would have said, more unfortunate. The university authorities had been brought to recognize Anne particularly because of the death of her mother during the last term of her freshman year; Anne, returning to college as a sophomore, was without one surviving relative except for the university. Her college education had been paid for in advance, along with a regular, although small, allowance, that duly provided for — in case the university should not extend its paternal benevolence — the purchase of Anne's clothes.

The university provided Anne with a small, fairly well-maintained room in one of its more comfortable living centers, where, as did fifteen other girls, Anne had a bed and a chair and a desk and a dresser. She was required to present herself for breakfast at seven, arrive promptly upon call at fire drill, and be in the house with the front door locked behind her no later than eleven on weeknights, twelve on Saturdays. She was also required to be reasonably friendly with the other girls, a friendship in no cases to extend to extreme devotion, pointed whispering in the dining hall, or sleeping two in one bed; she was expected to rise when the house mother entered the room, and be decently civil to the maids.

Anne’s mother had died shortly after the end of the football season, and long before the season of spring dances, and although Anne was at that time a shy and rather friendless girl, everyone in the house, from the house mother to the three girls on the first floor who had received permission to set up a darkroom in the first-floor bathroom for developing photographs, had sought Anne out either in the gloomy weather before she had set out for home, or in the bright warm days that followed immediately after her return, to offer both sympathy and a quick, friendly curiosity for details of the funeral. Anne had a vague comprehension, although naturally she could never investigate the fact fully, that several of the girls — Helena, for instance, on the second floor, and Cheryl, who was of course the house president — who had sat with her, choking up and saying “I know how I’d feel if it was *my* moth—” before dissolving into tears with her, had gone directly from Anne to dates with well-dressed boys who parked their cars, as a matter of hallowed custom, on the hill near the lake, where Cheryl certainly, and Helena probably, had sat laughing, and drinking beer, and what else?, Anne wondered.

Anne minded none of this particularly; what she did mind, and found insulting, was the immediate decrease of her value in the eyes of the other girls in the house shortly after her mother was buried. It was no longer in good taste to commiserate with Anne, because, as was generally known, Anne was Trying to be Brave. With her bravery clearly established by her anonymity, Anne faded back into the colorless girl on the third floor who lived alone, had no friends, and rarely spoke.

It was too much to hope, naturally, that Cheryl and Helena would introduce Anne to any of their young men just because her mother had died, or that the three girls on the first floor would allow her to develop pictures in their bathroom darkroom, but Anne had cherished a hope, along with so many other people to whom sudden and unusual things have happened, that after it was all over she might be changed — her face a little prettier, perhaps, or her hair a more decided color, or at *least* an interesting sadness in her manner, and the ability to think quickly and effortlessly of things to say when she passed the other girls in the hall.

At the beginning, then, of her sophomore year at the university, Anne was doing as well as might be expected in her studies, had an unblemished record at fire drill, could certainly not be accused of any disproportionate friendships, and was, in fact, very little better off after her mother’s death at all.

It did not take long for Anne to recognize this, since she was, in her silent and veiled manner, very agile; consequently it was in only about the third week of the school year that Anne stole Helena’s ankle bracelet and hid it in her mother’s trunk. It went under her mother’s books and papers and the ancient fur cape, which was of no value but had become Anne’s in the disposal of Anne’s mother’s private things, during which the bank holding all of Anne’s money had, with the air of an impersonal machine humanizing itself through a sentimental understanding of a small detail, sent it neatly wrapped to Anne as a memento.

Helena’s ankle bracelet was of solid gold, and had been given to Helena by a young man in whom she no longer had any profitable interest. Anne had seen it during the glorious days of her bereavement, in a blue china trinket box on Helena’s dresser, where it would be difficult to discover its loss casually out of the mess of necklaces and compacts and odd little items donated to Helena by various young men whose names Helena could remember easily when she looked over their honorary insignia in the box on her dresser, although in most cases she had forgotten the occasions when she had received her trophies. The ankle bracelet was neither the greatest nor the least of Helena's treasures, and Anne, stealing it and hiding it safely away, was confident that in all the mixture of young men's gifts in the box, Helena would forever be unable to recall the name on the ankle bracelet without its presence to remind her.

One evening, several days after the ankle bracelet had joined Anne's mother's fur cape in the trunk in Anne's closet, Anne passed Helena's room, full of noise and chatter, with six or seven girls inside, and after hesitating for a minute in the doorway, she slipped inside and sat down on the floor near the door. Although everyone noticed her and greeted her amiably enough, no one asked her any questions or addressed any particular remarks to her; nor did the tenor of their conversation change materially with her entrance. While Anne was there, Helena several times consulted the trinket box, twice to put things away and once to determine the year in which a young man under discussion had made the university's scholastic honorary society. Not in all this evening did Helena notice that she no longer had one of her gold ankle bracelets.

The day on which a notice appeared on the dormitory bulletin board announcing the date of the university's winter dance, Anne went quietly, in her slippers, into Cheryl's room while she was in class. In the top drawer of Cheryl's desk — Anne had seen it before — was an inexpensive black pen-and-pencil set, which, in its particular box, had been awarded to Cheryl when she graduated from high school by the members of her class, whom, as class president, she had inspired to be exactly the same as every other class graduated from that academy. Anne had heard Cheryl telling about the pen-and-pencil set (the pen no longer worked) with becoming modesty: they had voted her most likely to succeed, and given her the pen-and-pencil set, and there were shy little jokes about the great books she had been expected to write with the pen and the great pictures she had been expected to sketch with the pencil but how, as a matter of fact, she used neither, although she was the house president and a member of the senior council of the university. Along with her name, on both the pen and pencil, was written “Voted Most Likely to Succeed.”

Anne put the pen-and-pencil set with the ankle bracelet, on the bottom of her mother’s trunk, and if Cheryl noticed that it was gone, she said nothing to Anne about it, although Anne had taken of late to joining the other girls in the living room after the house was closed for the night, where, in pajamas and bathrobes, they drank Cokes ordered from a neighboring drugstore and ate sandwiches barely inferior to the college food.

There was a girl named Maggie, who was accounted a great wit, and from her room Anne stole a stuffed gray bear that Maggie ordinarily kept securely hidden under her pillow; by the time the bear had settled comfortably into Anne’s mother’s trunk, Maggie had probably discovered her loss but, after a noble battle with herself, had apparently decided to say nothing about it, but to sharpen her sarcasms against the world until her errant bear should return, wending his individual way back as he had taken his secret way of going.

Anne’s usual method was to watch, pressing herself softly against the slight crack in the door of her third-floor room, or leaning back beside a window with the curtain before her, until the girl whose room she had chosen to violate had left the house. Then, wearing felt slippers and usually a bathrobe over her clothes, and sometimes carrying a bath towel to avert suspicion and to cover any bulky objects, Anne would move softly out of her room, her heart shaking deliciously, biting her lips to keep from smiling. In the early afternoons, when the house was most quiet, Anne could go from one floor to the next by the backstairs, without being seen or attracting attention if she were. If anyone noticed her, she could say that the tub on the third floor was occupied and she had come to the second floor to take a bath, or to the first floor to answer the phone; if she were seen coming out of someone's room — which never, to her knowledge, had happened — she could say, with perfect truth, that she was looking for something.

Before the snow had fully melted, in the inexorable round of the university year, Anne had, besides the ankle bracelet and the pen-and-pencil set and the gray teddy bear, a black satin slip she had found on the floor of a closet and washed carefully and folded neatly before setting it away in her mother's trunk; she had a carbon copy of a sonnet, neatly typed and dated (it had been sent away, Anne knew, to a poetry magazine not long before, but the rejection notice was not attached to the carbon), and a small leather-covered notebook, virgin except for the first page, on which was written largely: "BUY ASPIRIN. WRITE HOME. GET SPANISH ASSGNMT. DRESS FROM CLEANERS."

Also by this time, of course, many of the losses had been discovered. Cheryl, going one day to her desk drawer to make a shy point about her own worth, was not able to find her pen-and-pencil set inscribed "Voted Most Likely to Succeed," and after much thought and consideration, she mentioned the fact cautiously to several of her friends.

"Not that I think it's been *stolen,* or anything," Cheryl insisted over and over again. "I don't think anyone in the house *steals.* I just can't imagine where my pen-and-pencil set has gone."

"Perhaps you left it somewhere," one of the girls might suggest incautiously, to which Cheryl would reply with indignation, "*Naturally* I'd never take it anywhere — not with 'Voted Most Likely to Succeed' written all over it. But I just *know* it hasn't been *stolen.*"

When the loss of the black satin slip became a topic of conversation, Cheryl's apprehensions became "But who around here *steals*?" and "I just can’t *believe* it of anyone in the house.” Maggie, who had lost the gray teddy bear, never mentioned it, although she did say she was almost positive that a silver signet ring was gone from her top right-hand drawer, and she was fairly certain that she had seen one of the maids hovering near the dresser shortly before she’d discovered that the ring was gone. The girl whose carbon copy of a sonnet was missing admitted blushingly that she could not say for sure how many copies of the sonnet she had made. One of the girls managed to recall that at one time she had owned a compact with her name on it, which she was no longer able to find; another believed that the yellow blouse she had blamed the laundry for losing had most likely been stolen. Anne softly contributed, during one discussion, the additional fact that she herself had lost a couple of things, but no one noticed particularly, probably on the theory that Anne’s possessions were so anonymous anyway that loss of any of them would be superfluous.

“I can’t believe it of the *maids,*” Cheryl was saying by now. “Surely not the *maids.*”

“Someone must have come in from outside, then,” said the girl who had lost the black satin slip. “Imagine, if anyone sneaked into the house and went through our *clothes.*” She shivered delightedly.

“I don’t think anyone could have come in,” Helena said firmly.

They circled joyfully around the fact that it might be one of themselves, and eyed one another with pleased suspicion. There was a group, made up of Helena, Cheryl, and several of the others, who believed excitedly that Maggie was doing it, and Cheryl said feelingly, “I can’t believe it of *Maggie.*”

“Well,” someone offered hesitantly, “she doesn’t have a lot of money, you know. She could have sold some of the jewelry.”

“She has a new sweater,” Helena said. “You know — the red one. And you can take my word for it, that sweater cost a lot more than anything Maggie’s ever worn before.”

“Of course,” Cheryl said thoughtfully, “she wouldn’t *dare* wear any of those things — *you* know. But still, I *can’t—”*

There was another group, made up of Maggie and several others, including the three girls with the bathroom darkroom, who believed Cheryl was responsible.

“Of course,” Maggie said charitably, “if it *was* Cheryl, you couldn’t really blame her. I mean, sometimes people have something wrong with them and they’ve *got* to steal.”

“Dipsomania,” one of the darkroom girls contributed knowingly. “It can only be cured by psychoanalysis.”

The girls moved closer to one another, listening, and someone offered, softly, “Do you suppose her family knows? And let her come back to college?”

“*Her* family,” Maggie said, “probably they don’t want her stealing *their* stuff.”

There was still another group, of course, with shifting ringleaders, who believed that Helena had done it. “She can’t *stand* anyone having something she doesn’t have,” one girl said. “It drives her crazy just to see one of us with a new coat or something.”

“Not that she doesn’t have *enough,* as it is,” said another. “I can’t really *imagine* Helena touching anything that didn’t belong to her. Except, of course, she’s really *terribly* jealous.”

The remaining girls, who believed that the three girls with the bathroom darkroom had stolen the property, based their case on incontrovertible facts: 1) that people who have permission to turn a first-floor bathroom into a photographic darkroom think they own the world, anyway; 2) no one could really tell whether they were in their darkroom at any given time, no matter what they *said*; they could be anywhere in the house; and 3) one of the three girls had been heard expressing a most enthusiastic admiration of a china cat on the dresser of another girl in the house, and although the china cat was not missing yet, a pack of cigarettes she had put down next to it was, and anyone could get rattled and grab the first thing she saw.

No one, for a minute, suspected Anne. Anne, in all of the suspicion and confusion, went from one to another of the little talking groups, offering her disregarded opinions, and at night, when the house was quiet, she took out her treasures and counted them over, setting the teddy bear next to the sonnet and the ankle bracelet next to the leather notebook, weighing the pen-and-pencil set in her hands and regarding its motto until she could have drawn from memory the peculiar angular script of it; trying on the black satin slip and walking silently around her room, with its door never locked.

Eventually, it was Anne who brought a formal complaint to the house mother.

It had occurred to Anne that the house mother, whose name was Miss McBride, had worn at various times a pair of dangling jet earrings, which Anne knew were kept in a cardboard box in Miss McBride’s dresser. As a result, one afternoon, in her bathrobe and carrying her towel, Anne approached the quiet, bookless room that Miss McBride had only just vacated to go shopping, and had, fortunately, only just stepped inside when Miss McBride returned unexpectedly. In the still atmosphere of the room Anne was speechless for a minute, as Miss McBride looked at her, and then Anne, making the best of her situation, said urgently, “Miss McBride, I was looking for you.”

"Yes?" Miss McBride said, not prepared to commit herself. She was a fairly young, well-set-up, incredibly romantic woman, and was fond of the big-sisterly admiration she received from her girls; she was partial to sympathetic smiles and knowing nods, and allowed the rumor to circulate uncontradicted that she had permitted — even encouraged — one of her girls to elope several years before with an extremely wealthy chemistry major. Although she had heard the stories of thievery, and was completely aware of the many rumors going around in her house, she was not yet prepared to commit herself on the subject, and did not intend to take any action until she knew better what kind to take without offending anyone. By telling her precipitately, Anne would force her to do something immediately, and so Miss McBride's tone when she said "Yes?" again to Anne was cold, and almost ominous.

"Miss McBride," Anne said, allowing her words to come almost in a rush, so that later, when Miss McBride questioned her, the easygoing mind would remember only her emotionality, "Miss McBride, I don't know what to do. Really, it's *awful.* I couldn't have *believed* it of her," Anne said, borrowing freely from Cheryl; "it must be some kind of a mental disease, or something," borrowing freely from Maggie. "I mean, when I *saw* her I tried to think of something to say, and she looked so guilty. So I came right down to tell you and ask you what to do." Anne hesitated for a minute, then added plaintively, "Please, can't we sort of keep it quiet, not have a scandal?"

"Who?" Miss McBride said, having fastened accurately on the one essential fact.

Anne dropped her eyes. "I'd rather not say, please, Miss McBride."

"You won't tell me?" Miss McBride's voice rose. Anne blushed and remained silent.

“Of course,” Miss McBride said, embarrassed for a minute at her own forwardness. There was no further attempt made by either of them to discuss the thievery. After a few minutes’ thought Miss McBride said, “I’ll post a notice on the bulletin board, for a house meeting tonight.”

By some odd coincidence every girl at the house meeting — in fact, every girl in the house — knew by the time Cheryl called the meeting to order that Miss McBride knew who the thief was, or had a clue, or meant to find out that night. Delicious apprehension made each girl tremble separately; many of them hoped that their most intimate friends would prove to be innocent; if a vote had been taken, the most likely candidate would have been Cheryl herself, just as she had been elected president of the house. As she stood in the center of the room, with the other girls around her draped over chairs and lying on the sofas and sitting on the floor, Cheryl knew perfectly well that each girl watching her imagined she saw some sign of guilt on her face.

Miss McBride spoke, soberly and earnestly. “Look, kids,” she said, “this is a terrible thing. Everyone, all over campus, knows about it by now. They’re beginning to talk about us, how we’ve got someone in this house who borrows things that don’t belong to her and then forgets to return them. It’s not good for any of you. I know you all want to protect your own reputations, and all together we want to keep this a clean and decent house. I think that the girl who is responsible for all this doesn’t quite realize that she is hurting all of us by not stepping forward.” Miss McBride stopped for a minute, but no one came forward, hand raised. “Do you think,” Miss McBride went on, “that if I said we’d all go to our rooms quietly, and then I’d wait in mine until the girl came to me — do you think that would do any good?”

There was a silence, and then one of the girls in a corner, who wanted action, said, “Not if she’s gotten away with it this far, she won’t.”

“I think I ought to tell you,” Miss McBride said significantly, “that the name of the girl is known.”

There was a dead silence of anticipation.

“I’m not going to tell you her name,” Miss McBride said firmly. “And I’m not going to tell you who saw her. All I’m going to say is that I’m going to take steps to stop this business, once and for all.”

There was another silence; Miss McBride was the one who had to take action. Miss McBride took a deep breath. “I’m going to search every room in this house,” she said with relish. “Tonight.”

There was another long silence, finally broken when one of the girls said timidly, “I don’t think you have the right to do that, Miss McBride.”

“Anyone who has anything to hide,” Miss McBride said emphatically, settling the matter once and for all, “can easily see the position she puts herself in.”

Anne, unappalled, hugged herself secretly. This was the best of all; she was perhaps the only person who had read the diary in Cheryl’s desk, seen the letters in Helena’s dresser, penetrated the secrets buried in handkerchief boxes, under beds, in the darkest corners of closets, the secrets known to be there, yet believed inviolate until a good excuse made them common currency, sometimes shocking, sometimes laughable.

“You can start with *my* room,” Cheryl said with dignity. There was a strong shift of sentiment toward Cheryl after this statement — unless, several of the girls wondered privately, Cheryl, as house president, had had warning of the search?

Miss McBride rose purposefully and went to the stairs, where she stopped again. “Kids,” she said, her voice lacking eagerness, “isn’t there some other way of doing this?" As she spoke, she started up the stairs. Cheryl first, and then the whole roomful of girls, followed her. Miss McBride went up to the second floor and then, after another minute's thought, up to the third floor. Here there lived only Anne and three others.

"Whose room shall I start with?" Miss McBride asked indecisively.

"Mine," Anne said firmly. Miss McBride, looking at Anne across the line of girls standing still in the hall, tried to make her glance meaningful. "Anne," she was trying to say, "I know it's all right, you're not the thief because you won't tell me who is; I've got to search your room." Miss McBride's gesturing eyebrows tried to say eloquently, "But we know, you and I, that it's only a formal gesture." She looked at Anne until all the other girls looked at her too, and then, unseen, Miss McBride shrugged helplessly at Anne.

Miss McBride, with the advice and the occasional help of the other girls, searched quickly and ineffectually. All of the drawers in the dresser and the desk were opened and their contents stirred around. "Some of the stuff was too big to really *hide,*" one of the girls contributed, and Miss McBride, adopting this theory into her concept of searching, made only perfunctory gestures at the bookcase and the bedcovers, although she lifted the mattress to look underneath, and one of the girls took the pillow out of its case. Anne, standing near the door, watched the girls showing curiosity about her for the second time in her life, saw a girl whom she rather admired poke hastily and surreptitiously at Anne's dresses in the closet, saw another girl stop by the desk to read a letter Anne was writing to a high school friend. Miss McBride, at the lid of Anne's mother's trunk, said superfluously, "This yours, Anne?"

"My mother's," Anne said quietly. Miss McBride let the corner of the fur cape fall immediately from her fingers, and said questioningly to the other girls "I don't think…?"

"Of course not," someone said uncomfortably, and the girl who had been reading Anne's letter hurriedly dropped it back onto the desk.

"Well," Miss McBride said, and smiled at Anne. "That's that," she said. She moved with purpose out of the room, and the girls followed her in a flock. Although Miss McBride moved into the next room on the floor, some of the girls separated themselves from her and could be heard, farther down the hall, instituting a search of their own in another room. Miss McBride, her searching growing more and more haphazard, went through all the rooms on the third floor; by the time she had done all four rooms she was only opening drawers and glancing into closets, but the rest of the girls were going over the rooms like locusts, reading, confusing, examining everything they could find. Talk was circulating among the group ("Did you *see* what they found—" "I should think she'd *die—"*), but the girls held together. Miss McBride said occasionally, "Now, let's play fair, kids. No one running off to her own room." And always, when she said this, she counted them, rapidly, at a glance.

On the second floor, Cheryl's diary turned up, and a collection of scandalous love letters in Helena's room, and a locket in which another girl had pasted a picture of one of her professors. The owner of the room always, without exception, stood by the door while her room was searched, ready to run if anything too awkward (something she never knew she had? perhaps something she had borrowed and not returned? perhaps something everyone would find unanimously, irresistibly funny? the stolen things, perhaps?) or too shaming turned up.

Naturally the darkroom was not searched, but Miss McBride insisted on having the girls go through *her* room, which, carefully prepared, disclosed nothing except a picture of a handsome young man whom Miss McBride blushingly refused to identify as either a brother or a fiancé.

When the search was over and they were all gathered together in the living room again, Miss McBride gave voice to the prevailing suspicion by saying, “Well, kids, it looks like one of you was warned in time and got rid of the stuff. But, as I told you before, we know who it is. *Now* I am going to say that if the girl who took these things that didn’t belong to her will come to me secretly in my room tonight, nothing more will be said.” She started for her room and then stopped to turn back and add, “Needless to say, if nothing comes of this tonight I shall have to take further steps. I had hoped” — she sighed lightly— “I had hoped to settle this here among ourselves, but if that is not possible I shall have to take further steps.” She took herself with dignity into her own room, and the girls, knowing more now than they did before, separated and went silently off to their own. No one cared to speak; each one knew the secrets of all the others; no one was inviolate any longer. It would be a long and painful process to build new privacies, secure them safely against intrusion, learn to trust one another again; there was a great destruction that went on in the house that night, of ruined treasures being burned, torn, cut with nail scissors. The wastebaskets taken out the next day were filled with loose torn pages and destroyed photographs, and for many days after that the girls in the house spoke rarely, and very politely, to one another.

When the house was finally quiet, Anne took out her ankle bracelet, her teddy bear and her sonnet, her pen-and-pencil set, her black slip and her leather notebook, added to them Miss McBride’s dangling jet earrings, which she had slipped into her pocket while helping search Miss McBride’s room, and set them in a row on her bed. All together, they were barely enough to fill a tiny overnight bag, so Anne stopped off in the house living room to slip three or four metal ashtrays into the bag with them. She stood for a minute just inside the front door, surveying the house, which was silent, with all its doors shut; it was her first minute of unalloyed pleasure since her mother's funeral. Then she slipped quickly out the front door and down the street, carrying the overnight bag; mighty, armed.

Showdown

Visitors, if there had ever been any, would have said that the little town of Mansfield was haunted. It didn't *look* haunted, hidden comfortably away among green hills, with its placid houses and cheerful-looking inhabitants, but nevertheless a visitor, if there had ever been any, would have said that it was definitely, but definitely, haunted.

Some notion of this entered Billy Manners's head as he sat on the front porch of his house looking down Mansfield's only street. Billy's father was the storekeeper, schoolteacher, and preacher in the church on Sundays, and Billy, at fifteen, felt that he had a responsible place in the community as the son of his prominent father. From his porch Billy could look down to his father's store, where school was held in the back room, and over to the church next door, and then past a few houses to where the hills began again. About three hundred people lived in Mansfield, but it took only one to be haunted. And Billy had begun to feel that he was it.

Golly, Billy thought, golly. There ought to be some way for a smart guy like me to figure this out.

Uneasily he went into the house, and out to the kitchen. He looked at the mail-order calendar on the wall, which read JULY 16, 1932. That's fine, Billy thought, Saturday. Pop will still be at the store. Mother is out visiting Mrs. Baxter. I'll go fishing.

As though Billy's father had heard this thought, Billy heard his name being called. Billy ran out the front door and saw his father outside the store, calling him.

Golly, Billy thought, what did I forget to do? Full of apprehension, he hurried down the street to the store.

"Billy," his father said as he approached, "your mother wants you to hurry right over to the church and help her clean it out for tomorrow."

"Going to be a good sermon tomorrow, Ray?" old Thad Ruskin called from the end of the store porch. "Full o' hellfire?"

"Pop always preaches good sermons," Billy said with dignity. He detested Thad Ruskin; everyone in town did. Thad drank — where he got it no one knew; rumor had it that he ran a still up in the hills somewhere — and he had ruined his pretty daughter Susy's romance with Tom Harper, who had subsequently left Mansfield and had not been heard from since. Rumor also had it that Tom Harper had made a million dollars in the city, and was coming back someday to face down Thad Ruskin and carry off Susy. Susy was still waiting, on the off chance. Nowadays, Susy spent all her time at home sewing towels and pretty clothes for her hope chest, while Thad, usually drunk, sat among the loafers in front of the store, repeating over and over that no Tom Harper was going to come into *his* home and steal off *his* daughter. Everyone hated Thad, sympathized with Susy, and hoped that Tom Harper would bring his million dollars back to town.

" — And your mother wants you, first of all, to run over and help Mrs. Baxter get the ladder up from the cellar so's she can get down her top row of preserved peaches and see if the cat's had her kittens back there."

"Then can I go fishing, Pop?" Billy asked without much hope.

"Promised me you'd help in the store this afternoon, didn't you?" Billy's father said.

"Yessir," Billy muttered. As he started despondently across the street to Mrs. Baxter's house, a sudden commotion behind him made him turn. Voices were raised. A stranger was walking down the street. He was a ragged, tired-looking figure — looks like he's been walking for three days, Billy thought — and he was heading for the store. The loafers on the porch of the store were all standing, old Thad Ruskin well in front peering at the stranger and murmuring.

Why, it's Tom Harper! Billy thought. All ragged, and poor! Billy stood watching while Tom Harper — it *was* him — walked up to the steps of the porch and stood facing Thad Ruskin.

"You ruined my life once, Thad Ruskin," he said. "Now I'm going to finish yours."

No one stepped forward to help Thad as Tom Harper went slowly up the steps, but as he closed in on Thad, the old man moved swiftly. "Come back to kill me?" he demanded, and Tom's body slipped to the ground. "Ain't nobody that smart."

Billy had been hurrying across the street toward Tom for what seemed an eternity. By the time Tom's body lay on the ground, Billy had gotten there, and stood peering with the others at the man who was supposed to have made a million dollars, and who now lay with Thad Ruskin's knife in his chest.

"Go call Susy, someone," Thad said. "I want her to see what happens to people who try to cross me."

"He's still breathing," Billy's father said. "Here, let's make him more comfortable."

Someone had found Susy, who came running over to the store, and she sank down beside Tom's figure on the ground, crying.

Tom opened his eyes halfway. "Didn't forget me, did you, Susy?" he whispered.

"I won't ever forget you," Susy cried passionately, "and neither will anyone else. They all just stood here and let my father kill you! I'll see that they don’t get off easy!”

“I don’t want anyone punished for this,” Tom said weakly, “not even your father. Just don’t forget me…”

“Guess he’s dead, Susy,” Billy’s father said gently.

Billy went fishing after that. In the general excitement it was easy for him to slip away. But he was late for dinner, and as he opened the front door warily, he heard his father’s voice from the kitchen, calling, “Billy!”

Billy went into the kitchen and saw that there was fried ham and applesauce for dinner. He hoped his mother would sneak some up to him later.

“You were supposed to help your mother and Mrs. Baxter and then help me in the store, Billy,” his father said sternly. “I think you’d just better run along up to bed.”

Billy turned meekly. It was no more than he had expected. “Pop,” he said as he left the kitchen, “Pop, what did they do to Thad Ruskin?”

“They’re going to settle that tomorrow,” his father said. “And I don’t want you hanging around the store while we men talk about it, either.”

Billy went upstairs to bed. The excitement of the day, combined with the hot sun and the walking he had done in the afternoon, had made him tired. He fell asleep before his mother could manage to escape his father’s eye and sneak upstairs with a plate of ham and applesauce.

It took a few days for Billy to decide that Mansfield was haunted. He never thought about it consciously, but now and then a shadow of a troubling idea seemed to come over him, like the next morning, as he sat on his front porch looking down the street. Golly, he thought. Golly. There ought to be some way for a smart guy like me to figure this out.

Soon after, he went into the kitchen, and saw that the date was July 16, 1932; Billy thought he might go fishing and forget about work. Just then he heard his name being called, and he hurried down the street to where his father was standing in front of the store.

"Billy," his father said, "your mother wants you to hurry right over to the church and help her clean it out for tomorrow."

Old Thad Ruskin piped up, "Going to be a good sermon tomorrow, Ray? Full o' hellfire?"

Billy said, "Pop always preaches good sermons," and then his father added: "And your mother wants you, first of all, to run over and help Mrs. Baxter get the ladder up from the cellar so's she can get down her top row of preserved peaches and see if the cat's had her kittens back there."

Without hope, Billy asked his father if he could go fishing and was reminded he had agreed to work in the store that afternoon. He started across the street, then heard a commotion and turned to see ragged Tom Harper walking toward the store. Billy watched Tom Harper approach old Thad, and Billy was across the street in time to see Tom fall at Thad's feet. When Susy promised Tom that no one would ever forget him, Billy murmured assent, as did everyone else, and then he went fishing.

When he got home late for dinner his father was angry and sent him to bed without anything to eat, and Billy fell asleep before his mother could sneak him a plate.

And the next morning Billy sat on his front porch and thought about it again. Somehow it always evaded him, the secret of why Mansfield was haunted. Nothing ever happened there, just the same things over and over every day, ever since Billy could remember.

Let me see, Billy thought. What happened yesterday?

He had gone fishing, he remembered, and had gotten home late for dinner. What else? Probably just fooled around all day, he thought. Was today Saturday? He went in and looked at the calendar. He thought he might go fishing again today.

But when Billy ran down to the store after his father called, he found that excitement had really come to Mansfield; he saw Tom Harper, home from the city, try to kill old Thad Ruskin, but Thad killed Tom instead. Billy saw the whole thing. Afterward, he went fishing.

The next day, just as Billy was crossing the street to go to Mrs. Baxter's, he thought, Something's going to happen in a minute! And something did. The day after that, as he ran across the street to see Tom Harper die, he thought, Haven't I done this before?

And the next day, as he ran down the street in answer to his father's call, he thought, How many million times have I done this?

It was several hundred thousand times, anyway, and always on July 16, 1932, and in all that time something had been growing in Billy's head. From his first thought, as he ran across the street to see Tom Harper's body the first time, that here was something he wasn't going to forget in a hurry, there had grown in him a definite conviction that there was something wrong going on. Particularly since he could never remember what he had done the day before. Finally, Billy had a realization.

I do these things again and again, he thought one day, running across the street to the store to see Tom Harper die. I bet I've run from Mrs. Baxter's over to the store lots of times for lots of reasons, but I don't remember ever running across for anything but to see Tom Harper.

The next thought, of course, was: Suppose I *don't* run across to see Tom Harper? It didn't work. Every time Billy turned around and saw Tom Harper walking up onto the porch to meet Thad Ruskin he began to run, and he always got across the street just in time to see Tom's body topple at his feet.

Suppose I hurry?, Billy wondered. He tried to speed himself up crossing the street. With a prodigious effort he managed to reach the store porch before Tom had started to fall. Everything else was the same, but Billy had arrived a fraction of a second sooner.

He hurried home from fishing a fraction of a second earlier, that afternoon, but was still too late for dinner.

The next morning he really tried to hurry. He went into the kitchen a fraction of a second sooner than he felt he ought to; he thought, I'll go fishing, then had to wait for his father to call him; he said, "Pop always preaches good sermons" to Thad Ruskin just as Thad was finishing "hellfire"; and he crossed the street in time to see the knife go into Tom's breast.

He was still late for dinner, though. He entered his house, knew his father was sitting at the kitchen table eating ham and applesauce, and went right on upstairs. He had just reached the top of the stairs when he heard his father begin: "You were supposed to help your mother and Mrs. Baxter…"

All this time, Billy didn't quite know what he was doing. He was still going on with the same motions every day, but his doubt — something that made him know the whole business was fishy — also made him go faster. After three or four days of speeding up, he was beginning to arrive at the store several seconds before his father stepped out front and called "Billy!" He was answering Thad Ruskin's remark before Thad said it.

He was beginning to remember more, too. When he heard his own voice saying "Pop always preaches good sermons" to thin air, and then a minute later heard Thad Ruskin's remark, Billy was beginning to realize what was going on. By this time he had managed to get across the street in time to walk up the store steps with Tom Harper and stand next to him as the knife went in.

The idea that was coming to Billy was vague. It finally materialized into a strange thought, one morning as he sat on his front porch. If I should see a murder somewhere, he thought suddenly, and if I could be there in time, what I should do is step between the two guys and grab for the knife.

The Trouble with My Husband

"THE TROUBLE WITH MY husband," Mrs. Smallwood said, nodding profusely, "is that he thinks he's God almighty. He thinks he's God almighty." She reached out inaccurately for Mrs. James. "Let me fill your glass for you."

"No thank you," Mrs. James said quite firmly. She looked uneasily across the room to where her husband sat trying to talk art with Mr. Smallwood.

"My husband," Mrs. Smallwood went on, "thinks he's God almighty. That's the only trouble with him. He thinks he's—"

"I understand he's a very fine painter," Mrs. James said vaguely. She looked at her own husband again; he was leaning forward, gesturing eagerly; Mr. Smallwood was leaning back, arms folded; both of them were very much absorbed. Mrs. James turned back to Mrs. Smallwood. "You have such a lovely place here," she said. "So attractive." She laughed deprecatingly. "I'm afraid I don't know very much about art—"

"They're all his," Mrs. Smallwood said. "Every damn one of them is his, except the little one by the door."

Mrs. James leaned forward.

"You can't see it from here," Mrs. Smallwood said. "It's mine."

"Yours?"

"I painted it," Mrs. Smallwood said. "You can't see it from here." She got up and reached again for Mrs. James's glass. "Let me just fill," she said, and went toward the kitchen.

"Arthur," Mrs. James said. "Arthur, dear." Neither of the men heard her; they were both talking at once, watching each other intently. "Arthur?" she said again, raising her voice a little.

"He won't listen," Mrs. Smallwood said. "They both think they're God almighty." She sat down and took a long drink from her glass. "It's his house, his paintings, his kids, his money, his every goddamn thing."

"How *are* your children?" Mrs. James asked. "Such dear boys, both of them. I saw them walking up the hill the other day with their father, and they all looked as if they were having such a wonderful time."

"His kids, his house, his money," Mrs. Smallwood said. She swayed over and put a confiding hand on Mrs. James's knee. "You know," she said, "I *love* children. I wanted to have children and Harry didn't. It was *my* idea to have children. And you know, the minute I saw those goddamn little helpless little things I had such a real *feeling* for them; you'll never know how I feel about kids."

"They're such…" Mrs. James thought for a minute. "Such interesting little fellows," she said.

"I really feel for those kids," Mrs. Smallwood said. "I spend the whole goddamn day cooking and cleaning and washing and wiping their noses, and I really love those kids. Don't let Harry say anything to you about *that.*"

"I suppose they'll be painters, too, won't they," Mrs. James said brightly.

"Like me," Mrs. Smallwood said. "You go over and look at that little picture I painted. You can't see it from here. I'll tell you something," she said, catching hold of Mrs. James's arm, "let me just tell you this. Watkins in New York called me the other day. Offered me their whole advertising campaign, just like that. That's two hundred a picture."

"That sounds perfectly wonderful," Mrs. James said.

"I'm not sure whether I want to do it," Mrs. Smallwood said. "You know, I think when a woman has a home and children she ought to give up art. Would you think I ought to give up my painting just for a home and a couple of lousy children with running noses?"

"Arthur," Mrs. James said, "Arthur dear, I think—"

"And the rest of it is," Mrs. Smallwood said. "I think I'll go on down to New York for a few weeks and see Watkins. He ought to pay my expenses." She nudged Mrs. James. "I could have a time," she said.

"It must be wonderful to be able to paint," Mrs. James said. "To be able to express yourself. I've often wished—"

"Let me just show you," Mrs. Smallwood said. She stood up and went unsteadily across the room to a stack of papers piled untidily in a bookcase. "Let me show you," she called over her shoulder to Mrs. James. "Pour yourself a drink while you're waiting."

"What are *you* looking for?" Mr. Smallwood said suddenly. He and Mr. James had stopped their conversation to watch Mrs. Smallwood, and now Mr. Smallwood stood up and walked over to his wife. She was a small woman and had to look far up at him when he stood next to her. "What in hell do you think you're doing?" he said. "Going through my stuff."

Mrs. Smallwood put back the papers she was holding. "I was looking for the sketches I did for Watkins," she said.

Mr. Smallwood looked down at the drink in his wife's hand and then gave her a soft tap on the shoulder. "You go back and sit down," he said.

Mrs. Smallwood came sullenly back to sit down next to Mrs. James. "He hates to have me talk about my painting," she said in a whisper. "I didn't hurt any of your old paintings," she said aloud.

"That's all right, Diana," Mr. Smallwood said. He turned to Mr. James, but Mrs. Smallwood said loudly, "Think you're God almighty. You just can’t stand it if Watkins wants me to do a big contract. I might get more money than you do, you and your godalmighty paintings.”

“Arthur,” Mrs. James said, “don’t you think we’d better—”

Mr. James looked at his watch. “Indeed, yes,” he said. “Mr. Smallwood and I were just having a very interesting—”

“I suppose he told you all about how good he is,” Mrs. Smallwood said. “His painting his money his house his kids. I take care of those goddamn kids all day long while he sits there and says he’s painting and he’s so scared I’ll make more money than he does. I have a real feeling for kids,” she said to Mrs. James. “I *love* those kids. You’ll never know how I felt when I first saw those little helpless things — so goddamn *helpless*.”

“I know how you felt,” Mrs. James said. She went over and stood beside her husband’s chair. “I’m afraid we really must—”

“And now you’ve got to drive out these people, too,” Mr. Smallwood said to his wife. “Any nice people who come to see us, with your Watkins and your money talk.”

“No, really, it’s late,” Mrs. James said, and Mr. James added, “No, certainly not.”

“He really did call me,” Mrs. Smallwood said. “He called me on the phone, long-distance from New York, and he said he wanted me to do their whole setup this year. He certainly did call me.”

“One day while I was out, probably,” Mr. Smallwood said. “Watkins never talked to you since that trash you sent him three years ago.”

“I did do some good pictures,” Mrs. Smallwood said. “I was looking for them.”

Mr. Smallwood turned to Mr. and Mrs. James. “I feel as though I ought to apologize,” he said.

“Not at all,” Mr. James said.

Mrs. James added hurriedly, “If you would just show us where our coats —”

“Don’t go,” Mrs. Smallwood said. She came over to Mrs. James and put a hand on her shoulder. “*Please* don’t go on account of me. I want to show you those pictures I did for Watkins. They’re really good, I promise you.”

“You won’t be able to find them,” Mr. Smallwood said.

“I’m afraid we haven’t time,” Mrs. James said.

“Where did you put them?” Mrs. Smallwood asked her husband, and then, to Mrs. James, “It’s so early yet. You only just got here. Where are they?” she said to her husband insistently.

“I’ll tell you where they are,” Mr. Smallwood said. He walked over to the table and picked up his drink, and went on, with his back to his wife. “You tore them up,” he said, “the last time we had company.”

Six A.M. Is the Hour

SIX A.M. IS an hour when dude ranch cowhands are still able to play at being real ranchers. Even the tired nags after a night in the fields are frisky, and there will be a half hour for coffee after the herd is locked in the paddock and before the earliest guest is out. But this morning the horses balked at the gate and, instead of crowding through to the feed troughs, turned, reared, and finally stood milling in obvious terror.

Six A.M. is, too, the hour when tired jazz musicians, tired of other people’s voices and other people’s liquor, are finally able to play at being people themselves. After a night at the clubs, there is a half hour for coffee after the celebrants are sent home and the doors are closed at last.

But this morning the sun did not rise clearly, and the early-morning passersby on the street turned apprehensively, hesitated, neglected bus schedules and trains, spoke nervously to one another, and waited.

The front pages of the morning papers were given over, as if by common agreement, to the solemn but vague proclamation written for the President urging “every citizen to have faith.” The vague statement asserting that “the best scientists of the nation are cooperating with the Army” trailed off into a general assurance that instructions would be announced, possibly tomorrow. The radio pundits had retired, and the air sounded alternately with symphonic recordings and prayer.

The fact that the sun did not shine was incidental, although there were those who felt that it was the main contributing factor to the air of general hysteria that was growing slowly and inexorably, in spite of the open doors of the churches, and the hymns sung on street corners by stars of stage, screen, and opera. There was a sizable portion of the population who felt that the sun's vagueness was the beginning of the end; these people gathered on mountaintops previously decided upon, and spent the hours on their knees. There was a small select group among the panic-stricken who believed that their own personal destruction was the object of the general wholesale violence, and these few alternately repented and became brazen, depending upon whether it looked as though their own private deaths might save the rest of the country, or might only involve it in a great unending ruin.

When the first hour of that day had passed, therefore, citizens began to watch for some sign. Apparently no one noticed that the clocks still said six o'clock. No one, that is, except Sossiter. In his luxurious midtown apartment, nothing stirred until noon. And then Sossiter awoke, looked at his watch, scratched his head, rose, dressed, and rang for his breakfast.

That the bell should have rung at all is one of the minor miracles of that morning, when no sounds moved in an orderly fashion, when standard cause-and-effect were suspended in favor of a great, more supremely logical cause-and-effect; at any rate, when Sossiter rang, the bell also rang, and only the fact that the bell was not answered disturbed the regular routine of Sossiter's well-paid existence. He rang again, and a third time, consulted his watch again, looked out at the sunless sky, and debated. The cigarette that he selected from the package on the dresser came to reach his hand already lighted; this he did not consciously observe. With his cigarette in his hand, he sat in the overstuffed chair in his bedroom and considered.

How much time went by while he pondered, neither he nor his ornamental clock could say. All that is sure is that Sossiter smoked and waited. "It must have stopped," he said. "The clock is stopped. But my watch stopped too. That is unlikely." He was a logical man. He set himself to solving the mystery. So he went to the clock and heard it ticking. Still, it said six o’clock. It must have been some time since he had wakened. “Nevertheless,” he said, “it does move.”

It *had* to move; all things moved and that was the secret of life. “Conservation of energy,” Sossiter told himself. “Admit no entities beyond necessity, all things have their opposites, a stitch in time saves nine.” He felt tremendously reassured by these incontrovertible facts, and he glanced at his watch with contempt; it must have stopped, after all. It occurred to him finally that, six o’clock or not, man must eat. Ignoring the bell, he put on a heavy figured silk dressing gown and opened his bedroom door. That, possibly, was when Sossiter first began to believe that perhaps thesis does not necessarily imply antithesis; birds of a feather, even, might not flock together. It was not even absolutely certain to Sossiter, after that first moment, that water seeks its own level. Because surely there had been a hall outside his bedroom door the night before? Surely, when he had retired with a highball and a mystery story at eleven o’clock the night before, surely there had been stairs going down to the first floor of his home? Surely, Sossiter thought, surely, without any doubt, there was something illogically, terribly wrong.

Martians, he thought. Those crazy physicists that spend all day cooking themselves under an atomic reactor and all night writing stories for *Weird World* have done it. Spoiled my day completely. One of those idiots has hung the world up like a celluloid ball in an airstream. Serve him right if the moon fell in his lap. So Sossiter drew a breath, testing it. And sure enough, to his superdelicate senses the air plainly was the same he had breathed last night upon retiring. Now the problem became clear. He must find the crux of this hiatus and give the globe a shove before something slipped. “Think fast,” he said, “and don’t anybody move.”

Move? Was movement one natural law that had been suspended for the duration of Sossiter's supreme test? He lifted his hand tentatively, made the thought that indicated movement in the fingers, and was happy to see that where he dictated turning to the thumb, it was the ring finger that moved, in a particularly impossible gesture, and the hand itself that made the decision. This is it, then, Sossiter thought, and nodded gravely. Without any conscious weighing of his act he stepped firmly out into the infinite space that lay outside his bedroom door, and floated without fear down to the ground and the street that lay outside his house. Actually, it was not the street that lay outside his house normally; it was, to all appearances, the main street of a western ghost town; Sossiter noticed a sign saying SILVER DOLLAR SALOON, and nodded again. This is most certainly it, he thought. The Time is upon us.

And Sossiter, leaving no footprint in the dust, marched blithely backward until his elegant back had entered through the swinging doors. Of course, the doors did not swing. If they had, he would have known the game was up. But the doors hung dead center. "Stranger," a voice intoned, "the game is about to start. Yer jest in time." (Pretty shrewd, Sossiter noted.) "You may not know the rules. I cut, deal, and call. Don't peek at the dealer. Lay yore poke out. And name yore pizen." Sossiter seemed to shrink with the effort of his concentration.

"I usually decline a game unless I know who I am playing against," he said courteously, hoping to delay until he found some inkling of the rules, if any, that governed this game, if it could be called a game, when so obviously it seemed that more than Sossiter was at stake. "Would you consider telling me your names?"

The voice that had spoken to him before made a sound of derision and said, "I cut, deal, and call; do you want to know my name too?"

“I do indeed,” Sossiter said firmly.

The voice laughed and said, “Thor. The gent on your right is named Loki; we don’t let him touch the cards, and you’ll soon know why, if you don’t already. The other gent is Wotan; he runs the bank in this game. If you don’t like our rules, you can quit. Anytime, anytime at all.”

The way the voice said “anytime at all” gave Sossiter a small icy chill down his back, and he caught his breath before he could say, “Sure, buddy. Play it any way you like.” Even in his own ears the words lacked conviction, had no authentic ring at all.

Then, cautiously, Sossiter turned to find the table, his eyes obediently lowered but high enough to see that the three figures were seated — rather, were in a seated position — around a huge spinning iron pot suspended in air. Already it was warm enough to give off a slight acrid scent. With studied nonchalance Sossiter reached for his wallet and found a fistful of cartwheels, heavy-looking but weightless. He flipped one, and the rest followed in a cascade into the pot. Loki tittered, “Now the kitty.” And a soft cry followed by the odor of burned hair issued from the pot.

“Good, brave man,” said Thor. “But you’ll make one of us in spite of that, I trow. This is going to be a brand of poker you never knew.”

“I’m sure,” Sossiter said fervently. “Deal, bud.” Thor looked up sharply and seemed about to speak, but thought better of it and began solemnly to deal the cards; these were as large as slabs of marble, and seemed equally heavy, although Thor dealt them effortlessly. Next to him, Loki was examining each of his cards as they came, breathing quickly and laughing in a shrill, high giggle. Sossiter turned his cards up laboriously, and then said, “How do I bet?”

A shout of laughter from Thor and Wotan greeted him, and Loki turned slightly and giggled again. “You’ve already bet,” Thor said, laughing still.

With a quick memory of the lost sun, Sossiter was silent. “Well?” Thor said sternly, eyeing him.

Casually Sossiter indicated his cards. “Straight flush,” he said. “To the jack.”

“Straight flush to the king,” Loki said, next to him. “In spades.” With dismay Sossiter turned and saw Loki grinning evilly at him.

“Next bet?” Thor said. “I’m ready to deal, mortal. Bet.”

Sossiter’s mind, which had been relied upon in crises involving billions, in solving disputes on which hung issues of war and peace, behind great public and greater private plans a thousand times — Sossiter’s massive brain seemed to rattle in his aching skull. The decision, however, came in an instant: “New York,” he drawled. “Nine million people, and a tenth of America’s wealth.” The three sneered. “Silence, vermin,” said Thor. Then courteously to Sossiter, “I’ll see you a millennium of scalding lead and raise you a comet’s tail. Call it.”

“Right,” said Sossiter. “Chicago. Almost as big as New York, but farther west.”

“As far as Hollywood?” asked Loki with the first real interest he had so far shown.

“Not quite,” said Sossiter, and Loki turned away crossly. Again Thor dealt the cards, and Sossiter, looking eagerly at his, found that he had four aces; this time he returned Loki’s sneer with a sneer of his own, and casually turned his cards over. “Four aces,” he said with vast indifference.

“Five,” said Loki.

“Five what?” said Sossiter.

“Five aces, mortal fool,” Loki said.

“The mortal loses,” said Wotan.

“Bet, mortal,” Thor said.

This time Sossiter in his agony looked up at the place where Thor was sitting. Only the happenstance that Loki in his writhing of delight at that moment tipped a whiskey bottle into the pot, raising a bitter cloud of smoke and steam, shielded our champion and saved us all. To gain a moment, Sossiter snickered. “You guys run a cheap game. You mean there’s no piano player, no girls?”

Thor uttered a Beelzebubbling roar. “Lunkheads! Scuttlebumpkins! Suffering sulphuroids, didn’t I tell you to have the damned minstrels on hand? Bring out a fresh stinger for our guest and a brimstone daiquiri for me. Fly!”

“And the girls?” said Sossiter insidiously. Loki waved a hand casually, and Sossiter found a lovely girl sitting, most abruptly, in his lap; she was smiling and dark-haired and seemed most agreeable, except that she seemed to be made of white stone, probably marble, and her weight made Sossiter’s knees buckle. He slid her off, she landed on Loki’s toe, and Loki, rising with an immense shout of rage, aimed a blow at Sossiter that might have crushed him onto the floor; Sossiter ducked, the blow hit Wotan, and as Wotan, with a casual gesture of his left hand, let loose a lightning stroke at Loki, Sossiter fled. He ran, as silently as he could in his bathrobe and slippers, down the corridors of time, through the invisible barriers of space, back into his own apartment, where, sitting on his bed, he smoked a cigarette. He glanced at his watch. Six o’clock.

He took a deep draft of the scented Turkish blend, briefly smiled at the remembrance of his days as a student at Beirut, when he smoked a true Middle East blend of camel droppings, mahorka, and goat’s hair…and rang for his breakfast. When it came, he studiously avoided looking at Thornton, the immaculate Thornton, whose clear eye and slender though aging figure was a reproach that Sossiter kept to scourge himself for his own sybaritic ways. “Thornton, get that clock fixed today, you knave. Do it, or you’ll find there’s the devil to pay.”

“Clock, sir? The clock?” Thornton picked up the clock and examined it as though he had never seen a clock before.

“Certainly,” said Sossiter, “the clock; what did you think I meant when I said ‘clock’? Have it fixed today.”

“Yes, sir,” said Thornton indignantly. “What would you care to have done to it, sir?”

“I want it fixed,” said Sossiter. “It says six o’clock.”

“So does mine, sir,” said Thornton. “So do all of them.”

“Is it only six o’clock, then?” Sossiter asked.

“No, sir, no indeed,” Thornton said. “But they said on the radio that time has been suspended until the god Thor decides what to do with us. It seems he won us, sir, in an…er…a poker game.”

Root of Evil

MISS SYBIL TURNER opened the envelope and took out the enclosure, glanced at it, started to set it down on a stack of similar mail, and then took it back and glanced at it again; then she giggled. “Listen to this, Mabe,” she said, and her friend Mabel Johnson, working at an identical desk, but typing at the moment, said, “Wait a minute,” and finished her line before looking up. “What?” she said.

Sybil was still holding the letter. “Listen,” she said. “Here’s a guy wants us to run an ad for money.”

Mabel laughed shortly. “*That*’s no way to get it,” she said, looking down again at her typewriter. “Better he should go to work.”

“No, *listen.* He says, ‘Money to give away’ and he’s got a post office box to write to and two dollars enclosed for the ad to run all week, and everything. Can you imagine?”

“He must be crazy,” said Mabel Johnson.

“Crazy it *is,*” Sybil Turner agreed devoutly.

—

“Here’s something funny,” Mr. George Carter commented to his wife the next evening. He had been quietly reading his evening paper and his wife was doing needlepoint; they sat peacefully in front of their living room fire, with the children soundly asleep upstairs. “Here’s a real good one,” George Carter said again, and his wife looked up patiently. “ ‘Money to give away,’ “ George Carter read, once he was sure he had her attention. “Right here in the paper. People think of the screwiest things.”

“But so many people are taken in by a thing like that,” Ellen Carter said in her soft voice. “People writing to him, hoping.”

“Paper has no right to print a thing like that,” George said.

Ellen started to speak and then paused, her eyes lifted to the ceiling and her mouth open, listening. Then, reassured, she looked again at her husband and said, “Probably they run a thing like that to test how many people read the classified ads. Couldn’t that be it?”

George was obviously sorry that he had not thought of this himself. “Maybe so,” he said grudgingly. “Wish they’d send some of that money along to us, though. *We* could use it.”

“Oh, dear,” Ellen agreed with a sigh. “With prices the way they are, and meat…” She dropped her scissors onto the arm of the chair, and folded her hands in her lap, and sighed again. “George,” she demanded, as one who begins a long and intricate story, “just try to guess how much they had the nerve to charge for lamb today? *Lamb!*”

“Things are pretty bad.” Mr. Carter hastily elevated the paper before his face. “Screwiest idea I ever heard,” he muttered.

—

“The fact is perfectly plain,” Mrs. Harmon said severely to her daughter. “Your own mother’s sewing, weeks and weeks of work, isn’t good enough for you to wear out in public. So you can go without.”

“Without clothes?” said Mildred sullenly.

“You know *perfectly* well what I mean. You picked out the style of this dress yourself and I spent three weeks making it and it looks just beautiful on you and—”

“I *didn’t* pick out the style,” Mildred said.

Her mother sighed. “I sometimes think you are the *most* unreasonable—”

“I wanted the dress in the *store,*” Mildred wailed. “Not for you to *copy* it.”

Her mother took a deep breath, as if determined to be reasonable in spite of everything. “Dresses in the store cost a lot of money,” she said. “This dress cost less than—”

“If I only had some *money,*” Mildred said hopelessly. “I’ll write to this guy in the paper says he’s giving money away. I’ll get *married* or something.” She tossed her head defiantly. “*Then* I can have dresses.”

Mrs. Harmon shifted her ground abruptly and began to weep. “Three weeks I took to make that dress,” she said mournfully, “and now it’s not good enough for you, and you want to run away and get married, and all these years I’ve tried to keep you looking nice and worked to buy pretty things and spent three weeks—”

“Oh, *Mother,*” said Mildred. She blinked to keep tears out of her own eyes. “I’m not going to get married, *honestly.* And the dress is *beautiful.* I’ll *wear* it, honestly I will, I’ll wear it all the *time.*”

“It’s no good,” her mother said. “I know all the other girls—”

“It’s *beautiful,*” Mildred said. “It’s just like the one in the store. It’s the prettiest dress I ever saw, and I’m going to put it on right *now.*”

Mrs. Harmon lifted her face briefly from her handkerchief. “Watch out for that pin I left in the shoulder,” she said.

—

“For the last time, I’m afraid I find it necessary to say,” Amy Nelson said emphatically, “that I do not wish to go to any movie.”

“But—”

“Indeed I do not,” Amy said. She set her shoulders and looked extraordinarily stern. “Movies last night,” she said. “Movies the night before. I’m so tired of going to movies I don’t know what to do. And anyway there’s nothing left to see.”

“But, Amy—”

“*Some* girls,” said Amy pointedly, “like to go to the theater. *Some* girls like to go to a nightclub and dance. *Some* girls even like to ride in taxis and wear gardenias. Of course *I’m* always happy at the movies, though. Good old Amy.”

“I can’t afford—”

“*That* point,” said Amy delicately, “is the one I was too polite to refer to. Let me just remark, however, that I know of only one grown man who has not got enough initiative to get out and *do* something for himself. He works heart and soul for this organization and comes around every week and says thank you to them so gratefully for — What is it they pay you? Seventeen cents a week?”

“Now listen—”

“*Some* men are making good money at twenty-four. *Some* men have good jobs and *they’re* not afraid to assert themselves and keep up with other people and not let everyone else get ahead of them, and *their* girls don’t have to go to movies every night of the week and see the same old—”

“But when I’ve worked there a little—”

“And *some* men,” Amy continued icily, “do not expect girls to wait around until they are sixty-five and drawing old-age pensions before they can get married.”

“Well, to hear you talk—”

“Here,” said Amy in her sweetest voice, “perhaps *this* will help you. Here, in the classified section of tonight’s paper. Perhaps *this* is the lucky break you’ve been waiting for. Let me just give you this copy of tonight’s paper, since I am sure it would take your entire weekly earnings to buy one for yourself.”

“You don’t have to talk like—”

“And now, good night,” said Amy, less than graciously.

—

“He shouldn’t of done it, that’s all,” said Ronald Hart, who was fifteen years old and felt utterly responsible for his mother and ten-year-old brother. “He’s going to get us all in trouble, that’s what.”

“Dickie,” said his mother, “tell me again what happened.”

“I wrote the man like I said,” Dickie told her. He looked nervously from his mother to his brother. “I didn’t think he’d *answer,*” he said, his voice trembling. “I never thought he’d *answer.*”

“I’m afraid we ought to send it back to him,” his mother said. She had tight hold of the shining bill, and she twisted it between her fingers as though afraid to let it go.

“Well, *we* haven’t really done anything,” Ronald said. “Maybe we ought to tell the cops.”

“No, no,” said his mother hastily. “That’s the *most* important thing of all. We’re not going to tell *any*body, you hear? Ronald?”

“Okay,” said Ronald, “but maybe he’s a gangster or—”

“Dickie, you hear me?”

“Yes, but suppose they catch us?” Dickie said.

“We haven’t *done* anything,” his mother said again. “I don’t even know if it’s any good. I don’t dare take a hundred-dollar bill into the bank and ask them if it’s any good.”

“Counterfeit,” said Ronald wisely.

“But what if it isn’t?” said his mother. “Suppose it’s real?” She sighed, and looked down at the hundred-dollar bill. “They have our address, of course.”

“I had to put the address in for him to know where to send the money,” Dickie said miserably.

His mother reached a sudden decision. “I’ll tell you what we’ll do,” she said. “We’ll put it right in Dickie’s piggy bank. Then if they come and ask us about it, we can say we just put it away for safekeeping. And if no one comes after a while, why, I guess it’s ours. But don’t *tell* anyone.”

“Don’t you tell, Dickie,” his brother said warningly.

“Don’t *you* tell,” Dickie said.

“*You*’re the one always blabs out everything.”

“I was the one thought of writing him in the first place, wasn’t I?”

“And look what you got us into.”

“Boys,” said their mother warningly, “we’ve got enough trouble without you quarrelling. Now, Dickie, there’s one more thing I want you to do.”

“What?”

“Just in case it *is* all right,” his mother said, “I want you to sit right down and write that man a nice letter saying thank you.”

“Oh, *Mother*!”

“No one is ever going to say my boys weren’t brought up right,” she said firmly.

—

Mr. John Anderson let himself into his apartment, carrying his mail, and sighed deeply as he closed the door behind him. He was hungry and tired, and his day had gone poorly. He had succeeded in persuading a newsboy to accept ten dollars, and he had slipped a hundred-dollar bill into the cup of a blind beggar, but otherwise he had had no success at all. He winced when he remembered the way the truck driver had spoken to him, and the thought of the giggling shopgirls made him almost ill.

He took off his coat and sat down wearily in the easy chair. In a few minutes he would take care of the mail, then have a shower and dress and go out to some nice restaurant for dinner; he would take a vacation for this evening and carry only enough to take care of his own expenses. He could not decide whether to take a taxi uptown to a fancy steakhouse, or to go to the seafood restaurant nearby and have a lobster. Lobster, he rather thought.

After he had rested briefly he got up, went to the desk, and picked up the mail he had brought home with him. Absently he stared at the stacks of ten-dollar bills in the pigeonholes of his desk: the fives, the fifties, the hundreds. The mail under his hand was typical — one offensively humorous request for a million dollars, badly written in capital letters, and unfortunately including no return address; one circular from a loan company featuring on the envelope a man pointing toward the reader and the statement "YOU need no longer worry about money." There was a terse note from the newspaper saying that his week was up today, and asking if he desired to continue running his ad. One letter was signed by three hundred children in the Roosevelt Elementary School, saying thank you for the television set he had given the school library. One postcard read, "Dear Sir, If you really mean it please send ten dollars return mail." This last he answered, addressing the envelope quickly and enclosing, without counting, a handful of ten-dollar bills.

Then he sat down at the desk, looking with desperation and frustration at the stacks of money. Finally, in a fury, he took one of the piles of ten-dollar bills and threw it wildly against the opposite wall, where it scattered so that ten-dollar bills floated all about the room and settled gently down onto the furniture. "In the name of heaven," he wailed, "what am I going to *do* with it all?"

The Bridge Game

MRS. MURRAY WENT quickly into the living room carrying a dish of salted nuts in one hand and a dish of chocolates in the other, and hummed amiably to herself as she put them down carefully on diagonal corners of the bridge table, which stood already set up in the center of the room.

"I got out a large ginger ale and a large club soda," she said, her humming rising for a minute into words and then subsiding back to anonymity again.

"Okay," Mr. Murray said. He sat reading his newspaper, a large, cheerful, balding man like millions of others who sat peacefully of an evening in their own chairs, reading their own papers; like probably hundreds of other men whose wives had invited neighbors over for bridge, he still had his jacket and tie on. He would take them off when the Leghorns came, asking permission politely of the ladies, encouraging Mart Leghorn to do the same, but as long as he had to open the door to the Leghorns he must be correctly dressed.

Like millions of other wives, Mrs. Murray looked like her husband. She was plump and pleasant, and dieting, and would try to go very easy on the candy and nuts while she played bridge, she and Mrs. Leghorn both begging prettily to have the dishes put as far away from them as possible, "So I won't forget and just go on eating them; I just *can't* stop once I start!" Later in the evening she would serve coffee and a chocolate cake she had made herself, with a careful eye on the sugar.

The doorbell rang as she was standing vaguely looking around the room, rechecking everything. Mr. Murray rose heavily and put his paper down on the arm of the chair, and Mrs. Murray moved it to the bottom shelf of the end table and followed him out into the hall.

“Evening, evening,” Mr. Murray was saying heartily. “Come in, come in, Roberta. Mart, old boy.”

“Don’t you look nice,” Mrs. Murray said, and Mrs. Leghorn said, “How *nice* you look tonight,” and “Dora, dear, we brought our daughter, Carol, I *hope* you don’t mind, she was all alone at home and I told her I was sure you wouldn’t mind.”

“Of course not,” Mrs. Murray said, making her voice sound pleased. “We’re delighted, of course.”

“She can just sit and read or something,” Mrs. Leghorn said. “You really don’t mind?”

“I hope you don’t mind my barging in like this, Mrs. Murray,” Carol said; she went over and put her arm around Mrs. Leghorn. “Mother said she was sure you wouldn’t mind, and I said I’d just sit and read or something.”

“We’re delighted,” Mrs. Murray said. “I hope we won’t bore you.”

Carol laughed. She was very tall and thin and very tan, and she wore her hair — it was black, as Mrs. Leghorn’s used to be — over her forehead in bangs, and down her back in a smooth straight line. She put her hand out and squeezed Mrs. Murray’s. “I *did* want to stop and say hello while I was in town,” she added.

Breaking away from Carol, Mrs. Murray succeeded in leading everyone into the living room, where she and Mrs. Leghorn sat on the couch and Carol sat properly on a stiff chair slightly removed from the rest of the room, while the men walked around each other absently, like dogs settling down to sleep.

“How is college, Carol?” Mrs. Murray asked.

“Oh, grand,” Carol said. She smiled brightly. “It’s good to get home for a while, though.”

“How long will you be here?” Mrs. Murray asked, nodding.

“Till Wednesday.” Carol had started to answer almost before Mrs. Murray finished asking; it was a polite formality, like “How are you,” that had to be gotten past before Mrs. Murray and Carol could size each other up afresh. Carol had been away for three months now, and this was her first trip home. Mrs. Murray noticed her thin leather sandals, her long bare legs. “You certainly have changed,” she said, and Carol laughed easily.

“Bet it feels good to be home,” Mrs. Murray said.

“Well?” Mr. Murray demanded abruptly, coming to stand in front of Carol. “Well, how does it feel to be back home?”

Carol looked up at him. “Gets pretty dull in the old hometown,” she said.

“Well,” Mr. Murray said, “ought to have some young men around to liven it up. Girl like you needs young fellers.”

Mrs. Murray tightened her lips. She disliked her husband’s use of vernacular just as she disliked his telling stories in dialect; she felt it sat awkwardly on a man of his age and dignity, and besides, he was apt, so often, to misuse a mechanical vocabulary. “I thought we might play bridge,” she said to Mrs. Leghorn, gesturing at the card table. She allowed just the faintest hint of disappointment, plans upset, to creep into her voice. “But I’m afraid Carol…”

Carol turned away from Mr. Murray immediately. “Oh, *please,*” she said. “I’ll be just fine, honestly.”

“Well,” Mr. Murray said, looking at the card table as though he had never seen it before, “I don’t know why we can’t *all* play. Carol can take my place to start with, and then we can cut in.”

“I don’t think we ought to…” Mrs. Murray began.

“Oh, no, really,” Carol said. “I can just sit and read, that’s what I *came* for. I just didn’t want to sit home all alone,” she added to Mr. Murray.

“Mart,” Mrs. Leghorn called, “tell them that Carol doesn’t want to play bridge.”

Mr. Leghorn turned around guiltily. “She can take my place,” he said.

“Suppose we just give up bridge,” Mrs. Murray said. This time her voice held an audible grievance. “We can sit and talk.”

“Suppose I make everybody a drink,” Mr. Murray said. He slapped Mr. Leghorn on the shoulder. “Drink, old man?”

“I’ll help,” Carol said, jumping up. “After making so much trouble I ought to do something useful.”

“Never mind,” Mrs. Murray called, but Carol had followed the men out to the kitchen.

“You know,” Mrs. Leghorn began at once, “I could just *kick* myself for bringing Carol tonight, but the poor child gets *so* lonesome, and it seems like all her friends are out of town — the Raglan boy’s in Maine, you know — and I can’t just send her off alone to the movies or something.”

“What’s she been doing all the time she’s been home?” Mrs. Murray asked flatly.

“Well,” Mrs. Leghorn said, waving delicately, “she’s been busy, of *course.* Out a lot, and shopping and all that. There are plenty of people who’d *like* to take Carol around, of *course.* But she won’t go out with just anybody.”

Mrs. Murray felt her social injury being passed over lightly. “I’ll tell you what we can do,” she said. “I don’t care much for bridge anyway, you know. I like to play, but of course I’m not really terribly good.”

“You’re *much* better than I am,” Mrs. Leghorn said. “If anybody’s going to…” She stopped and listened to a roar of laughter from the kitchen. “You know, Oliver seems *such* a hand with young folks," she laughed. "I'll never forget him at the country club dance last Christmas."

Mrs. Murray nodded grimly. "But I don't mind sitting out at all," she said.

Carol came into the room, laughing and carrying two drinks. "Natch," she said over her shoulder to Mr. Murray, who was also carrying two drinks, and they both laughed.

"Mother, Mrs. Murray," Carol said. She handed them the drinks, then took hers from Mr. Murray. "Here's to fun," she said, and she and Mr. Murray laughed again.

Mr. Leghorn followed them finally out of the kitchen, carrying his own drink, which he sipped as he walked. "I like that dining room wallpaper," he said to Mr. Murray. "Who'd you get it from?"

"Our landlord," Mr. Murray said boisterously.

"It was here when we moved in," Mrs. Murray explained.

"Daddy can't think of anything but business," Carol said.

"I can't think of anything but pleasure," Mr. Murray said. Kittenishly, Mrs. Murray thought.

"We've settled the bridge problem," Mr. Murray said to his wife. He took a deep swallow of his drink. "You three are going to play, and Carol and I are going to play gin rummy."

"Oh, come on," Carol said, making a horrible frown. "I said I wasn't going to play anything, and you know it."

"Perhaps Carol would like to play in *my* place," Mrs. Murray said loftily. "I don't really feel like playing at all."

"Let's not have all that again," Mr. Murray said firmly. "It's all settled."

"You read this thing, Oliver?" Mr. Leghorn asked from across the room. "This book?" He held up a book he had taken from the end table.

“Never learned to read,” Mr. Murray said. “Can’t read a note.”

Mr. Leghorn laid the book down and turned the pages absently. “I like music, now,” Mr. Murray said to Carol. “I get a real kick out of that.”

“Charge,” Carol said. When he stared, she said, “*Charge.* You get a *charge* out of that.”

“I get a *charge* out of that,” Mr. Murray said.

Mr. Leghorn closed the book and came purposefully across the room. “Going to play bridge?” he asked. “Roberta, you play with Oliver. Dora and I will take you on.”

“And Carol?” Mrs. Murray asked, before her husband could say it.

“She can sit and read or something,” Mr. Leghorn said. “Good book over there on the table, Carol.”

“See here,” Mr. Murray said, “we can’t just leave Carol out.”

Mrs. Murray got up suddenly, said “Excuse me,” and hurried out of the room.

“Are you all right?” Mrs. Leghorn called blankly after her, and then, to Mr. Murray, “She’s feeling all right, of *course*?”

“Sure,” Mr. Murray said, surprised.

“Mrs. Murray looks so *nice* tonight,” Carol said eagerly, “I don’t know when I’ve seen her looking handsomer.”

“That blue dress has always looked good on her,” Mrs. Leghorn said.

Mr. Leghorn was setting the usual chairs around the bridge table, silently and efficiently. He riffled the pages of the score pad, tested the point on the pencil, moved the candy dishes slightly, and finally sat down to shuffle the cards. “Come on, everybody,” he said. “Got to get started.”

Mrs. Leghorn and Mr. Murray moved obediently to the bridge table, and Carol walked over to Mr. Murray’s easy chair and settled down, holding the book Mr. Leghorn had suggested.

“Where’s Dora?” Mr. Leghorn demanded. “If we’re going to get in more than a couple of hands…”

“She’s been gone quite a while,” Mrs. Leghorn said to Mr. Murray. “Do you think there’s anything…?”

“She’ll be back,” Mr. Murray said. “Here she comes now.”

Mrs. Murray entered the room quickly, smiling brightly. Her nose had just been powdered. “Sorry, everyone,” she said. “Oh, is *this* how we play?” She looked at the bridge table and then over at Carol. “Carol, honey,” she said breathlessly, “I want you to take this.” She circled the table and handed Carol a small box, then went back and sat down.

“Why, Mrs. Murray,” Carol said. “You really *shouldn’t.*” She opened the box and looked inside. “Really,” she said, “I *can’t* possibly…”

“Bring it here,” Mrs. Leghorn said. “Let me see.”

Carol took the box over, and Mrs. Leghorn looked. “Dora,” she said, “isn’t that nice, now.” She tilted the box and held it for Mr. Leghorn to see. “It’s awfully pretty,” she said.

“Yes,” Mr. Leghorn said. Insistently, he began to deal the cards.

“Try it on,” Mrs. Murray said to Carol.

It was a piece of costume jewelry, a pin of gold leaves, each with a small pink or green or red stone set in the center; when Carol tried it on, it looked plain and matronly on the shoulder of her young cotton dress. “It’s perfectly lovely,” Carol said, looking down at it. She unpinned it and put it back into the box.

“I’ll tell you,” Mrs. Murray said quickly, looking down at the cards Mr. Leghorn was dealing her, “I really bought it for myself, but it’s *much* too fancy for me, and then when I saw how Carol was growing up to be such a young lady, I thought she might like it. That’s all.”

“But I really couldn’t take it,” Carol said.

"I want you to, dear," Mrs. Murray said. "It *looks* like Carol, doesn't it?" she said to Mrs. Leghorn. Mrs. Leghorn stared up at Carol for a minute.

"Thank you very much, then," Carol said. "I'll let you get on with your game." She left the box on the corner of the table and settled back into the chair.

"Carol loves the pin, of *course,*" Mrs. Leghorn said to Mrs. Murray. "It's a sweet thing."

"It gives her a *charge,*" Mr. Murray said.

Mrs. Murray regarded her husband. "For heaven's sake, Oliver," she said finally, "don't talk like a child."

The Man in the Woods

WEARILY, MOVING HIS feet because he had nothing else to do, Christopher went on down the road, hating the trees that moved slowly against his progress, hating the dust beneath his feet, hating the sky, hating this road, all roads, everywhere. He had been walking since morning, and all day the day before that, and the day before that, and days before that, back into the numberless line of walking days that dissolved, seemingly years ago, into the place he had left, once, before he started walking. This morning he had been walking past fields, and now he was walking past trees that mounted heavily to the road, and leaned across, bending their great old bodies toward him; Christopher had come into the forest at a crossroads, turning onto the forest road as though he had a choice, looking back once to see the other road, the one he had not chosen, going peacefully on through fields, in and out of towns, perhaps even coming to an end somewhere beyond Christopher's sight.

The cat had joined him shortly after he entered the forest, emerging from between the trees in a quick, shadowy movement that surprised Christopher at first and then, oddly, comforted him, and the cat had stayed beside him, moving closer to Christopher as the trees pressed insistently closer to them both, trotting along in the casual acceptance of human company that cats exhibit when they are frightened. Christopher, when he stopped once to rest, sitting on a large stone at the edge of the road, had rubbed the cat's ears and pulled the cat's tail affectionately, and had said, "Where we going, fellow? Any ideas?," and the cat had closed his eyes meaningfully and opened them again.

"Haven't seen a house since we came into these trees," Christopher remarked once, later, to the cat; squinting up at the sky, he had added, "Going to be dark before long." He glanced apprehensively at the trees so close to him, irritated by the sound of his own voice in the silence, as though the trees were listening to him and, listening, had nodded solemnly to one another.

"Don't worry," Christopher said to the cat. "Road's got to go *some*where."

—

It was not much later — an hour before dark, probably — that Christopher and the cat paused, surprised, at a turn in the road, because a house was ahead. A neat stone fence ran down to the road, smoke came naturally from the chimneys, the doors and windows were not nailed shut, nor were the steps broken or the hinges sagging. It was a comfortable-looking, settled old house, made of stone like its fence, easily found in the pathless forest because it lay correctly, compactly, at the end of the road, which was not a road at all, of course, but merely a way to the house. Christopher thought briefly of the other way, long before, that he had not followed, and then moved forward, the cat at his heels, to the front door of the house.

The sound of a river came from among the trees. The river knew a way out of the forest, because it moved along sweetly and clearly, over clean stones and, unafraid, among the dark trees.

Christopher approached the house as he would any house, farmhouse, suburban home, or city apartment, and knocked politely and with pleasure on the warm front door.

"Come in, then," a woman said as she opened it, and Christopher stepped inside, followed closely by the cat.

The woman stood back and looked for a minute at Christopher, her eyes searching and wide; he looked back at her and saw that she was young, not so young as he would have liked, but too young, seemingly, to be living in the heart of a forest.

"I've been here for a long time, though," she said, as if she'd read his thoughts. Out of this dark hallway, he thought, she might look older; her hair curled a little around her face, and her eyes were far too wide for the rest of her, as if she were constantly straining to see in the gloom of the forest. She wore a long green dress that was gathered at her waist by a belt made of what he subsequently saw was grass woven into a rope; she was barefoot. While he stood uneasily just inside the door, looking at her as she looked at him, the cat went round the hall, stopping curiously at corners and before closed doors, glancing up, once, into the unlighted heights of the stairway that rose from the far end of the hall.

"He smells another cat," she said. "We have one."

"Phyllis," a voice called from the back of the house, and the woman smiled quickly, nervously, at Christopher and said, "Come along, please. I shouldn't keep you waiting."

He followed her to the door at the back of the hall, next to the stairway, and was grateful for the light that greeted them when she opened it. He was led directly into a great warm kitchen, glowing with an open fire on its hearth, and well lit, against the late-afternoon dimness of the forest, by three kerosene lamps set on table and shelves. A second woman stood by the stove, watching the pots that steamed and smelled maddeningly of onions and herbs; Christopher closed his eyes, like the cat, against the unbelievable beauty of warmth, light, and the smell of onions.

"Well," the woman at the stove said with finality, turning to look at Christopher. She studied him carefully, as the other woman had done, and then turned her eyes to a bare whitewashed area, high on the kitchen wall, where lines and crosses indicated a rough measuring system. “Another day,” she said.

“What’s your name?” the first woman asked Christopher, and he said “Christopher” without effort and then, “What’s yours?”

“Phyllis,” the young woman said. “What’s your cat’s name?”

“I don’t know,” Christopher said. He smiled a little. “It’s not even my cat,” he went on, his voice gathering strength from the smell of the onions. “He just followed me here.”

“We’ll have to name him something,” Phyllis said. When she spoke she looked away from Christopher, turning her overlarge eyes on him again only when she stopped speaking. “Our cat’s named Grimalkin.”

“Grimalkin,” Christopher said.

“*Her* name,” Phyllis said, gesturing with her head toward the cook. “*Her* name’s Aunt Cissy.”

“Circe,” the older woman said doggedly to the stove. “Circe I was born and Circe I will have for my name till I die.”

Although she seemed, from the way she stood and the way she kept her voice to a single note, to be much older than Phyllis, Christopher saw her face clearly in the light of the lamps — she was vigorous and clear-eyed, and the strength in her arms when she lifted the great iron pot easily off the stove and carried it to the stone table in the center of the kitchen surprised Christopher. The cat, who had followed Christopher and Phyllis into the kitchen, leaped noiselessly onto the bench beside the table, and then onto the table; Phyllis looked warily at Christopher for a minute before she pushed the cat gently to drive him off the table.

“We’ll have to find a name for your cat,” she said apologetically as the cat leaped down without taking offense.

“Kitty,” Christopher said helplessly. “I guess I always call cats ‘Kitty.’”

Phyllis shook her head. She was about to speak when Aunt Cissy stopped her with a glance, and Phyllis moved quickly to an iron chest in the corner of the kitchen, from which she took a cloth to spread on the table, and heavy stone plates and mugs, which she set on the table in four places. Christopher sat down on the bench, with his back to the table, to indicate clearly that he had no intention of presuming that he was sitting at the table but was on the bench only because he was tired, that he would not swing around to the table until invited warmly and specifically to do so.

“Are we almost ready, then?” Aunt Cissy said. She swept her eyes across the table, adjusted a fork, and stood back, her glance never for a minute resting on Christopher. Then she moved over to the wall beside the door, where she stood, quiet and erect, and Phyllis went to stand beside her. Christopher, turning his head to look at them, had to turn again as footsteps approached from the hall, and after a minute’s interminable pause, the door opened. The two women stayed respectfully by the far wall, and Christopher stood up without knowing why, except that it was his host who was entering.

—

This was a man toward the end of middle age; although he held his shoulders stiffly back, they looked as if they would sag without a constant effort. His face was lined and tired, and his mouth, like his shoulders, appeared to be falling downward into resignation. He was dressed, as the women were, in a long green robe tied at the waist, and he, too, was barefoot. As he stood in the doorway, with the darkness of the hall behind him, his white head shone softly, and his eyes, bright and curious, regarded Christopher for a long minute before they turned, as the older woman’s had done, to the crude measuring system on the upper wall.

“We are honored to have you here,” he said at last to Christopher; his voice was resonant, like the sound of the wind in the trees. Without speaking again, he took his seat at the head of the stone table and gestured to Christopher to take the place on his right. Phyllis came away from her post by the door and slipped into the place across from Christopher, and Aunt Cissy served them all from the iron pot before taking her own place at the foot of the table.

Christopher stared down at the plate before him, and the rich smell of the onions and meat met him, so that he closed his eyes again for a minute before starting to eat. When he lifted his head he could see, over Phyllis’s head, the dark window, the trees pressed so close against it that their branches were bent against the glass, a tangled crowd of leaves and branches looking in.

“What will we call you?” the old man asked Christopher at last.

“I’m Christopher,” Christopher said, looking only at his plate or up at the window.

“And have you come far?” the old man said.

“Very far.” Christopher smiled. “I suppose it seems farther than it really is,” he explained.

“I am named Oakes,” the old man said.

Christopher gathered himself together with an effort. Ever since entering this strange house he had been bewildered, as though intoxicated from his endless journey through the trees, and uneasy at coming from darkness and the watching forest into a house where he sat down without introductions at his host’s table. Swallowing, Christopher turned to look at Mr. Oakes and said, “It’s very kind of you to take me in. If you hadn’t, I guess I’d have been wandering around in the woods all night.”

Mr. Oakes bowed his head slightly at Christopher.

“I guess I was a little frightened,” Christopher said with a small embarrassed laugh. “All those trees.”

“Indeed, yes,” Mr. Oakes said placidly. “All those trees.”

Christopher wondered if he had shown his gratitude adequately. He wanted very much to say something further, something that might lead to an explicit definition of his privileges: whether he was to stay the night, for instance, or whether he must go out again into the woods in the darkness; whether, if he did stay the night, he might have in the morning another such meal as this dinner. When Aunt Cissy filled his plate a second time, Christopher smiled up at her. “This is certainly wonderful,” he said to her. “I don’t know when I’ve had a meal I enjoyed this much.”

Aunt Cissy bowed her head to him as Mr. Oakes had before.

“The food comes from the woods, of course,” Mr. Oakes said. “Circe gathers her onions down by the river, but naturally none of that need concern you.”

“I suppose not,” Christopher said, feeling that he was not to stay the night.

“Tomorrow will be soon enough for you to see the house,” Mr. Oakes added.

“I suppose so,” Christopher said, realizing that he was indeed to stay the night.

“Tonight,” Mr. Oakes said, his voice deliberately light. “Tonight, I should like to hear about you, and what things you have seen on your journey, and what takes place in the world you have left.”

Christopher smiled. Knowing that he could stay the night, could not in charity be dismissed before the morning, he felt relaxed. Aunt Cissy’s good dinner had pleased him, and he was ready enough to talk with his host.

“I don’t really know quite *how* I got here,” he said. “I just took the road into the woods.”

“You would have to go through the woods to get here,” his host agreed soberly.

“Before *that,*” Christopher went on, “I passed a lot of farmhouses and a little town — do you know the name of it? I asked a woman there for a meal and she turned me away.”

He laughed now, at the memory, with Aunt Cissy’s good dinner warm inside him.

“And before that,” he said, “I was studying.”

“You are a scholar,” the old man said. “Naturally.”

“I don’t know *why.*” Christopher turned at last to Mr. Oakes and spoke frankly. “I don’t know why,” he repeated. “One day I was there, in college, like everyone else, and then the next day I just left, without any reason except that I did.” He glanced from Mr. Oakes to Phyllis to Aunt Cissy; they were all looking at him with blank expectation. He stopped, then said lamely, “And I guess that’s all that happened before I came here.”

“He brought a cat with him,” Phyllis said softly, her eyes down.

“A cat?” Mr. Oakes looked politely around the kitchen, saw Christopher’s cat curled up under the stove, and nodded. “One brought a dog,” he said to Aunt Cissy. “Do you remember the dog?”

Aunt Cissy nodded, her face unchanging.

There was a sound at the door, and Phyllis said, without moving, “That is our Grimalkin coming for his supper.”

Aunt Cissy rose and went over to the outer door and opened it. A cat, tiger-striped where Christopher’s cat was black, but about the same size, trotted casually into the kitchen, without a glance at Aunt Cissy, went directly for the stove, then saw Christopher's cat. Christopher's cat lifted his head lazily, widened his eyes, and stared at Grimalkin.

"I think they're going to fight," Christopher said nervously, half rising from his seat. "Perhaps I'd better—"

But he was too late. Grimalkin lifted his voice in a deadly wail, and Christopher's cat spat, without stirring from his comfortable bed under the stove; then Grimalkin moved incautiously and was caught off guard by Christopher's cat. Spitting and screaming, they clung to each other briefly, then Grimalkin ran crying out the door that Aunt Cissy opened for him.

Mr. Oakes sighed. "What is your cat's name?" he inquired.

"I'm *terribly* sorry," Christopher said, with a fleeting fear that his irrational cat might have deprived them both of a bed. "Shall I go and find Grimalkin outside?"

Mr. Oakes laughed. "He was fairly beaten," he said, "and has no right to come back."

"Now," Phyllis said softly, "now we can call your cat Grimalkin. Now we have a name, Grimalkin, and no cat, so we can give the name to your cat."

—

Christopher slept that night in a stone room at the top of the house, a room reached by the dark staircase leading from the hall. Mr. Oakes carried a candle to the room for him, and Christopher's cat, now named Grimalkin, left the warm stove to follow. The room was small and neat, and the bed was a stone bench, which Christopher, investigating after his host had gone, discovered to his amazement was mattressed with leaves, and had for blankets heavy furs that looked like bearskins.

"This is quite a forest," Christopher said to the cat, rubbing a corner of the bearskin between his hands. "And quite a family."

Against the window of Christopher’s room, as against all the windows in the house, was the wall of trees, crushing themselves hard against the glass. “I wonder if that’s why they made this house out of stone?” Christopher asked the cat. “So the trees wouldn’t push it down?”

All night long the sound of the trees came into Christopher’s dreams, and he turned gratefully in his sleep to the cat purring beside him in the great fur coverings.

—

In the morning, Christopher came down into the kitchen, where Phyllis and Aunt Cissy, in their green robes, were moving about the stove. His cat, who had followed him down the stairs, moved immediately ahead of him in the kitchen to sit under the stove and watch Aunt Cissy expectantly. When Phyllis had set the stone table and Aunt Cissy had laid out the food, they both moved over to the doorway as they had the night before, waiting for Mr. Oakes to come in.

When he came, he nodded to Christopher and they sat, as before, Aunt Cissy serving them all. Mr. Oakes did not speak this morning, and when the meal was over he rose, gesturing to Christopher to follow him. They went out into the hall, with its silent closed doors, and Mr. Oakes paused.

“You have seen only part of the house, of course,” he said. “Our handmaidens keep to the kitchen unless called to this hall.”

“Where do they sleep?” Christopher asked. “In the kitchen?” He was immediately embarrassed by his own question, and smiled awkwardly at Mr. Oakes to say that he did not deserve an answer, but Mr. Oakes shook his head in amusement and put his hand on Christopher’s shoulder.

“On the kitchen floor,” he said. And then he turned his head away, but Christopher could see that he was laughing. “Circe,” he said, “sleeps nearer to the door from the hall.”

Christopher felt his face growing red and, glad for the darkness of the hall, said quickly, “It’s a very old house, isn’t it?”

“Very old,” Mr. Oakes said, as though surprised by the question. “A house was found to be vital, of course.”

“Of course,” Christopher said, agreeably.

“In here,” Mr. Oakes said, opening one of the two great doors on either side of the entrance. “In here are the records kept.”

Christopher followed him in, and Mr. Oakes went to a candle that stood in its own wax on a stone table and lit it with the flint that lay beside it. He then raised the candle high, and Christopher saw that the walls were covered with stones, piled up to make loose, irregular shelves. On some of the shelves great, leather-covered books stood, and on other shelves lay stone tablets, and rolls of parchment.

“They are of great value,” Mr. Oakes said sadly. “I have never known how to use them, of course.” He walked slowly over and touched one huge volume, then turned to show Christopher his fingers covered with dust. “It is my sorrow,” he said, “that I cannot use these things of great value.”

Christopher, frightened by the books, drew back into the doorway. “At one time,” Mr. Oakes said, shaking his head, “there were many more. Many, many more. I have heard that at one time this room was made large enough to hold the records. I have never known how they came to be destroyed.”

Still carrying the candle, he led Christopher out of the room and shut the big door behind them. Across the hall another door faced them. As Mr. Oakes led the way in with the candle, Christopher saw that it was another bedroom, larger than the one in which he had slept.

“This, of course,” Mr. Oakes said, “is where I have been sleeping, to guard the records.”

He held the candle high again and Christopher saw a stone bench like his own, with heavy furs lying on it, and above the bed a long and glittering knife resting upon two pegs driven between the stones of the wall.

“The keeper of the records,” Mr. Oakes said, and sighed briefly before he smiled at Christopher in the candlelight. “We are like two friends,” he added. “One showing the other his house.”

“But—” Christopher began, and Mr. Oakes laughed.

“Let me show you my roses,” he said.

Christopher followed him helplessly back into the hall, where Mr. Oakes blew out the candle and left it on a shelf by the door, and then out the front door to the tiny cleared patch before the house, which was surrounded by the stone wall that ran to the road. Although for a small distance before them the world was clear of trees, it was not very much lighter or more pleasant, with the forest only barely held back by the stone wall, edging as close to it as possible, pushing, as Christopher had felt since the day before, crowding up and embracing the little stone house in horrid possession.

“Here are my roses,” Mr. Oakes said, his voice warm. He looked calculatingly beyond at the forest as he spoke, his eyes measuring the distance between the trees and his roses. “I planted them myself,” he said. “I was the first one to clear away even this much of the forest. Because I wished to plant roses in the midst of this wilderness. Even so,” he added, “I had to send Circe for roses from the midst of this beast around us, to set them here in my little clear spot.” He leaned affectionately over the roses, which grew gloriously against the stone of the house, on a vine that rose triumphantly almost to the height of the door. Over him, over the roses, over the house, the trees leaned eagerly.

“They need to be tied up against stakes every spring,” Mr. Oakes said. He stepped back a pace and measured with his hand above his head. “A stake — a small tree stripped of its branches will do, and Circe will get it and sharpen it — and the rose vine tied to it as it leans against the house.”

Christopher nodded. “Someday the roses will cover the house, I imagine,” he said.

“Do you think so?” Mr. Oakes turned eagerly to him. “My roses?”

“It *looks* like it,” Christopher said awkwardly, his fingers touching the first stake, bright against the stones of the house.

Mr. Oakes shook his head, smiling. “Remember who planted them,” he said.

—

They went inside again and through the hall into the kitchen, where Aunt Cissy and Phyllis stood against the wall as they entered. Again they sat at the stone table and Aunt Cissy served them, and again Mr. Oakes said nothing while they ate and Phyllis and Aunt Cissy looked down at their plates.

After the meal was over, Mr. Oakes bowed to Christopher before leaving the room, and while Phyllis and Aunt Cissy cleared the table of plates and cloth, Christopher sat on the bench with his cat on his knee. The women seemed to be unusually occupied. Aunt Cissy, at the stove, set down iron pots enough for a dozen meals, and Phyllis, sent to fetch a special utensil from an alcove in the corner of the kitchen, came back to report that it had been mislaid “since the last time” and could not be found, so that Aunt Cissy had to put down her cooking spoon and go herself to search.

Phyllis set a great pastry shell on the stone table, and she and Aunt Cissy filled it slowly and lovingly with spoonfuls from one or another pot on the stove, stopping to taste and estimate, questioning each other with their eyes.

“What *are* you making?” Christopher asked finally.

“A feast,” Phyllis said, glancing at him quickly and then away.

Christopher's cat watched, purring, until Aunt Cissy disappeared into the kitchen alcove again and came back carrying the trussed carcass of what seemed to Christopher to be a wild pig. She and Phyllis set this on the spit before the great fireplace, and Phyllis sat beside it to turn the spit. Then Christopher's cat leaped down and ran over to the fireplace to sit beside Phyllis and taste the drops of fat that fell on the great hearth as the spit was turned.

"Who is coming to your feast?" Christopher asked, amused.

Phyllis looked around at him, and Aunt Cissy half turned from the stove. There was a silence in the kitchen, a silence of no movement and almost no breath, and then, before anyone could speak, the door opened and Mr. Oakes came in. He was carrying the knife from his bedroom, and with a shrug of resignation he held it out for Christopher to see. When Mr. Oakes had seated himself at the table, Aunt Cissy disappeared again into the alcove and brought back a grindstone, which she set before Mr. Oakes. Deliberately, with the slow caution of a pleasant action lovingly done, Mr. Oakes set about sharpening the knife. He held the bright blade against the moving stone, turning the edge little by little with infinite delicacy.

"You say you've come far?" he said over the sound of the knife, and for a minute his eyes left the grindstone to rest on Christopher.

"Quite a ways," Christopher said, watching the grindstone. "I don't know how far, exactly."

"And you were a scholar?"

"Yes," Christopher said. "A student."

Mr. Oakes looked up from the knife again, to the estimate marked on the wall.

"Christopher," he said softly, as though estimating the name.

When the knife was razor sharp, Mr. Oakes held it up to the light from the fire, studying the blade. Then he looked at Christopher and shook his head humorously. “As sharp as any weapon can be,” he said.

Aunt Cissy spoke, unsolicited, for the first time. “Sun’s down,” she said.

Mr. Oakes nodded. He looked at Phyllis for a minute, and at Aunt Cissy. Then, with his sharpened knife in his hand, he walked over and put his free arm around Christopher’s shoulder. “Will you remember about the roses?” he asked. “They *must* be tied up in the spring if they mean to grow at all.”

For a minute his arm stayed warmly around Christopher’s shoulders, and then, carrying his knife, he went over to the back door and waited while Aunt Cissy came to open it for him. As the door was opened, the trees showed for a minute, dark and greedy. Then Aunt Cissy closed the door behind Mr. Oakes. For a minute she leaned her back against it, watching Christopher, then, standing away from it, she opened it again. Christopher, staring, walked slowly over to the open door, as Aunt Cissy seemed to expect he would, and heard behind him Phyllis’s voice from the hearth.

“He’ll be down by the river,” she said softly. “Go far around and come up behind him.”

The door shut solidly behind Christopher and he leaned against it, looking with frightened eyes at the trees that reached for him on either side. Then as he pressed his back in terror against the door, he heard the voice calling from the direction of the river, so clear and ringing through the trees that he hardly knew it as Mr. Oakes’s: “Who is he dares enter these my woods?”

Behold the Child Among His Newborn Blisses

IT WAS LATE on Saturday morning and the doctor's office was nearly empty'. Two mothers sat quietly, one holding a little girl in a pink bonnet and dress, the other watching tolerantly while her little boy charged around the room, pulling a series of wooden ducks on wheels. From far within the doctor's office a baby screamed violently. Neither of the mothers paid the slightest attention. They had been waiting together for about fifteen minutes before the little girl on her mother's lap got the hiccups. Her mother blushed, patted the little girl's back, and finally turned her over onto her stomach on the couch. "Stay there, darling," she said, "and the nasty old hiccups will go away so quick you won't know you had them." She smiled at the other mother.

"They get them, don't they," the other mother said sympathetically.

"She gets them all the time," the little girl's mother said. "She just doesn't have a minute's peace with them."

"This one," the other mother gestured at the little boy, "he used to get them all the time, too."

"Terrible," the little girl's mother said.

"He outgrew them," the little boy's mother said, pleased. The outer door opened and stayed open, letting in a draft. The little girl's mother, glaring at the doorway, picked up a pink sweater and threw it over the little girl, who was still lying on her stomach. The little boy's mother called: "Thomas, stay away from the door, dear, you'll catch your death of cold."

An enormous middle-aged woman backed in through the doorway, holding her hand out before her and calling "Come on, honey, come on into the nice office. Come on, Girlie honey."

"Would you mind closing that door?" the little girl's mother said angrily, "there are children in here."

"I've got to get him to come in, don't I?" the big woman said. "Just a minute." She began to snap her fingers, calling again, "Girlie honey, come on in — you've got to come in and see the nice doctor."

The little girl's mother looked at the little boy's mother, who shrugged and sighed. Then they both sat back furiously and watched their own children. The big woman was slowly backing into the room, still snapping her fingers and coaxing. Finally a boy of about ten appeared in the doorway, looking around watchfully and holding one hand behind him. Both the mothers smiled automatically; in the doctor's office it is manners to smile at someone else's children. The boy was reassured and came a step into the room. The big woman moved slowly forward and then caught him. "There," she said, "now you'll see, he isn't going to hurt you a bit."

"Would you *please* close that door?" the little girl's mother demanded.

The big woman said apologetically: "I just had to get him to come in. He's scared." She kicked the door shut. "He's never been to the doctor before."

"Never?" the little boy's mother asked incredulously.

"No." The big woman, still holding the boy, went over to an upholstered chair and sat down, putting the boy on her knee. He had one hand bandaged in a huge white handkerchief. "That's why he's scared, I guess."

"Hasn't he even had any whooping-cough inoculations?" the little girl's mother asked.

"Or diphtheria?" the little boy's mother added.

"Or his weight?" the little girl's mother insisted. "Don't you watch his weight?"

“He’s good and healthy, he is,” the big woman said. “He never needed to go to a doctor before.”

The little boy on the floor had abandoned the ducks and was standing close to the big woman, watching the boy on her knee. They regarded one another steadily, almost without curiosity. “You want to get down?” the big woman said to the boy on her knee. “Girlie, you want down?” The boy shook his head. “I guess he’s kind of shy of you at first,” the big woman said to the little boy standing watching. “He doesn’t always take to strangers right away.”

The little boy’s mother leaned forward. “Hello,” she said to the boy, “aren’t you a big boy?” The boy turned his eyes on her. “You’re a *big* boy, aren’t you?” she said. “Can’t you talk to me?” He turned his eyes back to the little boy watching him, and the little boy’s mother laughed embarrassedly. “I guess he is sort of shy,” she said.

“He hardly ever talks anyway,” the big woman said.

“How old is he?” the little girl’s mother asked.

“He’s ten, going on eleven.”

“Ten,” the little girl’s mother repeated speculatively.

“This one,” the little boy’s mother said, “is five.”

“Well,” the big woman said. She turned to the boy on her knee. “This little man here is only five years old, Girlie. Imagine!”

“I’m five,” the little boy said.

The boy on the big woman’s knee stirred. “So’m I,” he said.

The big woman laughed. “See,” she said, “he can talk.”

“Do you call him Girlie?” the little boy asked. “Is that boy’s name Girlie?”

“It sure is,” the big woman said, “it’s Girlie all right.”

“Why is his name Girlie? Is he a girl?”

The big woman laughed. “I’ll tell you,” she said, “when he was born he didn’t cry a sound, and his old man said he couldn’t be a real man, so quiet, and so that’s why we call him Girlie.”

“Is he a girl, though?” the little boy persisted.

The big woman laughed again. “I guess he doesn’t know himself, sometimes,” she said. “Do you, Girlie?”

Girlie moved suddenly. He twisted out of the big woman’s arms and charged at the little boy, knocking him down. “Girlie,” he said. “Boy.”

The little boy began to cry even before his mother reached him and snatched him up. “Well!” she said, “a big boy like that!”

“Good lord!” the little girl’s mother said, horrified. “A terrible thing to do!”

The little boy’s mother turned on Girlie, who stood in the middle of the floor grinning hopefully. “You bad bad boy,” she said. “You awful boy!”

“Play,” Girlie said, “play with Girlie.”

“Can’t you even say you’re sorry?” the little boy’s mother said, and she turned to the big woman. “Doesn’t he even say he’s sorry when he does a thing like that?”

The Third Baby's the Easiest

EVERYONE SAYS THE third baby is the easiest one to have, and now I know why. It's the easiest because it's the funniest, because you've been there twice, and you know. You know, for instance, how you're going to look in a maternity dress about the seventh month, and you know how to release the footbrake on a baby carriage without fumbling amateurishly, and you know how to tie your shoes before and do knee-chests after, and while you're not exactly casual, you're a little bit off-hand about the whole thing. Sentimental people keep insisting that women go on to have a third baby because they love babies, and cynical people seem to maintain that a woman with two healthy, active children around the house will do anything for ten quiet days in the hospital; my own position is somewhere between the two, but agree that the third is the easiest. The whole event is far too recent for me to be deluded.

Because it was my third I was saved a lot of unnecessary discomfort. No one sent me any dainty pink sweaters, for instance. We only received one pair of booties, and those were a pair of rosebud-covered white ones that someone had sent my first child when he was born and which I had given, still in their original pink tissue paper, to a friend when her first child was born; she had subsequently sent them to her cousin in Texas for a second baby, and the cousin sent them back East on the occasion of a mutual friend's twins; the mutual friend gave them to me, with a card saying "Love to Baby" and the pink tissue paper hardly ruffled. I have them carefully set aside, because I know someone who is having a baby in June.

I borrowed back my baby carriage from my next-door neighbor, took the crib down out of the attic, washed my way through the chest of baby shirts and woolen shawls, briefed the two incumbent children far enough ahead of time, and spent a loving and painstaking month packing my suitcase. This time I knew exactly what I was taking with me to the hospital, but assembling it took time and eventually required an emergency trip to New York from our home in Vermont. I packed it, though, finally: a yellow nightgown trimmed with lace, a white nightgown that tied at the throat with a blue bow, two of the fanciest bed-jackets I could find — that was what I went to New York for — and then, two pounds of homemade fudge, as many mystery stories as I could cram in, and a bag of apples. Almost at the last minute I added a box of pralines, a bottle of expensive cologne, and my toothbrush. I have heard of people who take their own satin sheets to the hospital but that has always seemed to me a waste of good suitcase space.

My doctor was very pleasant and my friends were very thoughtful; for the last two weeks before I went to the hospital almost everyone I know called me almost once a day and said, “Haven’t you gone *yet?*” My mother- and father-in-law settled on a weekend to visit us when, according to the best astronomical figuring, I should have had a two-weeks-old baby ready to show them; they arrived, were entertained with some restraint on my part, and left, eying me with disfavor and some suspicion. My mother sent me a telegram from California saying, “Is everything all right? Shall I come? Where is baby?” My children were sullen, my husband was embarrassed.

Everything was, as I say, perfectly normal, up to and including the frightful moment when I leaped out of bed at two in the morning as though there had been a pea under the mattress; when I turned on the light my husband said sleepily, “Having baby?”

“I really don’t know,” I said nervously. I was looking for the clock, which I hide at night so that in the morning when the alarm rings I will have to wake up looking for it. It was hard to find it without the alarm ringing.

“Shall I wake up?” my husband asked without any sign of pleased anticipation.

“I can’t find the *clock*” I said.

“Clock?” my husband said. “Clock. Wake me five minutes apart.” I unlocked the suitcase and took out a mystery story, and sat down in the armchair with a blanket over me. After a few minutes the cat, who usually sleeps on the foot of my son’s bed, wandered in and settled down on a corner of the blanket by my feet. She slept as peacefully as my husband did most of the night, except that now and then she raised her head to regard me with a look of silent contempt.

Because we live in a small country town and our hospital is five miles away I had an uneasy feeling that I ought to allow plenty of time, particularly since neither of us has ever learned to drive and consequently I must call our local taxi to take me to the hospital. At seven-thirty I called my doctor and we chatted agreeably for a few minutes, and I said I would just give the children their breakfast and wash up the dishes and then run over to the hospital, and he said that would be just fine and he’d plan to meet me later, then; the unspoken conviction between us was that I ought to be back in the fields before sundown.

I went into the kitchen and proceeded methodically to work, humming cheerfully and stopping occasionally to grab the back of a chair and hold my breath. My husband told me later that he found his cup and saucer (the one with “Father” written on it) in the oven, but I am inclined to believe that he was too upset to be a completely reliable reporter. My own recollection is of doing everything the way I have a thousand times before — school-morning short-cuts so familiar that I am hardly aware, usually, of doing them at all. The frying pan, for instance. My single immediate object was a cup of coffee, and I decided to heat up the coffee left from the night before, rather than take the time to make fresh; it seemed brilliantly logical to heat it in the frying pan because anyone knows that a broad shallow container will heat liquid faster than a tall narrow one, like the coffee pot. I will not try to deny, however, that it *looked* funny.

By the time the children came down everything seemed to be moving along handsomely; my son grimly got two glasses and filled them with fruit juice for his sister and himself. He offered me one, but I had no desire to eat, or in fact to do anything which might upset my precarious balance between two, and three, children, or to interrupt my morning's work for more than coffee, which I was still doggedly making in the frying pan. My husband came downstairs, sat in his usual place, said good-morning to the children, accepted the glass of fruit juice my son poured for him, and asked me brightly, "How do you feel?"

"Splendid," I said, making an enormous smile for all of them. "I'm doing wonderfully well."

"Good," he said. "How soon do you think we ought to leave?"

"Around noon, probably," I said. "Everything is fine, really."

My husband asked politely, "May I help you with breakfast?"

"No indeed," I said. I stopped to catch my breath and smiled reassuringly. "I feel *so* well," I said.

"Would you be offended," he said, still very politely, "if I took this egg out of my glass?"

"Certainly not," I said. "I'm sorry, I can't think how it got there."

"It's nothing at all," my husband said. "I was just thirsty."

They were all staring at me oddly, and I kept giving them my reassuring smile; I *did* feel splendid; my months of waiting were nearly over, my careful preparations had finally been brought to a purpose, tomorrow I would be wearing my yellow nightgown. “I’m so pleased,” I said.

I was slightly dizzy, perhaps. And there *were* pains, but they were authentic ones, not the feeble imitations I had been dreaming up the past few weeks. I patted my son on the head. “Well,” I said, in the tone I had used perhaps five hundred times in the last months. “Well, do we want a little boy or a little boy?”

“Won’t you sit down?” my husband said. He had the air of a man who expects that an explanation will somehow be given him for a series of extraordinary events in which he is unwillingly involved. “I think you ought to sit down,” he added urgently.

It was about then that I realized that he was right. I ought to sit down. As a matter of fact, I ought to go to the hospital, right now, immediately. I dropped my reassuring smile and the fork I had been carrying around with me.

“I’d better hurry,” I said inadequately.

My husband called the taxi and brought down my suitcase. The children were going to stay with friends, and one of the things I had planned to do was drop them off on my way to the hospital; now, however, I felt vitally that I had not the time. I began to talk fast.

“You’ll have to take care of the children,” I told my husband. “See that...” I stopped. I remember thinking with incredible clarity and speed. “See that they finish their breakfast,” I said. Pajamas on the line, I thought, school, cats, toothbrushes. Milkman. Overalls to be mended; laundry. “I ought to make a list,” I said vaguely. “Leave a note for the milkman tomorrow night. Soap, too. We need soap.”

"Yes, dear," my husband kept saying. "Yes dear yes dear."

The taxi arrived and suddenly I was saying good-by to the children. "See you later," my son said casually. "Have a good time."

"Bring me a present," my daughter added.

"Don't worry about a thing," my husband said.

"Now, don't you worry," I told him. "There's nothing to worry about."

"Everything will *be fine* I said. "Don't worry."

I waited for a good moment and then scrambled into the taxi without grace; I did not dare risk my reassuring smile on the taxi driver but I nodded to him briskly.

"I'll be with you in an hour," my husband said nervously. "And don't worry."

"Everything will be fine," I said. "Don't worry."

"Nothing to worry about," the taxi driver said to my husband, and we started off, my husband standing at the curb wringing his hands and the taxi tacking insanely from side to side of the road to avoid even the slightest bump.

I sat very still in the back seat, trying not to breathe. I had one arm lovingly around my suitcase, which held my yellow nightgown, and I tried to light a cigarette without using any muscles except those in my hands and my neck, and still not let go of my suitcase.

"Going to be a beautiful day," I said to the taxi driver at last. We had a twenty-minute trip ahead of us at least — much longer, if he continued his zigzag path. "Pretty warm for the time of year."

"Pretty warm yesterday, too," the taxi driver said.

"It was warm yesterday," I conceded, and stopped to catch my breath. The driver, who was obviously avoiding looking at me in the mirror, said a little bit hysterically, "Probably be warm tomorrow, too."

I waited for a minute, and then I was able to say, dubiously, “I don’t know as it will stay warm *that* long. Might cool off by tomorrow.”

“Well,” the taxi driver said, “it was sure warm *yesterday*.”

“Yesterday,” I said. “Yes, that was a warm day.”

“Going to be nice today, too,” the taxi driver said. I clutched my suitcase tighter and made some small sound — more like a yelp than anything else — and the taxi veered madly off to the left and then began to pick up speed with enthusiasm.

“Very warm indeed,” the driver babbled, leaning forward against the wheel. “Warmest day I ever saw for the time of year. Usually this time of year it’s colder. Yesterday it was *terribly*—”

“It was not,” I said. “It was freezing. I can see the tower of the hospital.”

“I remember thinking how warm it was,” the driver said. He turned into the hospital drive. “It was so warm I noticed it right away. ‘This is a warm day,’ I thought, that’s how warm it was.”

We pulled up with a magnificent flourish at the hospital entrance, and the driver skittered out of the front seat and came around and opened the door and took my arm.

“My wife had five,” he said. “I’ll take the suitcase, Miss. Five, and never a minute’s trouble with any of them.”

He rushed me in through the door and up to the desk. “Here,” he said to the desk clerk. “Pay me later,” he said to me, and fled.

“Name?” the desk clerk said to me politely, her pencil poised.

“Name,” I said vaguely. I remembered, and told her.

“Age?” she asked. “Sex? Occupation?”

“Writer,” I said.

“Housewife,” she said.

“Writer,” I said.

"I'll just put down housewife," she said. "Doctor? How many children?"

"Two," I said. "Up to now."

"Normal pregnancy?" she said. "Blood test? X-ray?"

"Look—" I said.

"Husband's name?" she said. "Address? Occupation?"

"Just put down housewife," I said. "I don't remember *his* name, really."

"Legitimate?"

"What?" I said.

"Is your husband the lather of this child? Do you have a husband?"

"Please," I said plaintively, "can I go on upstairs?"

"Well, *really*," she said, and sniffed. "You're *only* having a baby."

She waved delicately to a nurse, who took me by the same arm everybody else had been using that morning, and in the elevator this nurse was very nice. She asked me twice how I was feeling and said "Maternity?" to me politely as we left the elevator; I was carrying my own suitcase by then.

Two more nurses joined us upstairs; we made light conversation while I got into the hospital nightgown. The nurses had all been to some occupational party the night before and one of them had been simply a riot; she was still being a riot while I undressed, because every now and then one of the two other nurses would turn around to me and say, "Isn't she a riot, honestly?"

I made a few remarks, just to show that I too was light-hearted and not at all nervous; I commented laughingly on the hospital nightgown, and asked with amusement tinged with foreboding what was the apparatus they were wheeling in on the tray.

My doctor arrived about half an hour later; he had obviously had three cups of coffee and a good cigar; he patted me on the shoulder and said, "How do we feel?"

"Pretty well," I said, with an uneasy giggle that ended in a squawk. "How long do you suppose it will be before—"

"We don't need to worry about *that* for a while yet," the doctor said. He laughed pleasantly, and nodded to the nurses. They all bore down on me at once. One of them smoothed my pillow, one of them held my hand, and the third one stroked my forehead and said, "After all, you're *only* having a baby."

"Call me if you want me," the doctor said to the nurses as he left. "I'll be downstairs in the coffee shop."

"I'll call you if I need you," I told him ominously, and one of the nurses said in a honeyed voice, "Now, look, we don't want our husband to get all worried."

I opened one eye; my husband was sitting, suddenly, beside the bed. He looked as though he were trying not to scream. "They *told* me to come in here," he said. "I was trying to find the waiting room."

"The other end of the hall," I told him grimly. I pounded on the bell and the nurse came running. "Get him out of here," I said waving my head at my husband.

"They told me—" my husband began, looking miserably at the nurse "It's al-l-l-l-l-l right," the nurse said. She began to stroke my forehead again. "Hubby belongs right here."

"Either he goes or I go," I said.

The door slammed open and the doctor came in. "Heard you were here," he said jovially, shaking my husband's hand. "Look a little pale."

My husband smiled weakly.

"Never lost a father yet," the doctor said, and slapped him on the back. He turned to me. "How do we feel?" he said.

“Terrible,” I said, and the doctor laughed again. “Just on my way downstairs,” he said to my husband. “Come along?”

No one seemed, actually, to go or come that morning; I would open my eyes and they were there, open my eyes again and they were gone. This time, when I opened my eyes, a pleasant-faced nurse was standing beside me; she was swabbing my arm with a piece of cotton. Although I am ordinarily timid about hypodermics I welcomed this one with what was almost a genuine echo of my old reassuring smile. “Well, well,” I said to the nurse. “Sure glad to see *you*.”

“Sissy,” she said distinctly, and jabbed me in the arm.

“How soon will this wear off?” I asked her with deep suspicion; I am always afraid with nurses that they feel that the psychological effect of a hypodermic is enough, and that I am actually being inoculated with some useless, although probably harmless, concoction.

“You won’t even notice,” she said enigmatically, and left.

The hypodermic hit me suddenly, and I began to giggle about five minutes after she left. I was alone in the room, lying there giggling to myself, when I opened my eyes and there was a woman standing beside the bed. She was human, not a nurse; she was wearing a baggy blue bathrobe. “I’m across the hall,” she said. “I been hearing you.”

“I was laughing,” I said, with vast dignity.

“I heard you,” she said. “Tomorrow it might be me, maybe.”

“You here for a baby?”

“Someday,” she said gloomily. “I was here two weeks ago, I was having pains. I come in the morning and that night they said to me, ‘Go home, wait a while longer.’ So I went home, and I come again three days later, I was having pains. And they said to me, ‘Go home, wait a while longer.’ And so yesterday I come again, I was having pains. So far they let me stay.”

"That's too bad," I said.

"I got my mother there," she said. "She takes care of everything and sees the meals made, but she's beginning to think I got her there with false pretenses."

"That's too bad," I said. I began to pound the wall with my fists.

"Stop that," she said. "Somebody'll hear you. This is my third. The first two — nothing."

"This is *my* third," I said. "I don't care who hears me."

"My kids," she said. "Every time I come home they say to me, 'Where's the baby?' My mother too. My husband, he keeps driving me over and driving me back."

"They kept telling me the third was the easiest," I said. I began to giggle again.

"There you go," she said. "Laughing your head off. I wish *I* had something to laugh at."

She waved her hand at me and turned and went mournfully through the door. I opened my same weary eye and my husband was sitting comfortably in his chair. "I said," he was saying loudly, "I said, 'Do you mind if I read?'" He had the *New York Times* on his knee.

"Look," I said. "Do I have anything to read? Here I am, with nothing to do and no one to talk to and you sit there and read the *New York Times* right in front of me and here I am, with nothing—"

"How do we feel?" the doctor asked. He was suddenly much taller than before and the walls of the room were rocking distinctly.

"Doctor," I said, and I believe that my voice was a little louder than I intended it should be. "You better give me—"

He patted me on the hand and it was my husband instead of the doctor. "Stop yelling," he said.

“I’m *not* yelling,” I said. “I don’t like this any more. I’ve changed my mind, I don’t want any baby, I want to go home and forget the whole thing.”

“I know *just* how you feel,” he said.

My only answer was a word which certainly I knew that I knew, although I had never honestly expected to hear it spoken in my own ladylike voice “Stop yelling,” my husband said urgently. “*Please* stop saying that.”

I had the idea that I was perfectly conscious, and I looked at him with dignity. “Who is doing this,” I asked. “You or me?”

“It’s all right,” the doctor said. “We’re on our way.” The walls were moving along on either side of me and the woman in the blue bathrobe was waving from a doorway.

“She loved me for the dangers I had passed,” I said to the doctor, “and I loved her that she did pity them.”

“It’s all right, I tell you,” the doctor said. “Hold your breath.”

“Did he finish his *New York Times*?”

“Hours ago,” the doctor said.

“What’s he reading now?” I asked.

“The *Tribune*,” the doctor said. “Hold your breath.”

It was so unbelievably bright that I closed my eyes. “Such a lovely time,” I said to the doctor. “Thank you so much for asking me, I can’t tell you how I’ve enjoyed it. Next time you must come to our—”

“It’s a girl,” the doctor said.

“Sarah,” I said politely, as though I were introducing them.

I still thought I was perfectly conscious, and then I was. My husband was sitting beside the bed, smiling cheerfully.

“What happened to *you?*” I asked him. “No *Wall Street Journal?*”

“It’s a girl,” he said.

“I know,” I said. “I was there.”

I was in a pleasant, clean room. There was no doubt that it was all over; I could see my feet under the bedspread.

“It’s a girl,” I said to my husband.

The door opened and the doctor came in. “Well,” he said. “How do we feel?”

“Fine,” I said. “It’s a girl.”

“I know,” he said.

The door was still open and a face peered around it. My husband, the doctor, and I, all turned happily to look. It was the woman in the blue bathrobe.

“Had it yet?” I asked her.

“No,” she said. “You?”

“Yep,” I said. “You going home again?”

“Listen,” she said. “I been thinking. Home, the kids all yelling and my mother looking sad like she’s disappointed in me. Like I did something. My husband, every time he sees me jump he reaches for the car keys. My sister, she calls me every day and if I answer, the phone she hangs up. Here, I get three meals a day I don’t cook, I know all the nurses and I meet a lot of people going in and out. I figure I’d be a *fool* to go home. What was it, boy or girl?”

“Girl,” I said.”

“Girl,” she said. “They say the third’s the easiest.”

The Short Stories

Burlingame High School, California — where Jackson was educated as a girl

List of Short Stories in Chronological Order

THE INTOXICATED
THE DAEMON LOVER
LIKE MOTHER USED TO MAKE
TRIAL BY COMBAT
THE VILLAGER
MY LIFE WITH R. H. MACY
THE WITCH
THE RENEGADE
AFTER YOU, MY DEAR ALPHONSE
CHARLES
AFTERNOON IN LINEN
FLOWER GARDEN
DOROTHY AND MY GRANDMOTHER AND THE SAILORS
COLLOQUY
ELIZABETH
A FINE OLD FIRM
THE DUMMY
SEVEN TYPES OF AMBIGUITY
COME DANCE WITH ME IN IRELAND
OF COURSE
PILLAR OF SALT
MEN WITH THEIR BIG SHOES
THE TOOTH
GOT A LETTER FROM JIMMY

THE LOTTERY (VERSION 1)
Epilogue
JANICE
TOOTIE IN PEONAGE
A CAULIFLOWER IN HER HAIR
I KNOW WHO I LOVE
THE BEAUTIFUL STRANGER
THE SUMMER PEOPLE
ISLAND
A VISIT
THE ROCK
A DAY IN THE JUNGLE
PAJAMA PARTY
LOUISA, PLEASE COME HOME
THE LITTLE HOUSE
THE BUS
THREE LECTURES, WITH TWO STORIES
EXPERIENCE AND FICTION
THE NIGHT WE ALL HAD GRIPPE
BIOGRAPHY OF A STORY
THE LOTTERY (VERSION 2)
NOTES FOR A YOUNG WRITER
ON THE HOUSE
LITTLE OLD LADY IN GREAT NEED
WHEN THINGS GET DARK
WHISTLER’S GRANDMOTHER
FAMILY MAGICIAN
THE WISHING DIME

ABOUT TWO NICE PEOPLE
MRS. MELVILLE MAKES A PURCHASE
JOURNEY WITH A LADY; OR, THIS IS THE LIFE
THE MOST WONDERFUL THING
THE FRIENDS
ALONE IN A DEN OF CUBS
THE ORDER OF CHARLOTTE’S GOING
ONE ORDINARY DAY, WITH PEANUTS
THE MISSING GIRL
THE OMEN
THE VERY STRANGE HOUSE NEXT DOOR
A GREAT VOICE STILLED
ALL SHE SAID WAS YES
HOME
I. O. U.
THE POSSIBILITY OF EVIL
THE SMOKING ROOM
I DON’T KISS STRANGERS
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THE VERY HOT SUN IN BERMUDA
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DINNER FOR A GENTLEMAN
PARTY OF BOYS
JACK THE RIPPER
THE HONEYMOON OF MRS. SMITH (VERSION 1)
THE HONEYMOON OF MRS. SMITH (VERSION 2)
THE SISTER

ARCH-CRIMINAL
MRS. ANDERSON
COME TO THE FAIR
PORTRAIT
GNARLY THE KING OF THE JUNGLE
THE GOOD WIFE
DEVIL OF A TALE
THE MOUSE
MY GRANDMOTHER AND THE WORLD OF CATS
MAYBE IT WAS THE CAR
LOVERS MEETING
MY RECOLLECTIONS OF S. B. FAIRCHILD
DECK THE HALLS
LORD OF THE CASTLE
WHAT A THOUGHT
WHEN BARRY WAS SEVEN
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PERIOD PIECE
4-F PARTY
THE PARADISE
HOMECOMING
DAUGHTER, COME HOME
AS HIGH AS THE SKY
MURDER ON MISS LEDERER’S BIRTHDAY

PARANOIA
STILL LIFE WITH TEAPOT AND STUDENTS
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I CANNOT SING THE OLD SONGS
THE NEW MAID
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ROOT OF EVIL
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THE MAN IN THE WOODS
BEHOLD THE CHILD AMONG HIS NEWBORN BLISSES
THE THIRD BABY’S THE EASIEST

List of Short Stories in Alphabetical Order

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A CAULIFLOWER IN HER HAIR
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A GREAT VOICE STILLED
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TRIAL BY COMBAT
WHAT A THOUGHT
WHEN BARRY WAS SEVEN
WHEN THINGS GET DARK
WHISTLER’S GRANDMOTHER

The Children’s Books

Jackson attended Syracuse University from 1935, where she flourished both creatively and socially. Here she received her bachelor’s degree in journalism. While a student at Syracuse, she became involved with the campus literary magazine, through which she met her future husband, Stanley Edgar Hyman. While attending Syracuse, the university’s literary magazine published Jackson’s first story, “Janice”, about a teenager’s suicide attempt.

Jackson during her university studies

Jackson's husband, c. 1961

The Bad Children (1958)

A Play in One Act

FOR SEVEN CHILDREN, EXTRAS IF DESIRED

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CHARACTERS

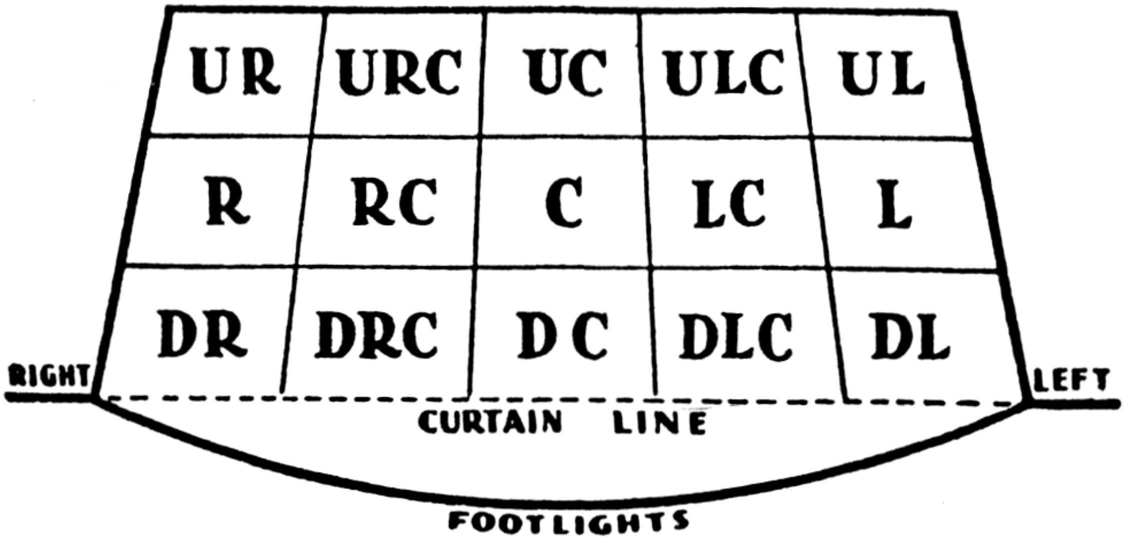
THE WITCH
THE ENCHANTER
HANSEL
GRETEL
MOTHER
FATHER
RABBIT
FOREST ANIMALS, *if desired*

PLACE: *A clearing in a forest.*

TIME: *Early morning, the twenty-seventh consecutive day of rain.*

STAGE POSITIONS

CHART OF STAGE POSITIONS



* * *

Upstage means away from the footlights, downstage means toward the footlights, and right and left are used with reference to the actor as he faces the audience. R means right, L means left, U means up, D means down, C means center, and these abbreviations are used in combination, as: U R for up right, R C for right center, D L C for *down left center,* etc. One will note that a position designated on the stage refers to a general territory, rather than to a given point.

NOTE: Before starting rehearsals, chalk off your stage or rehearsal space as indicated above in the *Chart of Stage Positions.* Then teach your actors the meanings and positions of these fundamental terms of stage movement by having them walk from one position to another until they are familiar with them. The use of these abbreviated terms in directing the play saves time, speeds up rehearsals, and reduces the amount of explanation the director has to give to his actors.

PROPERTIES

GENERAL: WITCH'S HOUSE, hollow tree, bench and long cloth, pebbles on ground, breakfast tray and quarter pound of butter (wrapped) beyond Witch's house, lunch tray, jar of mustard, kettle with lid and magic ingredients behind hollow tree, box of birdseed *off* D R.

MOTHER: Bundle of wood slung over her back.

FATHER: Bundle of wood slung over his back.

WITCH: Wand.

RABBIT; Straw hat and suitcase.

PRODUCTION NOTES

THE MUSIC FOR the songs in the play should be appropriate nursery rhyme tunes, or folk or well-known children’s songs. A single piano will provide sufficient accompaniment. If desired, in order to simplify production, the songs may be “talked.”

At rise of curtain, a second Rabbit, identical to the one that appears in the play, should be concealed under the long cloth that covers the bench at C stage. Just prior to the first entrance of Mother and Father, and after the Witch and the Enchanter hide behind the gingerbread house, the concealed Rabbit leaps from beneath the bench and hurries out D R. This Rabbit supposedly is the same one who was turned to butter by the Witch and served with the breakfast tray.

For added effect, a flashbulb can be used along with the flashes of light whenever the Witch changes the Rabbit to butter, birdseed, etc.

Nothing adds more to the polish of a production than the quick picking up of cues. Unless there is a definite reason for a pause, train your actors to come in with their speeches “on the heels,” so to speak, of the preceding speeches. When a production lags, audience interest likewise will lag.

It is always advisable during the last week of rehearsals to hold one or more sessions during which the actors merely sit around in a circle and go through lines only, with the express purpose of snapping up cues.

The Bad Children

* * *

SCENE: A CLEARING in a forest. There is a gingerbread-and-candy house U R, where the WITCH lives. A hollow tree, the home of the ENCHANTER, is “L. *At C stage is a bench, covered with a long cloth reaching to the ground. This bench is used variously during the course of the play as a table, a seat, or an incantation stove. If available, a forest background may be used*.]

AT RISE OF CURTAIN: It is early morning, the twenty-seventh consecutive day of rain, and the atmosphere is somewhat gloomy. The stage is empty. The WITCH *comes out of her house, stretching and yawning.]*

WITCH. Ah, there’s nothing like waking up on a good rainy day in the forest. Makes you glad to be alive. *[Calls.]* Fillybuster? *[Pause; then louder.]* Fiiiiiillybuster? ENCHANTER *[poking head out of tree, drearily]*. Well?... One of these days you’re going to wake me up in the middle of the night and I’m going to ——

WITCH. It’s morning. And I’m inviting you for breakfast.

ENCHANTER *[mollified now]*. What are we having?

WITCH *[coming R C]*. I’m not sure yet; it depends on what they’re having up at the castle, because I thought that rather than bother to cook anything myself I’d just enchant their breakfast down here. Wait a minute. *[Thinks, her hand to her forehead.]* I *believe* it’s griddle cakes and maple syrup and sausages and orange juice and coffee —

ENCHANTER. Well, wake me when it gets here. *[Starts to retire to his tree.]*

WITCH. Don’t be silly; I’m just waiting for them to put it on the table. *[Waits, thinking again, then goes to her gingerbread house, waves her magic wand around one corner of it, and returns with breakfast on a tray, which she sets on bench.]* Twenty-seven days of steady rain can certainly give you an appetite. *[Lifts dish cover.]* It was bacon, not sausages. And there’s plenty of coffee.

ENCHANTER *[who has approached bench eagerly]*. I like the castle coffee better than the stuff they serve over at the Duke’s palace. Somehow there’s more flavor to the castle coffee.

WITCH. The last time I enchanted their breakfast away, they sent a dragon after me. *[With tray in center of bench, WITCH sits right and ENCHANTER sits left of tray. They start to eat.]*

ENCHANTER. What happened?

WITCH *[nodding toward gingerbread house]*. He’s inside. I turned him into a violin but I never could learn to play him, so I hung him on the wall. I’ll show him to you some day.

ENCHANTER. There’s no butter.

WITCH *[annoyed]* That *always* happens when I take the castle breakfast. Somehow there’s something every time that careless kitchenmaid manages to forget when she sets the table. I’ve got a good mind to complain.

ENCHANTER *[turning away, arms folded]*. Well, I *won't* eat griddle cakes without butter.

[A RABBIT has entered D L.]

WITCH. All right, all right. Just a minute. *[Sees RABBIT.]* Hey, you — rabbit?

RABBIT *[pausing D L C]*, Yes?

WITCH *[rising, moving R C]*. Come over here, will you? I want you to do me a favor.

RABBIT *[suspiciously]*. So?

WITCH. Come on *over* here a minute, *[RABBIT moves slowly toward WITCH, who leads him into shadows back of her house.]* We need a quarter pound of butter for our griddle cakes —

RABBIT *[going reluctantly]*. So who has a quarter pound of butter?

WITCH. This doesn't hurt. And I promise I'll turn you right back after breakfast. *[Flash of light in shadows behind house; WITCH comes back with square of wrapped butter.]* There. I hate to be always jumping up from the table to get things they forgot. *[Sits on bench. Mollified, ENCHANTER begins to eat again."]*

ENCHANTER. You just don't know the tricks of the trade. Now *I* get most of my meals from the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel in New York. They know how to set a table *there.*

WITCH. But with daylight saving you have to wait so long for the dining room to open. No, I like my way best.

ENCHANTER. Listen, you want to take my advice. I was enchanting when you weren't even *born.* You just don't *understand* this magic business.

WITCH. I do so. I am, if you please, the most modern kind of witch you can get. It used to be that they had witches who just got into the work by accident — nothing else they could find to do, or they got tired of being nice to people, or something. These days that's all been changed. Now you've got to study, go to college, take special courses. Why, if I even began to tell you the things I had to take in college just to get to be a little old forest witch you'd be amazed. You'd be amazed, I can tell you — things you probably never even heard of, I had to take. *[Starts to sing "Witch's Song." On second verse she rises and moves R C, where she continues song. See production notes.]*

WITCH'S SONG

WITCH.

I know all kinds of things beginning with Z,
And beginning with A and beginning with P;
I know how to spell dinosaur, cabbage, and g-nu,
And how to spell Miss-iss-iss-iss-ippi, too.
I know how to turn evil omens to good,
And how to make plastic things out of plain wood,
And how to tame gorgons and scramble roc's eggs,
And how to make monsters with ninety-nine legs.
I can say abracadabra, I can do anagrams,

I can magically get an A-plus in exams.
I can turn men to ice cream, I can turn them to fudge,
I can brew a love potion and settle a grudge.
I'm a magical witch, I can do anything —
I can jitterbug, polka, play banjo, or sing.
I could stand on my head if I wanted to try,
I can paralyze wrestlers with my evil eye.
I can pass trigonometry, Latin, and shop,
I can sing *Traviata,* tenor, or bop;
I could pitch for the Giants, or play second sack,
I can fly to the moon, and get myself back.
[spoken] Not like the Russians.
I know all kinds of things beginning with Z,
Like Zaran wrap, hot lunch, and Zassafras tea.
I can spell without letters, and sing out of key;
I'm a magical witch; don't you wish you were me?

ENCHANTER *[as WITCH sits again on bench],* A college degree's not everything, dearie. Back when I was starting it was *really* rough — if you didn't have a lead shield to keep *off* rivals you couldn't even *think* of hanging up your shingle. Why, I remember a fellow I used to know, an albatross —

WITCH. There's a lot less mixing up of spells and hexing the wrong people, now we witches know what we're doing. Why, we use nothing but *scientifically tested ingredients* nowadays — just like they tell you on television.

ENCHANTER. I just want to know one thing. Just for instance — what have you got in your fancy test tubes that will do the work of old-fashioned henbane?

WITCH *[scornfully]*. Half a dozen things. There's SH20PA4CGN to the tenth power. *[Triumphantly.]* What about *that?*

ENCHANTER *[snorting]*. Chemicals! I'd just like to see you pull off just one good old-style cattle-rot with nothing but chemicals.

WITCH. Why, I can magic rings around *you,* you old fool!

ENCHANTER. You couldn't magic rings around a mushroom. Amateur stuff — you learned it in *school.*

WITCH *[rising, leaning toward him]*. Would you like to see me turn you right now into a muffin tin?

ENCHANTER *[rising, leaning toward her]*. You just try it and you'll find yourself turned into a little teensy hoppy toad.

WITCH. I'll change you into a guitar and play rock and roll on you.

ENCHANTER. I'll change you into a comic book and tear out all your pages.

WITCH *[as they lean closer and closer to each other, until their faces almost touch]*. I'll change you into a radio and run you all day long.

ENCHANTER. I'll change you into a comb and break out all your teeth.

WITCH. I'll change you into a vitamin pill and swallow you whole.

ENCHANTER. I'll change you into a kite and fly you into a tree.

VOICE *[under bench, supposedly from butter]*. Isn't there anyone around here who can change me back into a rabbit?

WITCH. Shh! Someone's coming. *[Picks up tray, WITCH and ENCHANTER hide behind gingerbread house, threatening one another with gestures, RABBIT leaps from beneath bench and hurries out D R.]*

[FATHER enters L, followed by MOTHER, FATHER and MOTHER come in front of bench and sing their duet.]

FATHER-MOTHER DUET

FATHER.

I walked the floor at three A.M.
In spite of my fatigue;
I had no doubts about joining Boy Scouts
And I ran the Little League.
I paid the dough for the Junior Prom,
Bought padlocks for the bikes;
I learned to say "Parley-vous Français"
And I went on all-night hikes.
Oh, I've been a wonderful father,
I've done all it said in the books;
I've been a True Dad, and, man, I've been had —
Those crooks.

MOTHER.

I saw the Gym Exhibit Thirty-seven times;

I mended the wreck that she made in Home Ec;
I paid off the March of Dimes.
I bought my Girl Scout cookies;
I planted the garden she planned;
I went to the play sponsored by P.T.A.
And boosted the High School Band.
Oh, I've been a wonderful mother.
I've read all the columns, and now
I've done all they said, I'd be better off dead —
And how.

BOTH.
Oh, we have been wonderful parents,
With study and practice and hopes (what dopes);
We've slaved and we've saved, and we have behaved;
And what are we now, for our time and our prayers
And our science fairs
And cleaner airs
And Papa Bears
And anxious cares?
Squares.

MOTHER *[calling toward L]*. Come on, children, we've got work to do.

[Now HANSEL and GRETEL come in L, reluctantly. They cross LC.]

GRETEL. Why do we *always* have to work?

HANSEL. Why can't we play all day the way *we* want to?

GRETEL *[stamping her foot].* I haaaaaate work!

[The RABBIT has come in D R, pausing there.]

HANSEL *[suddenly, picking up a rock].* Watch me throw this rock at that rabbit standing there.

RABBIT. It's too much! It is just simply too *much!* I am getting out of this forest, right now, today, this instant. First, I have to be a quarter pound of butter for a breakfast for a witch, and now an ugly, silly, rude-talking child comes along to throw rocks at me. No! No rabbit needs to put up with this kind of thing — I'm telling you right now; *no rabbit* needs to put up with this kind of thing for one single *instant. [Marches across stage to D L and turns.]* I'm going back to my old home in Mr. MacGregor's cabbage patch. I'm telling you all right now — *[Shouting]* — and this is positively my last warning to you — this is one rabbit who isn't going to stand for this kind of treatment for *one more day. Do you hear me? One more day. [Stomps out D L.]*

FATHER. Children? Hansel, why do you want to hurt the forest animals? Aren't they our friends?

[The RABBIT suddenly pops in DL again.]

RABBIT. Friends with that child I am *not.*

HANSEL. I hate animals! *[Threatens RABBIT with rock.]* Get out of here, you silly old rabbit.

RABBIT *[fairly seething].* Oh, to be a bear! If only for *three minutes,* oooooooh, to be a *bear,* or *anything* with teeth! *[Rushes out D L in a fit of* *frustration.]*

FATHER *[moving to children].* The animals have never hurt you, Hansel. We have been living in the forest for so long that many of the animals have become our friends.

GRETEL *[moving R C].* Dirty old rabbits!

HANSEL. I wish I could shoot them all! *[MOTHER now joins FATHER.]*

GRETEL. I wish I could go hoooooooome.

HANSEL *[moving to bench].* I'm sick of gathering wood in the forest. You always make us work. *[Sits on bench.]*

GRETEL. The *other* kids get to play all day. *[Sits on bench beside HANSEL.]*

MOTHER *[moving behind bench].* Why, Gretel, you know perfectly well that the other children help their dear, dear mommies and daddies. Remember little Frieda, who bakes almost as well as her mother, and Karl, who helps his father shoe the horses —

HANSEL. Who cares about horses? I wish I had a little foreign sports car.

GRETEL. And who cares about Frieda and Karl? They're no fun — all they do is work; we want to have *fun.* FATHER *[angrily, raising his voice — and hand].* Now you two just listen to me —

MOTHER. Gently, dear. Don't lose your temper. Remember, they're only children — reason with them. FATHER *[pacing D L, fuming].* I'd sooner reason with a plague of locusts — I'd sooner reason with a — All right.

[Calmer now; moves toward bench.] I'm sorry, my dear little children, but we have to gather our nice wood for today. Unless we all get together and gather our nice, nice wood for today we won't have any nice money, and if we don't have any nice, nice money we won't be able to buy you nice, nice food and — *[Voice rising.]* — nice, nice clothes and nice, nice toys and it would serve you —

GRETEL. I *hate* my toys. Everyone else has *much* nicer toys.

HANSEL. You *never* get us *anything* we want.

GRETEL. All we do is come out with you and pick up dirty old pieces of wood, and then when we want some little thing you *always* say no. Like when we wanted to go out on Hallowe'en and burn down people's barns, you wouldn't let us, and went and made us stay home.

HANSEL. Yeah. You never let us do *anything.*

FATHER *[tensely, to MOTHER, trying to control himself],* I am going to gather wood. It is my job; I am a wood-gatherer. I am going to gather wood. *[Starts R.]* I will not speak another word; I am going to gather my wood. *[Storms out R, almost shouting last words.]*

MOTHER *[hopefully, moving R C]*. Come along, dear children. Maybe we can finish early today and then we can all cook marshmallows over a campfire —

HANSEL *[refusing to budge, arms folded],* I *hate* marshmallows.

GRETEL. Who likes marshmallows? *[Starts to wail.]* I want to go hoooome.

HANSEL. Crybaby, *[MOTHER shrugs hopelessly and wanders out R, after FATHER.]*

GRETEL. I am *not* a crybaby, you big silly pig!

HANSEL. I am not a big silly pig — you are a crybaby. *[Tunefully.]*

GRETEL *[starting to pick up tune],* I am not.

HANSEL. You are so.

GRETEL. I am not.

HANSEL. You are so.

GRETEL. I am not.

HANSEL. You are so.

GRETEL. I am not. *[They fall gradually into musical introduction of "The Echo Song," moving into it naturally from their quarrel; this song is in two parts, one remark following the other, both singing last line, with appropriate gestures.]*

THE ECHO SONG

HANSEL *and* GRETEL.

You are so... I am not;

You're mean... You're mean;

Nyah to you... Nyah to you;

I won't play with you.

You're bad... You're bad;

You’re a pig... You’re a pig;
Meow... Meow;
I won’t play with you.

[The ENCHANTER, upstage with WITCH, is trying desperately to sneak into his hollow tree.]

WITCH. Shh! *[ENCHANTER, in is haste, falls; there is a great crash; HANSEL and GRETEL look around.]* I hope you broke your magic wand, *[ENCHANTER scrambles to his feet and manages to disappear in his hollow tree.]*

GRETEL. Oh — look! Look at the little house! *[She and HANSEL jump up from bench.]*

WITCH *[to ENCHANTER]*. Any time I want to hide, remind me to take a wizard with me.

GRETEL *[rushing to gingerbread house, followed by HANSEL]*. Hansel, it’s gingerbread! *[HANSEL and GRETEL eat greedily, pulling off bricks, vines, window frames, etc.]*

WITCH *[coming to them]*. Now you just wait a minute here, young people. Just what do you think you’re doing?

HANSEL. We’re eating this little house, stupid.

WITCH. That house happens to be private property, and I’ll thank you to leave it alone.

GRETEL. Don’t try to tell *us* what to do. You’re not *our* boss.

WITCH. That is my house and you had better get away from it, and fast.

HANSEL *[turning to her]*. Say, aren't you a witch?

WITCH *[pleased]*, I am. *[Struts C in front of bench, happy to be recognized.]*

HANSEL *[as he and GRETEL come R C].* Then aren't you supposed to catch us? And turn us into gingerbread? WITCH *[shuddering].* Don't believe everything you hear, son. You just leave my house alone. That gingerbread stuff is all out of date.

GRETEL. You are so an old witch, and you're supposed to catch us and try to turn us into gingerbread but we get away.

HANSEL. And I push you into the oven and you bake. *[Happily, running to WITCH, tugging at her sleeve.]* Come on, let's get started.

WITCH *[pulling away].* Listen. I can tell you one thing for sure about this gingerbread jazz. No witch ever lived has *got* to make gingerbread if she doesn't want to, and especially not out of people she has taken a strong immediate personal dislike to. What I mean is — I wouldn't make gingerbread out of you two if you were the last children on earth. Why, even if I were *starving* for one little crumb of gingerbread and had no other way of getting any, I wouldn't —

HANSEL. But you've *got* to.

WITCH *[pacing D L, turning].* Who *says* I've got to? Gingerbread is made out of nice things, like sugar and molasses and spices and butter, and what makes you think that you two would ever look to anyone like first-class ingredients?

HANSEL. We don’t care, anyway — we don’t get *really* turned to gingerbread; *you’re* the one gets pushed in the oven.

WITCH *[controlling herself]*. I’ll tell you what. *[Moves toward them again.]* You just behave yourselves and get away from my house and run along out of the forest, and we’ll forget the whole thing.

GRETEL. Oh, no, we won’t! We’ve got a *right* to eat this house. *[Runs up to house and starts eating again, HANSEL follows and does likewise.]* And you can just go ahead and catch us if you can, because *everyone* knows what is going to happen *then,* and *I* get to watch Hansel push you in the oven, and everything.

WITCH *[crossing over to them],* I can tell you right now, I don’t want any part of you; I just want you to go away from here. I’ll give you my whole front door if you go.

HANSEL. Why should we go? We can stay here and eat the whole house.

WITCH *[stamping her foot].* Now that is enough. I happen to be a very patient kind of witch, but you have made me angry. I tried to tell you nicely, but you wouldn’t listen. I am going to give you one last fair chance — please go away from my house and leave me alone.

HANSEL *[eating away at house]*. Silly old witch!

GRETEL *[likewise]*. We’ll do as we please.

WITCH. Well, nothing could be fairer than that. *[Sweetly.]* I am afraid that you two darling children are going to have a great big surprise.

HANSEL *[eagerly]*. More candy?

GRETEL. More gingerbread?

WITCH. Just step inside my little house and see what you find there.... *[Pushes HANSEL and GRETEL quickly inside and slams door on them.]* Oh, dear!

HANSEL *[from inside].* Oh, Gretel — look. She keeps ice cream cooking on the stove. *[Following dialogue between HANSEL and GRETEL comes from inside house.]*

GRETEL. And her sewing basket is full of cotton candy.

HANSEL. *I* want that.

GRETEL. You can’t have it — it’s mine.

HANSEL. I can so have it.

GRETEL. I saw it first.

HANSEL. And I’ll take it if I want it.

GRETEL *[screaming],* I want it, I want it, I want it, I want it, I want it — *[Crash.] Now* see what you’ve done.

HANSEL. I never did — you did it yourself.

GRETEL. I did not.

HANSEL. You did so.

GRETEL. I did not.

HANSEL. You did so. *[Quarrel again fades away into "The Echo Song," from inside house.]*

[As the children sing, the ENCHANTER *sneaks out of his hollow tree and crosses to the* WITCH *by the house. He and the* WITCH *listen appalled, and then sing the second verse with the children; they are all four singing at once, two singing the children's part and two singing the grownup*

THE ECHO SONG

HANSEL *and* GRETEL *[inside house]*.

I did not... You did so;

You're bad... You're bad;

You're a beast... You're a beast;

I won't play with you.

Nyah, Nyah... Nyah to you;

Meow, meow... Meow to you;

You're a rat... You're a rat;

I won't play with you

WITCH *and* ENCHANTER *[simultaneously]*.

Children calling to and fro,

Children calling... children calling;

Little voices calling... calling;

Calling sweet and low.

Children laughing, dancing, singing,

Happy children, sweet and gay;

Children calling... children calling,

All come out and play.

HANSEL *and* GRETEL *[inside house].*

You're mean... You're mean;

Go away... Go away;

You're nasty... You're nasty;

I won't play with you.

[HANSEL'S and GRETEL'S voices fade away.]

WITCH *[to ENCHANTER]*. Sometimes I get so tired of these people and their fairy stories — just look at the trouble I'm in now. I don't want anything to do with those children — I just want them to go home. *[Moves C.]*

ENCHANTER *[coming R C]*. You might turn them into squirrels and let them go.

WITCH *[sitting on bench, perplexed]*. There are enough bad-tempered squirrels in the forest now. Anyway, if the boy has been tormenting the forest animals it would be very wrong of me to turn them into anything small; can you imagine what would happen if the animals had a chance at them? Besides, I think that no matter what I did, those two children would still be ugly and mean. No, the only thing I can do with them is send them home again somehow.

ENCHANTER *[sitting beside WITCH]*. They're pretty far from home. They might get lost. The forest is a bad place to be lost in, especially if you’re not well liked around here to start with, and if they get lost at night it might be very uncomfortable for them.

WITCH. I suppose the wisest thing for me to do is wait until their parents come back along this way on their way home. Then I can give the children back and everything will be all right.

ENCHANTER. Easily the wisest thing to do. *[Rises.]* Meanwhile, about this question of who has the better magic ——

WITCH. Do you really dare to argue with me about that again? *[ENCHANTER moves R C and sings “Mean Old Wizard Blues.”]*

MEAN OLD WIZARD BLUES

ENCHANTER.

I want a rich witch, baby; no others need apply —
I want a rich witch, baby; no others need apply —
I’m a mean old wizard, got a right to steal and lie.
Got no enchantments make a pretty girl turn her head —
Got no enchantments make a pretty girl turn her head —
Got no enchantments — might as well be dead.
Mean old wizard, living in a hollow tree —
Mean old wizard, living in a hollow tree —
If you’re not a rich witch, baby, then you don’t want me.

WITCH. If you’re such a fine wizard, why don’t you invite me to lunch?

ENCHANTER *[unhappily]*. My treat?

WITCH. Yes. I’d like two cheeseburgers, an order of French fries, a lettuce and tomato salad with French dressing, and a chocolate malted.

ENCHANTER *[more unhappy].* Of course. Just wait until I can conjure up a diner somewhere with curb service. *[Goes up to hollow tree.]*

WITCH *[calling over her shoulder].* And make that a banana split for dessert.

ENCHANTER *[unhappier still].* Anything you say, madam. When I am forced to invite a lady to lunch I always make a point of serving her anything she likes. Onion on those cheeseburgers?

WITCH. Relish, thanks.

ENCHANTER. Of course. *[Makes some magic motions behind hollow tree; then he returns with lunch tray.]* Nothing like a picnic lunch out in the open air, I always say. *[Puts tray down on bench.]*

WITCH *[looking],* I thought I said mustard.

ENCHANTER. Sorry. I guess there *is* no mustard.

WITCH. Where’s that rabbit?

ENCHANTER *[hastily].* Never mind. I’ve got some mustard in my tree. I’ll get it right away. *[Hurries to his tree, WITCH eats huge bites; ENCHANTER returns with a jar of mustard.] There* you are. Salad all right?

WITCH. I wanted Russian dressing, but this will do.

ENCHANTER *[as he sits opposite WITCH and starts to eat],* I do love French fries.

WITCH. You know, I never thought of it in time. Why didn't I turn those two unpleasant children into cheeseburgers?

ENCHANTER. Because no one would eat them, that's why.

WITCH. But suppose I turned my violin back into a dragon —

ENCHANTER *[emphatically].* Wouldn't do. Even dragons have *some* sense. Only one dragon I ever knew who would eat just anything. Back in Kansas City, I knew this dragon, and *he* would eat *anything.* Old rags, and hornet nests, and paper boxes full of firecrackers — I tell you, you couldn't put anything near his reach but what that dragon would gobble it up. Why, I remember one time when I was doing a magic act and had to saw a lady in half and that dragon —

WITCH. Shh. I think they're coming. Listen.

MOTHER *and* FATHER *[off R, singing].* Oh, we have been wonderful parents.

WITCH *[shaking her head sympathetically].* Those poor people. You can tell from their happy voices that they think the children are gone for good.

ENCHANTER. It's really cruel to make them take the children back. Can't we think of something else?

WITCH. No, ohhhhhh, no. I'm not going to get myself stuck with a pair of mean, squabbling children.

[MOTHER and FATHER enter R. They seem rather jubilant.]

WITCH *[coming R C, graciously],* I beg your pardon, kind people...

FATHER. How do you do, madam. MOTHER. Good evening, charming lady.

WITCH *[aside, to ENCHANTER, still seated on bench],* I feel terrible. They're so polite, and what a mean thing I'm going to do to them. *[To MOTHER and FATHER.]* Excuse me, pleasant people. Have you lost a pair of children? *[MOTHER and FATHER look at one another, horrified, and shake their heads frantically.]*

MOTHER. Oh, no! No, no, no! No, we haven't! Why?

FATHER *[vaguely]*. Children? What are children?

MOTHER. Certainly not. If we had any children we certainly wouldn't lose them. Oh, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no...

FATHER. I'm sure you have the wrong people. Good night. *[Quickly takes MOTHER'S arm and pulls her with him as he moves past WITCH toward L. WITCH moves after them and stops them at L C.]*

WITCH. I'm really awfully sorry. But they are your children, and you've simply got to take them back.

MOTHER *[pleadingly]*. Please, nice witch, you keep them. Think how much help they'll be in your wicked magic. They can help you do evil spells, I'm sure, and then if you really want to wish terribly bad luck on someone, just think how useful they'll be.

FATHER. They are just about all the equipment *any* witch needs.

WITCH. No. I am really very sorry to have to tell you this, but I cannot use them. I may be a witch, but I have my standards, too, you know.

MOTHER *[with a sigh]*. I was kind of afraid you would feel that way.

FATHER *[hopefully]*. Are there any other witches who are not as particular as you are?

MOTHER. *Please* don't make us take them back. We were just thinking about what a good time we'd have, now they are gone. We're going to have fried chicken for dinner every night and w*e* are going to eat the drumsticks.

FATHER. And butterscotch pudding, and *we* get the second helpings.

MOTHER. And we'll gather our wood so much faster without those children whining at us and throwing rocks at the forest animals.

FATHER. And they won't wake us early in the morning with their quarreling.

MOTHER. And when I'm making dinner, no one will come into the kitchen and howl, "Pleeeeeeeeeeeeese can I have a cooooooooooooookie?"

WITCH *[shivering]*. It's no use. *[Paces D R, turns.]* I know how you feel and I'm just as sorry as I can be, but after all they *are* your children, and I can't do a thing. I'll be *glad* to turn them into gingerbread for you if I could, but I'll tell you the truth — I just simply couldn't bring myself to say the charm, not over those two badly-behaved children.

MOTHER *[moving toward WITCH]*. But maybe they might be good for something else — rock cookies, maybe? *[WITCH shakes her head.]* Or pound cake? *[WITCH shakes her head again.]*

WITCH. I very much doubt if I could turn those two into cod liver oil.

FATHER *[coming toward WITCH]*. But just a minute, now. Seems to me that those children came through this forest clearing, didn't they? *[WITCH nods her head.']* And they never got any farther than this, did they? *[WITCH shakes head.]* So they must have been stolen, weren't they? *[WITCH nods head.]* And if they were stolen, who stole them? *[WITCH starts to nod head, then stops.]* Why, a wicked witch stole them, that's who.

WITCH *[aghast]*. *Stole* them? Stole *those* children? Why, man, you listen to me —

FATHER. No, *you* listen to *me.* You went and stole our two dear little children and you've got them locked up somewhere — *[Quickly.]* — but don't tell me where! *[Paces L C, with air of sadness, MOTHER trailing after him in same manner.]* And I'm just terribly sad because my dear little children have been stolen by a wicked witch, but of course I am afraid of wicked witches myself, and so there's nothing I can do except get away as quickly as I can, and I'm sorry for you, you wicked old witch, but I am going to go home just as fast as I can run, and *you* can stay here and worry about those two dear children. Come, wife. *[Starts off L, MOTHER tagging after him.]*

ENCHANTER *[has been listening intently, turning from one speaker to another, and nodding]*. Well, I hope everything comes out all right. I'm going back to bed. Good afternoon, all. *[Heads quickly for his tree and disappears.]*

WITCH *[seeing herself being abandoned to the children]. Wait, wait! [Takes FATHER by sleeve just as he is leaving.]* Look, kind woodcutter. I never in all my life did steal anything, much less your two little children. Stealing is dishonest, and whatever else a witch may be, she is like a Boy Scout in that a witch is honest. I am a witch and I am honest, and stealing is out. I simply do not steal. *[Moves C.]* As a matter of fact, I am going to reform right now. I never stole anything in my life, but right now I am going to give back everything I ever happened to get by accident, kind of.

MOTHER *[moving toward WITCH]*. HOW do you get things by accident, kind of?

WITCH *[vaguely]*. Oh, you just wander by and things kind of follow you, kind of. Every time I clean out my closets or the back porch or the toy boxes, I find a lot of things I didn't really know I had, kind of. There's a nice pop-up toaster I just happened to notice one day when I was delivering a spell up at the castle. I've been meaning to take that back, first chance I got. And the duke's vacuum cleaner... MOTHER *[to FATHER]*, I almost wish that I were a witch. It certainly looks like it would be the only way I'd ever get a vacuum cleaner; I keep asking you and asking you —

FATHER *[joining MOTHER]*. And I keep telling you and telling you that with wood selling for what it does these days, it will be a good long time before we can even pay up the back rent on our hut in the forest, much less go in for vacuum cleaners.

WITCH *[moving R C, turning]*. And then you know what just stuck to my fingers, one day? That concrete swimming pool from the palace over on the other side of the mountain. I just don't know how I happened to bring home that concrete swimming pool. It's got a diving board and all. Now, that's going to be something to take back. *[Thinks.]* It's going to be a long hard pull up the mountain with that swimming pool. Maybe they haven't missed it yet. Maybe I don't need to bother taking that back right away.

MOTHER. Haven't you heard that crime does not pay?

WITCH. Yes, but witchcraft does. *[Grins.]* There are ups and downs in every business, of course, and by downs I mean plain bad breaks like those two children of yours. But generally speaking, the witch game is quite a nice little thing to get into. I wouldn't recommend it for just *any* girl, of course. You need talent, just like in everything else. Talent and a lot of hard work. And, of course, you have to be born with the witch personality....

MOTHER *[slyly moving toward her]*. Now you take my little Gretel —

WITCH *[recovering, backing away slightly]*. No, *indeedy.* I wouldn't take your little Gretel if you threw in four wishing rings and a left-handed pitcher.

MOTHER. Listen, Mrs. Witch. Isn't there some charm you can do that will — well — I don't want to sound like I'm criticizing my own children, but — isn't there *anything* you can do that might make them a little bit — well — *nicer?*

WITCH *[firmly]*. No magic *I* know.

FATHER *[pacing D L, turning]*. How about that Enchanter? Does he know any?

WITCH *[disdainfully]*. Him? He couldn't even turn water into ginger ale.

FATHER. But there must be *some* thing. There must be some magic somewhere.

WITCH *[pacing D L, turning]*. If this is the kind of thing I'm going to meet in this forest, I can tell you right now I'm going to give up being a witch and find some other line of work. *[Horrible face, facing front.]* Maybe I'll be a school principal.

MOTHER *[moving L C]*. We'll send Hansel and Gretel to your school.

WITCH *[quickly]*. Then I'll open a movie theatre.

FATHER *[joining MOTHER]*. We'll send Hansel and Gretel every Saturday afternoon.

WITCH. Then I'll go on television. They can't catch me there.

MOTHER *[doubtfully]*. Do you think you might be on a quiz program?

WITCH. Of course. Of course, that's it! *[Moves back to C.]* Now let me see. What do I know an awful lot about?

FATHER. I think I'll just step over and ask that Enchanter if he can't think of something to do with those children. *[Moves toward tree.]* After all, with *his* kind of magic he doesn't need to be on television.

WITCH *[dreaming]*. Western movies — I know a whole lot about Western movies, and I'm quick on the draw, too. Or popular songs: I can sing "Yes, We Have No Bananas," and "Rain, Rain, Go Away."

FATHER *[who has come L C again]*. Too bad. A very, very, very close friend of mine is the head of the "Sixty-Four-Million-Pieces-of-Gold" program. I just wish I could do something for you.

WITCH *[eagerly, crossing to FATHER]*. Can you get me on television? Can you? *[Clutches FATHER'S arm.]* Can you? I can do magic tricks — I can dance — sing — I even know a lot of fairy tales; I used to see a lot of the folks that hung around fairy tales — I can tell jokes —

FATHER *[breaking away, moving R C]*. Well, I certainly don't think I ought to do a favor for *you* if you won't do some little unimportant thing for *me.*

WITCH *[tagging after him],* I tell you there's no magic ever made could turn those two children of yours nice.

MOTHER. Then turn them into some other kind of thing. They couldn't be *worse. [Groans.]* Listen. There they go again. *[HANSEL and GRETEL, inside house, are heard: "I did not"— "You did so"— "I did not"— "You did so" — etc.]*

WITCH *[shuddering].* You see, the problem is that no matter what I turn them into they would be helpless to defend themselves against the enemies they've made in the forest. And of course I wouldn't want them to get hurt, so I *can't* just change them into something and let them go.

[The ENCHANTER pokes his head out of the tree.]

ENCHANTER. How can a person sleep with all this racket? You still worrying about those children? Why not turn them into valentines and mail them? *[Disappears inside tree again.]*

WITCH. That's it — that's it! *Lovebirds!* I'll turn them into lovebirds!

MOTHER *[joining WITCH and FATHER at RC]*. Wonderful — if they'll turn!

FATHER. Will it work?

WITCH. All my spells work, and I'll thank you not to make any cracks. *[Calls.]* Fillybuster? ENCHANTER *[head out of tree]*. Again?

WITCH. I need the help of your old-fashioned magic. This kind of thing takes four hands.

ENCHANTER. I won't meddle with any of your new-fangled chemicals. *[Comes down from tree to C stage.]*

WITCH *[embarrassed, moving C]*. Well, as a matter of fact, I can't get into my house. Those two children are inside it, and most of my magic is there in the cupboards. So I'll have to borrow some magic stuff from you, if you don't mind. Will you lend me your magic chalk? I'll give you some back just as soon as I can get it from my house. And some bats' wings if you have any, and a few little pieces of mandrake, and if you've got any sapphire dust I can use that.

ENCHANTER. No sapphire dust. You remember a week or so ago I was trying to magic up a drive-in movie in my tree? Well, it took all my sapphire dust, and even *then* it didn't work.

WITCH. You must have been using stale sapphire dust; that stuff won’t keep unless you put it in the refrigerator.

ENCHANTER *[sullenly]*. My refrigerator broke down when I left the cage door open and my basilisk got away — I was using that fellow for everything — I didn’t have any ice, my radio wouldn’t work, and I missed “The Lone Ranger,” and even my *waffle iron* wouldn’t heat up. You get so *dependent* on a basilisk, and then when you get an unreliable one —

WITCH. Will you ever stop complaining? As soon as I can get in my house I’ll bring you over some ice cubes, but meanwhile if you have no sapphire dust I’ll try to think of something else. Powdered pebbles. *[Picks up some pebbles from ground, and turns to MOTHER and FATHER.]* You two get to work and hammer some of those pebbles into powder; use only the white pebbles. *[Hands pebbles to MOTHER and FATHER, then turns to ENCHANTER.]* Have you got a big kettle?

ENCHANTER *[sarcastically]*. Don’t you want my collection of cereal box tops? I was going to get a ray gun. *[As scene continues he crosses behind tree and brings kettle to C. MOTHER and FATHER, meanwhile, have moved R, their backs to audience, where they supposedly are pounding pebbles into powder.]*

WITCH. Don’t be mean. I need a big kettle, and something to stir it with.

ENCHANTER. My magic wand?

WITCH. We modern witches use rocket power, thanks. Now I think we’ve got just about everything except birdseed.

ENCHANTER. No birdseed. *[Moves back and forth to tree several times bringing "magic stuff" to WITCH.]*

WITCH. Well, we can't turn them into lovebirds without birdseed. Where's that rabbit?

[At that moment the RABBIT, wearing a straw hat and carrying a suitcase, enters D L quickly, traveling fast in the direction of D R.]

RABBIT. Oh, no, oh, no! I'm on my way, baby —

WITCH *[running after him]*. Foolish creature; it's only a little bit of birdseed and I promise I'll change you right back.

RABBIT. But I told my friends and relations I'd be there by Tuesday.

WITCH. It won't take long. *[Pulls at RABBIT as he goes out D R.]* Come *on!* Do you think you're the only one who's in a hurry? *[Flash off D R; WITCH returns with box of birdseed.]* Those rabbits are getting so disagreeable — they never like to do good deeds any more.

MOTHER *[coming C with FATHER]*. You can take our wood to build the fire. *[Hands powdered pebbles to WITCH.]*

ENCHANTER. You'll *never* get it to work that way — that's what comes of a college education. Who ever heard of a six-sided pentacle?

WITCH. This is the way we learned it in spell-casting class. I got an A in the course, I'll have you know, and an A on my experiment notebook. Stand back, there. *[Others stand back.]*

ENCHANTER. Well, if it doesn't work, don't blame *me.* You want me to drop the mandrake in the pot now?

WITCH. Is it boiling?

ENCHANTER *[looking under lid]*. Just about.

WITCH. Well, do it carefully. Some of you fellows just throw everything in without thinking or measuring — You've got to mix it *right.*

ENCHANTER. We never mix it at all; it works every bit as well if you just put it all in at once.

WITCH. I've heard that they're making frozen magic potions now. You just drop them into boiling water. But I'll never believe they're as good as the kind you make yourself.

MOTHER *[nervously]*. What's going to happen, exactly?

WITCH. Haven't you ever seen magic worked before? I suppose it's strange to see the first time. The main thing to do right now is keep the pot boiling until we get everything in, and then we simmer it for a minute or so. You just be careful not to step inside the pentacle I drew on the ground with the magic chalk. When it's ready I'll just take a spoonful over and throw it against the side of my house, and then when we open the door, out will fly two lovebirds. Pretty little birds, lovebirds. And so affectionate.

FATHER. Are you sure it's safe?

WITCH *[injured pride]*. Safe! Since when has my magic not been safe? Really! I promised you I'd do this, and I'll have you know that when I guarantee my magic, I deliver. *[Sniffs.]* Safe, indeed!

FATHER *[apologetically],* I just *asked.*

MOTHER. He means — it won't turn the rest of us into lovebirds, will it? If it gets loose or something? WITCH. Well, naturally, if you refuse to listen to common sense and start walking all over the pentacle and going to look into the pot or something, I can't do a thing for you. But as long as you do what you're told — ENCHANTER. It's boiling. *[Music starts softly; drum introduction to "Incantation Rock."]*

WITCH. Good. Careful, now. You put the mandrake in? *[ENCHANTER puts in "mandrake."]* Then now we add the bat's wing — *[Adds these things as she continues.]* — and the powdered pebbles — last of all the birdseed. *[A dance begins slowly: WITCH, ENCHANTER, then MOTHER and FATHER join in dance.]*

[HANSEL and GRETEL come curiously and softly out of the house and stand in the doorway, watching; then HANSEL moves carefully along the back toward the bench and kettle. He tiptoes up to the kettle.]

WITCH *[shouting at kettle],* Orkway Agicmay! Ovelay Irdsbay! [HANSEL *tips over kettle, which pours pebbles or perhaps marbles toward dancers, who try to escape and cannot; as* WITCH, ENCHANTER, MOTHER and FATHER are *touched by rolling pebbles they are turned to stone one by one, and stand frozen,* WITCH *scrambles to get away.]* It's not supposed to look like that!

ENCHANTER. I *said* you were doing it wrong —

MOTHER. Make it get away from me —

FATHER. I should have known better — HANSEL *and* GRETEL *[laughing, clapping, capering].* They've all been turned to stone — they'll never get away — serves them right — now they can't catch us — they've all been turned to stone.

[The RABBIT emerges from the shadows D R and starts C.]

RABBIT. She should have known better than to use a *rabbit* for birdseed. I *tried* to tell her it wouldn't work. *[To HANSEL and GRETEL.]* I just hope you're satisfied.

HANSEL. Oh, we are!

RABBIT. There are your mother and your father turned to stone, and the Witch and the Enchanter, too. I kind of hate to see the old Witch go, you know. She was nice enough, in her way.

GRETEL. I'm *glad* they're all stone. I *hate* people.

RABBIT. So do I, now you mention it. *[Starts D R again.]* Well, I'm off. Have a good time, you two.

HANSEL *[as he and GRETEL run after him],* Wait a minute — who's going to make our dinner?

RABBIT. Not *me,* I can tell you. Eat a little gingerbread. *[Nods toward house.]*

GRETEL. If I eat any more gingerbread I'll burst.

RABBIT *[shrugging].* So go ahead and burst. It will be small loss to the forest, I can tell you. *[It starts to get dark as scene continues.]*

HANSEL. But are we supposed to stay here?

GRETEL. Always before, our mother and father told us what to do.

RABBIT. Well, you never did what they told you anyway, so why worry? I'm late. So long. *[Starts out.]*

GRETEL *[holding him back]*. No, please wait, Rabbit. It's not so much fun, being here alone with those statues.

RABBIT. What makes you think I like being here alone with you? Be nice bad children, now. *[Hurries out D R.]*

HANSEL. I'm not *scared,* you know — but isn't it getting dark, kind of? *[Looks about apprehensively.]*

GRETEL. I think it's really getting darker than I like it to get.

HANSEL. Maybe we'd better go back inside the witch's house.

GRETEL. Oh, *no!* I couldn't stay inside a witch's house, not while the Witch was standing outside here turned to stone.

HANSEL. Well, it's much too late to try to find our way back home.

GRETEL *[crying]*. I'm frightened. Now I wish we'd been better children.

HANSEL. I was good — you were the one who was bad all the time.

GRETEL. I was not!

HANSEL. You were so!

GRETEL. I was —— Ohh, it's dark, Hansel! *[Clings to HANSEL.]* Maybe I was bad part of the time.

HANSEL. I guess I was bad, too.

GRETEL. I'm sorry now.

HANSEL. I'm sorry, too.

GRETEL *[hopefully]*. Maybe if we're *very* sorry — and we ask very nicely —

HANSEL. Do you think so? *[Turns to ENCHANTER, who is statue nearest him.]* Oh, please, sir, we're so sorry we were bad and got you turned into stone and it's getting dark — Please, *please* turn back into a person again.

ENCHANTER *[turning his head slightly]*. Do you promise to behave?

GRETEL *[ardently]*. Oh, yes — yes!

WITCH *[looking around]*. Will you ever quarrel again?

HANSEL. No, no, no!

MOTHER. Will you do as you are told?

GRETEL. We promise.

FATHER. Will you be good children?

HANSEL. The best children in the world.

FATHER. Well, I was getting tired of being stone, anyway. *[Moves, then others move and relax, HANSEL and GRETEL run to MOTHER and FATHER and embrace them lovingly.]*

ENCHANTER *[to WITCH]*. I must say that that was just about the poorest job of magic-making I ever *did* see.

WITCH. It was poor quality material. You can't ever do things right if you work with poor quality material.

[The RABBIT is seen D R again.]

RABBIT *[peering around corner]*. Are you back again? Glad to see you. Notice that the rain has stopped? ENCHANTER. So it has! After twenty-seven days!

WITCH. We'll watch the sunset tonight. See? *[To ENCHANTER.]* That's what my magic did — it brought the sun out again. *[Stage is growing lighter.]*

ENCHANTER. I'd just like to see the day *you* can make the sun come out.

WITCH. I suppose next you'll be saying *you* did it?

ENCHANTER. Anyone who can make a mess like you did out of a simple little magic charm —

WITCH. I suppose your stale old mandrake had nothing to do with it?

ENCHANTER *[his face close to WITCH]*. You call yourself a witch?

WITCH *[facing right up to him, their noses almost touching]*. You call yourself an enchanter? Stale mandrake!

ENCHANTER. Yes, I call myself an enchanter, and maybe you would like to see me prove it by turning you into a barrel and rolling you downhill —

WITCH. I'll turn you into a little piece of bacon and —

GRETEL. Stop, Stop!

HANSEL. Aren't you ashamed of yourselves?

GRETEL. Quarreling like that?

HANSEL. Think how it sounds.

GRETEL. All that mean talk.

HANSEL. Why don't you be like *us?*

GRETEL. Always nice and sweet? *[Smiles prettily.]*

ENCHANTER *[to WITCH, furiously]* Your magic did *this?*

WITCH *[quailing]*. No magic of *mine.*

MOTHER. I don't think I'm going to like this.

FATHER *[loudly]*. You'd better change them back.

HANSEL. Father, dear, please don't raise your voice to the nice witch.

GRETEL. Try to be nice to *everybody,* like us.

MOTHER. I can't *stand* it!

FATHER. *Please* change them back!

WITCH. I can't — I can't!

HANSEL *and* GRETEL. We're *good* children. *[Both smile broadly.]*

MOTHER. Children — please stop smiling like that! *[Hand to head.]* It makes my head ache.

HANSEL. I'm a very good little boy. And I *love* rabbits. *[Starts D R, toward RABBIT.]*

RABBIT. Not this rabbit, sonny — not this rabbit. *[Sidesteps HANSEL and starts C.]*

GRETEL *[meeting RABBIT as he moves C]*. I'd just love to hug all you sweet little furry forest creatures! *[Reaches out for RABBIT.]*

RABBIT *[leaping wildly to avoid GRETEL]*. Get away — get away! I'll sweet-little-furry-forest-creature *you,* you two-legged crocodile! *[Moves D L, to a safe distance.]*

HANSEL. Funny, dear little rabbit, *[RABBIT glares at him.]*

MOTHER. Please, nice Witch, please change them back, *[HANSEL and GRETEL hug one another, and then approach MOTHER and FATHER, who also try to avoid them.]*

GRETEL. Dear, dear Mother.

HANSEL. Dear, dear Father.

WITCH *[pointing to light through trees]*. Look — the sunset!

GRETEL. Oh — isn't everything just lovely?

RABBIT *[drearily]*, I can tell you right now, all of you — this forest isn't going to be fit to live in now. *[RABBIT sings "Forest Holler," with others as chorus.]*

FOREST HOLLER

RABBIT.

Lived in the forest
All my life,
Got me some children
And I got my wife;
Lived in the forest
And I gathered wood,
But the rain came down
And it came down good.

CHORUS.
O Rain, go 'way from here,
O Rain, go 'way from here,
O Rain, go 'way from here —
We want a sunny day.

RABBIT.
Rabbit wants the sun to shine,

[CHORUS: Yes, siree...]
Squirrel wants the sun to shine,

[CHORUS: Yes, siree...]
Bluebird wants the sun to shine,

[CHORUS: Yes, siree...]
We all want the sun to shine.
Sun comes out
We’ll have a ball;
Rabbit and bluebird
Rent a hall.
Going to dance all day,
Dance all night,
Dance for joy
In that old sunlight.

CHORUS.
O Rain, go ‘way from here,
O Rain, go ‘way from here,
O Rain, go ‘way from here —
We want a sunny day.

CURTAIN

Nine Magic Wishes (1963)

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9 MAGIC WISHES

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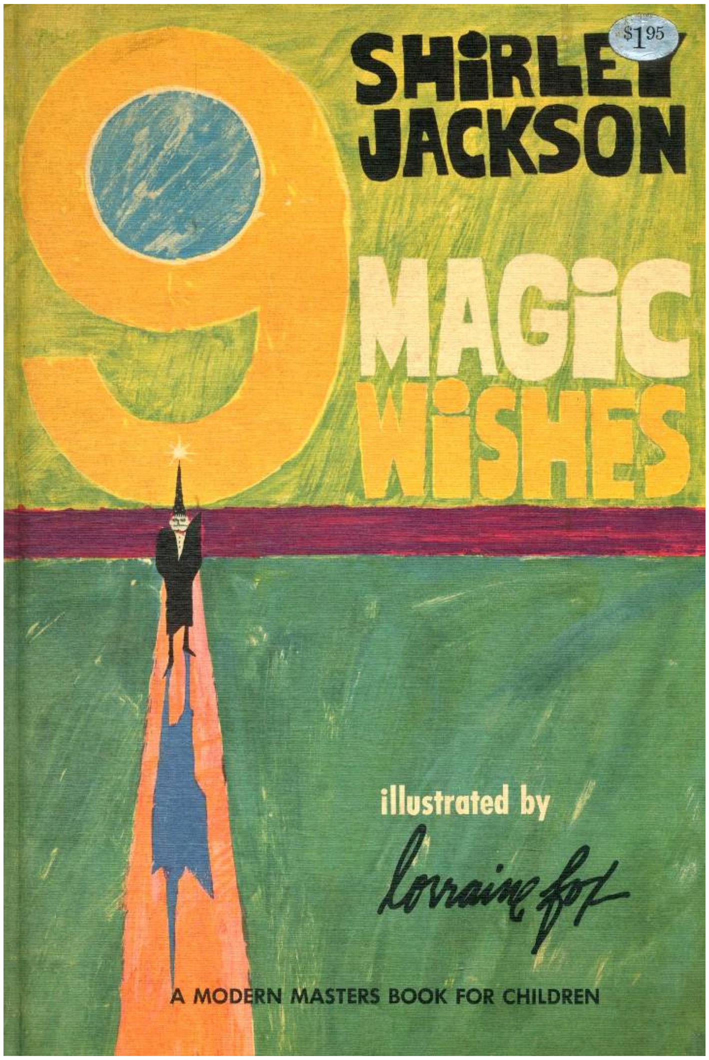
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A MODERN MASTERS BOOK FOR CHILDREN

The first edition

9 MAGIC WISHES

TODAY WAS A very funny day.

The sky was green and the sun was blue and all the trees were flying balloons. A magician came walking down my street. His coat was long and black and there were stars on his hat.

“I will give you nine wishes,” the magician said to me. “What do you wish for?”

So I closed my eyes and wished.

1

Wish one was for an orange pony with a purple tail. He ran as fast as the wind and his eyes were blue.

2

Wish two was for a squirrel holding a nut that opens and inside is a Christmas tree.

3

Wish three was for a round little clown with a butterfly on his nose. The clown knew tricks and songs and games and the butterfly stayed on his nose.

4

Wish four was for a garden of flowers all made of candy. I ate a sugar rose and a candy cane tree.

5

Wish five was for a snowman with a black hat and eyes of coal. He was so cold that I put on my mittens before I shook his hand.

6

Wish six was for a tiny zoo all for me, with a tiger and a lion and a bear. They were all so small I could put them in my pocket.

7

Wish seven was for a silver ship with sails of red and it carried me in the air over the tops of the trees and the tops of the houses and everybody on the ground thought I was a bird.

8

Wish eight was for a little box and inside is another box and inside is another box and inside is another box and inside that is an elephant.

“But that is only eight wishes,” the magician said to me. “You may have one more wish.”

But I had an orange pony with a purple tail and a squirrel holding a nut with a Christmas tree inside and a round little clown with a butterfly on his nose and a garden of flowers all made of candy and a cold cold snowman and a tiny zoo all my own and a silver ship with sails of red and a little box with another box inside and another box inside and another box inside and inside that an elephant.

9

“Thank you,” I said to the magician, “but there is really nothing more to wish for.”

“Then there is one wish left,” the magician said to me. “I will put it here on this rock and somebody will find it and have a magic wish.”

Then he turned himself into a leaf and the wind blew him away.

Today was a very, very funny day.

Famous Sally (1966)

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FAMOUS SALLY

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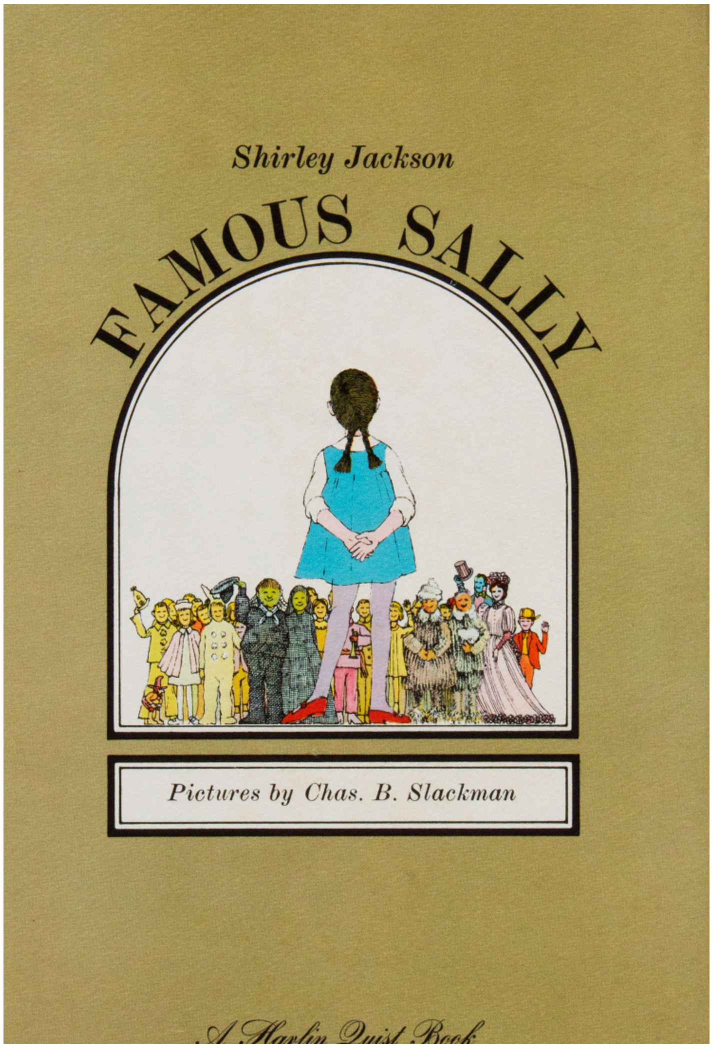
Shirley Jackson
FAMOUS SALLY
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The first edition

FAMOUS SALLY

No one in the world had ever heard of Sally. No one in the world knew Sally's name. No one ever said to her, "Good morning, Sally," or "Where are you going today, Sally?" or "What a pretty blue dress you are wearing, Sally" — if, of course, she should happen to be wearing a pretty blue dress at the time.

"I wish everyone knew my name," Sally said. "I wish I could hear everyone saying Sally Sally Sally."

She washed her face and hands and put on a blue dress — in case anyone should want to tell her it was pretty — and then she said, "I will make people say my name. I am Sally and I will make the people in all the cities say my name."

The first city she picked was Tall City. The buildings in Tall City were so high they wore clouds on their heads like hats. The people in Tall City walked on stilts because the doorways were so high, and the children hung their swings from the very tops of the trees.

"I must have my name very high for Tall City," Sally said. "What is the highest thing I know? A kite." So Sally made a kite out of white paper. The kite was ten miles and three feet wide and eleven miles and six inches long. On it Sally wrote S A L L Y in black paint. She tied thirty-one miles of string on her kite and took it into the yard behind her house.

Then she tossed the kite into the air and the wind caught it and up it sailed, higher and higher and higher, right through the clouds and across the sky until it sailed over the tall tops of the buildings in Tall City.

SALLY said the kite over Tall City, and the people in the streets of Tall City looked up and looked up and looked up.

“Sally,” they said to each other, “that kite says Sally. Sally,” they said, “Sally Sally.”

“Now the people in Tall City know my name,” Sally said.

The next city was Small City. The buildings in Small City were so low that people could sit down on their roofs and drink tea from a cup on the chimney. When the people in Small City went visiting each other they stepped in through the second-story windows, and once a cat chasing a mouse jumped right over a house.

“I must have a very small name for Small City,” Sally said. “What is the smallest thing I know? My little walking-doll is the smallest thing I know.” So Sally put her little walking doll in a box and went to the very edge of Small City. She took her little walking doll out of the box and put her on the ground and wound her walker and her talker and started the little walking doll down the streets of Small City.

“Sallysallysallysallysally,” said the little walking doll, walking one foot after the other down the streets of Small City. “Sallysally.”

The people on the street in Small City looked down at the little walking doll, and the people drinking tea on the roofs of Small City looked down on the little walking doll walking one foot after another down the street saying “Sally-sallysally.”

“Sally,” said the people of Small City to each other. “That little walking-doll is saying Sally. Sally,” they said. “Sallysally.”

“Now the people in Small City know my name,” Sally said.

The third city was Soft City. Everyone in Soft City was so quiet that the babies sang lullabies to themselves and all the people wore shoes made of cat fur so their feet would not make a sound on the streets. Their houses were made of pillows and they wore marshmallows for hats.

"I must have a very soft name for Soft City," Sally said. "What is the softest thing I know? The wind is the softest thing I know." So she went into her backyard and called the wind. "Please, please come," she called softly, "please, wind, come." The wind came and wound around and around Sally, whispering in her ear and tickling her hair. "Will you tell the people of Soft City my name?" Sally asked the wind, and the wind turned a little circle in Sally's hair and lifted a leaf off the ground and made a laughing noise in a buttercup and floated away to Soft City.

"Sallyallyallyallyally," the wind sang in the streets of Soft City. "Sallyallyally," and the people in Soft City turned their soft faces under the marshmallow hats and listened to the wind.

"Sally," they said to each other. "Listen to the wind; it is saying Sally. Sally," they said, "Sally."

"Now the people in Soft City know my name," Sally said.

The next city was Rose City. In Rose City the people planted roses in their gardens and in their houses and in the parks, and all the buildings had roses growing along their tops. There were roses growing in a row down the middle of the street. There were roses in window boxes, and all the people wore roses in their buttonholes and in their hair.

"What will take my name to Rose City?" Sally said. "What do roses love best? Honeybees," she said. "I will ask the honeybees to tell my name to the people of Rose City."

Sally went to the queen bee and the queen bee said, "Of course. My bees and I love to visit Rose City, and we will gladly tell the people there your name."

So the queen bee and nine thousand and eleven other bees flew in a great bee cloud to Rose City. They landed on the roses in the streets and the gardens and the people's heads.

"Zzzzzally," the bees sang loudly, "zzzzzally, zzzzzally, zzzzzally," and the people laughed because the bees were on all their roses.

"Sally," the people said, laughing, "listen to the bees saying Sally. Sally," they said, "Sally."

"Now the people in Rose City know my name," Sally said.

The next city was Play City. In Play City every day was a holiday all year round. The people dressed up like pirates or clowns or black cats, and they played leapfrog and jumprope and hide-and-go-seek all day long. In Play City every day was someone's birthday and every day they had a birthday party.

"What will take my name to Play City?" Sally said. "What is the happiest thing I know? A merry-go-round. I will send a merry-go-round to Play City to tell the people there my name." Sally went to the park where the merry-go-round was resting between rides and said, "Please, dear merry-go-round, will you carry my name to Play City?"

"Play City sounds like a fine place," the merry-go-round said, "I would be happy to carry your name there."

So the merry-go-round wheeled along beside Sally to the edge of Play City and then the merry-go-round began to go round and round and round, up and down the streets of Play City.

"Sally-go-round," sang the merry-go-round, "Sally-go-round, Sally-go-round, Sally-go-round." And the people of Play City stopped their games of ball and leapfrog and came to the merry-go-round to ask for a ride.

"Sally-go-round," sang the merry-go-round, and the people said to each other, "Do you hear what the merry-go-round is saying? It is saying Sally.

Sally," they said, "Sally."

"And now Play City knows my name," Sally said.

The next city was Slow City. Here the people moved like water dripping from a faucet. Step, they went. Step. Step. Step. When the people of Slow City ate their breakfasts they ate so slowly that when they were through it was time for lunch, and when one Slow City person said to another, "Good morning, how are you?" it took an hour and twenty minutes.

"What will take my name to Slow City?" Sally said. "How can I make the people of Slow City know my name? What is the slowest thing I know? A turtle."

So Sally asked a turtle friend of hers if he would take her name to Slow City and the turtle thought for a long time, because turtles take a long time to do anything, and then the turtle said in his careful voice, "Of course I will take your name to Slow City, Sally. I would like to visit there, anyway." Sally painted her name S A L L Y in bright red on the turtle's back, and because she could not wait for the turtle to walk to Slow City she put him in her wagon and pulled him to the edge of Slow City and then set him down on the street.

Down the street the turtle went, with his back saying SALLY. He looked carefully at everything he passed, turning his head from one side to the other, and the people of Slow City turned very slowly to look at him.

"Why is that turtle going so fast?" they asked each other, "why is he in such a hurry? He says Sally on his back," they said, "look, that fast turtle says Sally on his back. Sally," they said, "Sally."

"And now the people of Slow City know my name," Sally said.

The last city was Noisy City. In Noisy City all the people and the dogs and the cats and the birds made noise. They ran shouting through the streets and they slammed doors and they threw pots and pans out of upstairs windows to hear them crash in the street. All the people in Noisy City carried firecrackers in their pockets and set them off all day long. There were thirty-seven brass bands in Noisy City and they played all day long, and eleven times a day the fire sirens blew just for fun.

“What will take my name to Noisy City?” Sally said. “What is loudest thing I know? A drum.” So Sally got a big big drum seven feet across and she brought it to the edge of Noisy City and started down the street hanging and hanging on the drum.

“Sally boom boom,” the drum roared, “Sally boom boom Sally boom boom Sally boom boom.” But no one in Noisy City heard the drum at all. The people were making too much noise with the firecrackers and the brass bands and the pots and pans crashing on the sidewalk. Sally went from one end of Noisy City to the other, with the drum roaring “Sally boom boom Sally boom boom,” and no one heard her at all.

“What shall I do?” Sally said, “What shall I do? I must make the people of Noisy City know my name. I know what I will do.”

She set the drum on the edge of Noisy City and ran home quickly. Then she brought everything to Noisy City. She brought the bees and the wind and the little walking doll and the turtle and the merry-go-round and the kite. She brought them all.

The kite sailed high in the air over Noisy City, saying SALLY in big black letters, and the bees sang “Zzzzally zzzzally zzzzally,” and the little walking doll walked down the street putting one foot after the other and saying “Sally-sallysally,” and the wind sang softly “Sallyallyally Sallyallyally Sallyally-ally,” and the turtle walked along looking from one side to the other in his careful way, and on his back it said SALLY in red letters, and the merry-go-round sang “Sally-go-round Sally-go-round Sally-go-round,” and the big bass drum roared “Sally boom boom Sally boom

boom Sally boom boom," and SALLY they all went, "go round boom boom."

Then the people of Noisy City began to look around and they said to each other, "Sally. Look at the turtle and the kite. Listen to the wind. Listen to the drum. Look at the bees. Sally," they said, "Sally, Sally, Sally."

And now all the world had heard of Sally. Everyone knew her name. People came up to her and said, "Good morning, Sally," and "Where are you going today, Sally'?" and "What a pretty blue dress you are wearing, Sally" — if, of course, she should happen to be wearing a pretty blue dress at the time.

The Non-Fiction

In 1945 Jackson and her husband settled in Prospect Lane, North Bennington, Vermont, where Hyman had been hired as an instructor at Bennington College. This is their first home in North Bennington, where Jackson wrote 'The Lottery'.

The Witchcraft of Salem Village (1956)

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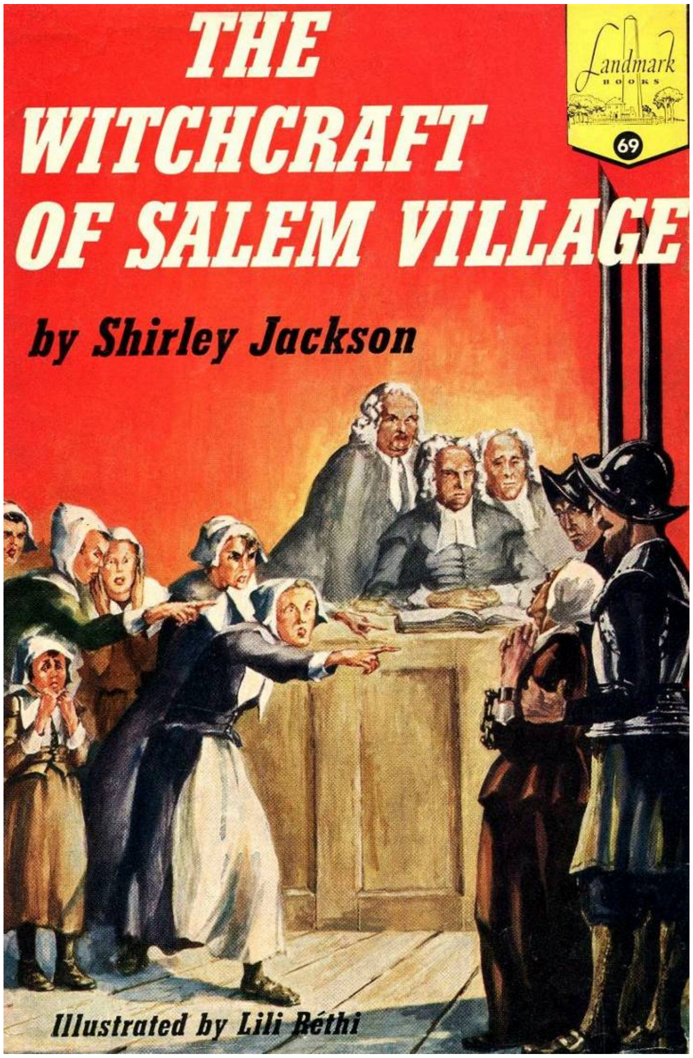
AFTERWORD


THE WITCHCRAFT OF SALEM VILLAGE
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NOTE

SALEM, MASSACHUSETTS, AND Salem Village, Massachusetts, were two separate places in 1692. Although only a few miles apart, they differed a good deal. Salem, where the witchcraft trials were held, was a large town, busy and active. Salem Village was a small community, self-centered and frequently almost isolated in the winter, although one of the main highways of Massachusetts ran, and still runs, past the site of Ingersoll's inn. The witchcraft cases began in Salem Village, although Salem has had to accept full responsibility. Salem Village no longer exists. Even the ghosts of George Burroughs's two wives would have trouble finding it today.

Goodwife, shortened to Goody, and Goodman were the usual forms of address during this period.

Shirley Jackson

1. THE UNEASINESS OF SALEM VILLAGE

BUILDING A NEW life in a wilderness is a job for strong and heroic people. The Puritans of the Massachusetts colony had to surmount unbelievable difficulties in order to stay alive. Their first years, of course, were spent in setting up houses and clearing enough ground to plant crops.

In order to clear a space of land for farming it was necessary to plan for years ahead, and the work required a strong back and a strong faith. The trees were cut down by hand with an axe in such a manner that they would all fall inward upon one another. This was done early in the spring. The trees lay where they had fallen all summer, so that they would dry out, and in the fall they were burned. The result was a burned-over patch of land, filled with stumps and charred embers. When the embers were carted away, a crop of sorts — usually barley or corn — could be planted between the stumps, and the area used for grain for several years. Then, when the stumps were enough decayed to be drawn out by oxen and chains, the rocks must be removed. Thus, after several years, the land was ready for farming. It could be plowed and a real field of grain planted.

The Indians were a constant danger, and a man working alone in a field was easy prey for them. It was necessary for the farmers to keep weapons by them always. There had been killings by Indians around many of the small villages nearly every year, and as late as 1691 it had been necessary for the county of Essex to establish a corps of twenty-four scouts for protection.

Although it was part of the Puritan plan for each man to have a voice in government through his standing in the church, all did not prosper equally.

Some were natural leaders and gradually acquired more land and consequently more influence. Some were, unfortunately, lazy. At a Salem town meeting in 1644 it was ordered that two people be appointed every Sunday to walk about the town and take note of those backsliders who did not attend church services, or who “lye at home or in the fields without giving good account thereof.” In addition, these patrols were to watch out for Indian attacks and fires.

Travel was, naturally, a hazardous and unpopular activity. Roads were not so necessary as houses and food, and the original custom was to blaze trees to show a track from one farm to another. As these tracks became paths, the underbrush was gradually cleared from them until they became wide enough to permit a horse and rider to pass. After enough traffic the path became hardened and widened until it might almost have been called a road.

Boston was the most important settlement in the colony. By 1690 it was a busy city, the center of government and education. Its people tended to be broader in their views than those in the smaller villages, although their religious discipline was almost as severe. In the smaller places, however, the church was the meeting house, the center of all village activity. In Boston there were government houses, Harvard College, shops, and taverns. People in Boston did not have to gather in the meeting house on Sunday to hear all the news, as people did in Salem Village.

By the late seventeenth century the people of the Massachusetts colony — especially in Boston — had already shown strong tendencies toward independence. Because they were so far away from England and the English government, they grew impatient with English ways. The English Book of Common Prayer had been outlawed in the Puritan church, and banishment or death was the punishment for difference of opinion over religion. Massachusetts required its officials to take an oath of allegiance to Massachusetts, but no longer were they required to take an oath of allegiance to the English government. The colony coined its own money, and arbitrated its own disputes.

In an effort to stamp out this growing feeling of independence, a new English governor named Sir Edmund Andros was sent to Massachusetts in 1686. He tried to enforce the English laws. He levied new taxes and declared that many land titles determined by the colonists were invalid, or at least doubtful until they had been confirmed in England.

When the colonists realized that their right to the land they had farmed and cleared was going to be questioned, they rebelled and put Andros into prison, where he was kept for several months until he was sent back to England. As a result, their charter as a colony was revoked, and it was necessary for Massachusetts to send some of its most important men to England in an attempt to get a new charter and establish land rights.

By the year 1692, the whole Massachusetts colony was disturbed and uneasy. In addition to the revoked charter, a calamity which affected every resident of the colony, there were rumors of war with France. The Indians still represented an immediate danger. Taxes were almost unbearably heavy, and attacks by pirates had damaged the growing commercial traffic of the colony.

In addition, the clergy were crying out against heresies and the inroads the devil had made among the people. Cotton Mather, in particular, was playing an important part in making the question of witchcraft a vital issue. Mather, a popular, passionate preacher in Boston, felt that his own war with the devil was being carried on constantly, and that the devil had marked him as a particularly desirable prey.

Cotton Mather was called in to wrestle with the devil in several cases of possession, when the devil spoke through a human body which he had entered. Mather and the possessing demons had bitter and furious quarrels, but Mather was usually victorious. He published accounts of some of his battles with the devil, citing the devil's own words and his threats against godly people, and these publications were widely circulated. People regarded Mather as a hero for doing battle personally with the devil.

In Salem Village the winter of 1692 was hard and all news brought along the dangerous lonely road from Boston was discouraging. In addition, Salem Village had its own troubles. Quarrels among its people were frequent, and there were even family feuds which had been carried on for two or three generations. Moreover, the village was getting a reputation for mistreatment of its ministers.

One minister had left the town because he was involved in constant bickering. Another minister had been almost starved out when the parishioners refused to pay the money and goods owed him. And now Samuel Parris, the only minister the people had been able to find to take their church, was supported by only half the town. The other half, although they came to church, made a point of disagreeing with the minister on all town issues. Some of the residents of Salem Village who lived close enough to other towns changed their church affiliations to the churches in those towns. Samuel Parris made efforts to reconcile the different groups in the village, but without much success. He was not a very tactful or generous man. Before he accepted the position of minister, he had insisted that the people of the town guarantee his payments. He had, in addition, asked for more than the other ministers had received.

Life in Salem Village was not easy at the best of times. Gaiety and merrymaking were regarded as irreligious, and the people of the village were somber and severe. Their lives were spent in hard work and religious observance. Even their relaxation was associated with the meeting house. On the Sabbath there was a long service in the morning, and another in the afternoon. Village residents who came from outlying farms were not able to get home between the services, and it gradually became a regular practice for the time between the services to be spent in visiting and conversation. This was the time when gossip and news were spread from one to another.

Occasionally there was a simple celebration held in the village. There were sometimes boating parties and even a hayride for the young people. Dancing was not permitted, but people enjoyed visiting one another and singing together, although of course their choice of songs was limited. They could not sing anything frivolous or any song (like so many of the songs they had left behind in England) which praised earthly love or mocked at any sacred institution.

Although many of the original settlers had been educated people, the education which the children received in Salem Village was not very thorough. It was believed that so long as the children were taught correct religious doctrine they would grow up to be good citizens. Their teaching, of course, was from the Bible, and the children were told over and over again that only the greatest piety would save them from eternal damnation.

The Puritans did not celebrate Christmas or Easter, because they felt that these holidays derived from pagan ideas and were not truly religious. The occasional holidays from school were given for a practical purpose, such as getting in the harvest. Any little girl who was caught making or playing with a doll would have been punished and taken to Mr. Parris for a long, serious talking-to. The Puritans thought that toys were in general frivolous and time-wasting, and that dolls in particular were harmful. Witches were supposed to use dolls and small copies of people to work magic.

Twice a week, on Sunday and on Wednesday, the children accompanied their parents to the meeting house. There they sat on hard benches and listened to Mr. Parris's three-hour sermons, which always warned them of the extreme caution they must use against temptation. Of course, Mr. Parris knew the names of everyone in the village, and any child who wriggled, or fell asleep, or showed signs of impatience, was sure of encountering Mr. Parris's displeasure.

Mr. Parris had not had any experience with witchcraft in Salem Village, although there had been rumors of witches in nearby towns. One neighboring minister had dealt with a case of witchcraft simply by sending both accused and accuser back home, with instructions to behave themselves. But many people felt that this was too lenient. Had not Cotton Mather told them of the joy among the demons whenever a Puritan succumbed to temptation? Some people whispered that when a minister was that gentle with the devil, it might mean that his secret feelings were much too sympathetic toward the forces of evil. Clergymen, they said, had been known to be witches before. Much of this gossip died away naturally, but people did not forget the incident.

Moreover, this incident demonstrated an attitude toward witchcraft which has contributed enormously to every witchcraft epidemic in history. Anyone who defended or sympathized with or said a good word for a witch was automatically suspected. It was felt that no one would help a witch without a good reason, and the reason could only be that the suspect's defender was also in league with the devil. It is this attitude which makes it so difficult for intelligent and thoughtful people to stop a great popular hatred like the hatred toward the witches.

2. THE DEVIL COMES CLOSER

IN SALEM VILLAGE in the early days of the year 1692, people were gossiping about the charter, about the Indians, and about the scarlet bodice that Bridget Bishop had made for herself. Everyone thought that Mr. Parris should be chided for permitting his West Indian slave to wear a colored turban, but no one seemed to be paying much attention to what the younger girls of the village were doing.

A group of girls, ranging in age from nine to nineteen, had formed an informal club. Nearly every day they would gather in the big cheerful kitchen of Mr. Parris's house to talk to Tituba, the West Indian slave who wore the bright turban. If any of their elders noticed this, or cared, it must have seemed to them that the girls could get into very little trouble in the home of the minister of the town. They were quiet and seemed well behaved, and perhaps the elders thought that Tituba was instructing them in the various duties of housework and cooking.

Little Elizabeth Parris was the youngest, and the older girls disliked having her tagging along. She was only nine years old, and her cousin Abigail Williams, who lived in the Parris house, was eleven. Abigail's closest friend in the village was Ann Putnam, who was twelve. Although Ann was always very polite and sweet when grownups were around, she could be very rude and cruel to other children. Elizabeth Parris, and even some of the older girls, were afraid of her. Mary Walcott, for instance, seemed to copy whatever Ann did, even though Mary was five years older. And Elizabeth Hubbard and Elizabeth Booth and Susannah Sheldon, who were all seventeen and eighteen years old, let Ann order them around just as she pleased. The only one who ever stood up to Ann was Mercy Lewis, and even she never dared quarrel openly with Ann.

All of these girls spent as much time as possible in the Parris kitchen. Sometimes the older ones even sneaked in for a few minutes when they were supposed to be running an errand or finishing up their work at home. Several of the older girls worked as servants in village homes, and of course it was even more difficult for them to come. But somehow they all managed to spend a good deal of time in the Parris kitchen with Tituba.

Mostly, Tituba told them stories. Although she had been brought up in the Spanish West Indies in what the Puritans considered a heathen voodoo faith, Tituba had been converted to Christianity, and was now as sincere a churchgoer as any of the rest of the villagers. Somehow, though, when Tituba told the girls about Adam in the Garden of Eden, or Noah and the ark, the stories sounded different, more interesting than when Mr. Parris told them from the pulpit. Tituba did not want to do these girls any harm, but she could not forget the magic and superstition she had known in her youth, and slowly the girls began to learn more about magic than they did about Noah.

Then the girls began to realize that what they were listening to was wrong by all the teachings of their church. Several of them, particularly little Elizabeth Parris, even felt that they could be punished, although she probably could not have explained why she felt that she was doing what her father would have called sinning. The other girls told Elizabeth that she was silly to worry about sin when all she did was let Tituba tell her fortune from the lines in her palm. Anyway, they pointed out, it was done, and nothing could change it now.

Ann Putnam made it very clear to little Elizabeth that the other girls had no desire to get into trouble just because Elizabeth was acting like a baby.

And, she warned, if Elizabeth told her father or anyone else, they would see that she regretted it for the rest of her life. Ann shook her fist in Elizabeth's face, and scowled at her horribly, and said she would do something terrible to Elizabeth if she said one single word. Elizabeth was too frightened to speak, but night after night she lay in her bed awake, wondering if she had condemned herself to eternal damnation when she let Tituba read her palm.

The other girls were excited by these forbidden games, and if they felt any fear of eternal damnation, they kept it to themselves after what had happened to Elizabeth. None of them dared to defy Ann Putnam. Besides, Tituba knew charms for catching a young man's fancy, and making hair curl, and she could tell the real meaning of dreams. The winter months were long and gloomy, and Tituba herself loved to remember the warm days of her youth, and try to forget the snow and cold wind outside. The girls went through their dreary tasks more cheerfully, thinking about the exciting fortunes Tituba had promised lay ahead for them. One of them was going to travel, another was going to have three husbands, another was going to marry a rich man, perhaps from as far away as Boston.

The January snow was heavy, and the winter, which already seemed endless, still had many long weeks to go. The people in Salem Village at last began to take notice of what the young girls were doing. It was said that some of the girls were behaving very strangely. They frequently did not answer when they were spoken to. They seemed very nervous, and cried without reason, and sometimes even fell into hysterical fits when they laughed and cried and could not be quieted. They screamed out meaningless words in their sleep. Families grew a little anxious. In spite of their stern ways, they loved their children. John Proctor, in whose family Mary Warren was a servant, told around the village that a good whipping had calmed

Mary down wonderfully well. But not many people cared to try so severe a method.

Mr. Parris was particularly worried about his little girl. Even though many people around the village disliked Mr. Parris and said that he was cruel and vain, no one could deny that little Elizabeth was very dear to him. He was almost broken-hearted when she woke up at night, in terrible fear, and called for him to help her fight off the terrible creatures she saw beside her bed. When he picked her up, she did not recognize him, but tried to escape from his arms. She seemed always afraid of some danger which only she could see. Tituba, too, dearly loved the child and sat before the kitchen fire crying. Elizabeth refused the dainty little meals Tituba made for her, and said that Tituba was trying to poison her. During the day the child seemed half-asleep most of the time. She lay beside the window for hours at a time, staring out at nothing, and then roused suddenly to cower back and scream in fear at the invisible phantoms which she thought were threatening her.

Everyone in town heard about it when Mr. Parris at last called in Dr. Griggs. Elizabeth must be very sick indeed, they thought. And all over the village the other girls whispered to one another that Elizabeth might even be dying and that — even worse — she might be going to tell about the games in the Parris kitchen, which now began to seem so much worse than they had before.

Dr. Griggs was an honest, well-meaning man, but he knew no more about medicine than any other doctor of the time. After he had examined Elizabeth and listened to her wild talk of phantoms at her bedside, he looked very grave. Mr. Parris took his arm and led him from the room.

“Tell me, Doctor,” said Mr. Parris in great anxiety, “what ails the child?”

The doctor looked away. He could not meet Mr. Parris’s worried eyes, and at last he said slowly, in a troubled voice, “The child is afflicted, Minister, and it seems to me that it can only be by witchcraft.”

The news was all over town as though witchcraft indeed had carried it. Elizabeth Parris had been bewitched. Some evil person, working with the powers of the devil, had sent deliberate suffering to the child. This was worse than any kind of plague or illness. There was a witch in the village. The phantoms which frightened Elizabeth Parris were clearly the work of magic. People began to wonder about Mr. Parris’s enemies in the town. Had one of them taken this method of getting even with the minister?

By nightfall, however, it was being told that Ann Putnam, too, was bewitched. When she heard the news about Elizabeth Parris, she screamed out and fell onto the floor as though she had been struck down. Now she was sitting on a bench in her father’s house, shivering with fear. Many of the people of the village went to the Putnam house to see Ann and wonder at her horrible state. The diagnosis of witchcraft had been a lucky thing for the girls. It meant that now no one was going to ask Elizabeth questions which would lead to a confession of the goings-on in the Parris kitchen. Perhaps the idea that they were bewitched would save the girls from punishment if the truth did come out.

By the next day the people of the village had even more cause to be frightened. Mercy Lewis was bewitched, and so was Mary Warren. Nor were they the only ones. Abigail Williams and Mary Walcott and Elizabeth Hubbard and Susannah Sheldon and Elizabeth Booth were all falling into fits just like Elizabeth Parris. They were screaming that they saw nightmarish figures, and that they were being pinched and pushed by invisible and unknown hands.

Once witchcraft had been named, Mr. Parris, Mr. Putnam, and the other senior men of the village were all convinced that some person was purposely tormenting these girls. John Proctor remarked once again that a good whipping had worked wonderfully well with Mary Warren. No one smiled at him now, for things had become serious.

It seemed to Mr. Parris that prayer might be of some assistance, so he invited ministers from neighboring parishes and towns to gather with him. While they were assembled solemnly, devoting their prayers to the aid of the unfortunate children, little Elizabeth burst into the room, followed by her cousin Abigail. The two children crashed through the group of ministers, knocking over furniture, shouting aloud through the prayers, and badly frightening the visitors.

Later in the day, others of the afflicted girls were brought to Mr. Parris's house in the hope that the presence of the other ministers might comfort them. Instead, the girls managed to convince the ministers that they had with their own eyes seen the torments of the demons, and had come almost face to face with the devil himself. The girls shouted and yelled meaningless words, rolled on the floor, and could not be held still. Abigail even dashed into the fireplace and scattered burning embers around the room. The visiting ministers looked at one another in horror. Cotton Mather had described demons as acting in this manner. The other ministers joined with Mr. Parris in a hasty prayer, and fled.

It fell then to Mr. Parris to discover the person in his parish who was doing this harm. No one doubted that the torments of the girls were the result of the activities of some living person in league with the devil. The only question was who?

In his own study, where he wrote his sermons, Mr. Parris questioned the sick girls. In spite of their cries and interruptions he explained to them that if they could succeed in identifying the person who was practicing witchcraft upon them, the whole village would be saved from a danger which might otherwise destroy it. He told them how one person could, with the devil’s help, demolish a whole town. He told them that the actual safety of the village depended upon their attempting to recognize the witch who hurt them. Kindly and gently, with the important men of the village standing anxiously by, Mr. Parris asked the girls again and again if they knew who afflicted them.

Ann Putnam sat silently while Mr. Parris spoke. Her father and her uncles were watching her, and she stared without speaking into the fire. Finally, Mr. Parris turned to her and said, “Tell us, if you can, who has afflicted you thus.”

Ann seemed not to hear, and yet, when Mr. Parris repeated his question, she stirred and looked up at him trustingly. “I am not afflicted,” she said sweetly. “I am very well, Minister.” Then, with a horrible scream, she threw herself onto the floor, so that Mr. Parris had to catch her quickly to keep her from hurting herself against the furniture. When he lifted her, she lay stiff in his arms with her teeth clenched tight and her eyes staring. All of those watching saw tooth marks on her arms, as though she had been bitten, and she said wildly, “Please, Minister, tell them to leave me alone. I will never put my name to the devil’s book, no matter how they hurt me.”

Horrified, Mr. Parris turned to the other girls and demanded if any of them knew who was hurting Ann. Mercy Lewis said that she was not sure, but she thought she had seen someone come to Ann and bite her arm. The other girls joined in. They were all fairly sure that they had seen something of the sort.

When Ann opened her eyes again and looked around as though in surprise, Mr. Parris again asked her if she knew who had come to her and hurt her.

“I cannot be sure,” Ann said, as though reluctantly. “I *thought* I saw someone.”

Mr. Parris and the others pressed her to name the person she thought she saw. Ann was unwilling. She said she did not want to injure an innocent person if she was wrong, and if she was right the witch would only come after her again and hurt her even more. Again the other girls agreed. The witch, they said, was dangerous. They did not dare name her for fear of further punishment. Mr. Parris and the other men promised them every possible protection, and Mr. Parris offered a fervent prayer in their defense. During Mr. Parris’s prayer the witch forced the girls to yell so loudly that frequently the minister’s words could not be heard. And when Mr. Parris, at the end of his prayer, grew more than usually eloquent, it was necessary for two of the men to hold Ann Putnam to keep her from throwing herself bodily at the minister.

Elizabeth Parris was almost asleep in one corner of the room. When at last her father finished his prayer and turned in despair to take his small daughter into his arms, she stirred sleepily and murmured, “Tituba.”

“Tituba?” repeated Mr. Parris, turning to look at the other girls. “Is it Tituba?”

“Tituba!” shouted Ann, and then the others followed. “Tituba,” they said. “She has done this.”

Before Mr. Parris could take more than a step toward the door, Mercy Lewis raised her voice. “She is not alone!” Mercy cried out through the clamor. “There are others with her. I see Goody Osburn, too.”

“And Sarah Goode!” someone shouted. And then they called out, all together in a fearful racketing confusion, “Sarah Goode! Sarah Osburn! Tituba!”

They could not have chosen better. Sarah Goode was a woman whose reputation was already doubtful. She was poor and acted half crazy as she wandered with her ragged children from door to door, begging food and shelter and cursing those who denied her. Most of the villagers dreaded the sight of Sarah Goode and her pack of children, who were suspected of stealing what they needed when they were refused help.

Sarah Osburn was, on the other hand, a respectable woman, but one who had acquired the reputation of being strange. She spent a large part of her time sick in bed, and everyone knew her for a cross, disagreeable old woman whose house was always in disorder. Although Salem Village was a proper village, with its houses and individual properties, there were outlying farms which still came within the village limits, and Sarah Osburn lived on such a farm. The people from these farms attended the village meeting house, and sometimes came miles on horseback in order to do so. Such a journey into the village was not to be undertaken casually, and frequently the only contact the village inhabitants had with these distant neighbors was in the meeting house and in the social gatherings that filled the time between sermons. Consequently, most of what the villagers knew about their distant neighbors was derived from these weekly meetings and from stories brought back by visitors to the farms.

Tituba lived in the village, in the house of Mr. Parris. Sarah Osburn lived on an outlying farm, and Sarah Goode lived wherever she could find shelter. It is certain that the bewitched girls knew a good deal about these women from local gossip — a vice heartily condemned by their church. Their mothers had surely talked among themselves of the shiftlessness of Sarah Goode, and the slovenliness of Sarah Osburn, and had perhaps even told one another that such behavior was the devil’s handiwork. Certainly the people of the village, shocked and horrified at the fact of witchcraft, were not at all astonished to find out who the first witches were.

It is possible that the girls did not really mean to accuse their friend Tituba. The mention of her name could have been a last attempt to explain the strange position in which they found themselves.

On February 29, 1692, warrants were issued against Sarah Goode, Sarah Osburn, and Tituba. It was felt that a crime so dangerous must be accepted as a public responsibility, and so four of the most important men in the village signed their names to the complaint against the witches. Thomas Putnam was one of these. He was the father of Ann, and the parish clerk. Edward Putnam, his brother, who also signed the complaint, was a deacon. Joseph Hutchinson, another signer, was generally regarded as one of the wisest men in the village, as well as one of the wealthiest. And Thomas Preston, the fourth of the men to sign, was a representative of one of the great local landowning families. The family to which Preston belonged was also one which had shown great opposition to Mr. Parris, so Thomas Preston's signature upon the first warrant showed the people that no private feuds would be allowed to stand in the way of destroying this great danger.

Today it seems strange that no one made the slightest attempt to stop this epidemic at the very beginning. A few people advised caution, and suggested that the village must not judge too hastily, but wise words were ignored in the general fear of witchcraft. The general political tension in the colony, combined with the superstitious fear of the devil's power, exploded almost at once into uncontrollable hysteria.

Mr. Parris is generally believed to be largely responsible for the witchcraft trials. He was badly frightened, and worried because his own daughter was one of the tormented girls. Moreover, he probably realized that the people would turn to their church as a protection against the devil, and that he would become a very important man if he was able to defeat the devil in his own village. Therefore, instead of trying to quiet the general fear, he seemed to be working hard to increase it. His sermons were full of fury against the witches, and he was constantly found in prayer over the afflicted girls. Perhaps he saw himself as a second Cotton Mather, battling personally with the devil. He refused to do anything at all to restrain the afflicted girls, and they wandered freely about the village like a kind of sideshow, giving performances whenever they had an audience.

The people of Salem Village did not understand clearly what was happening, but they knew it was something dreadful. They saw a group of girls whom they had known all their lives acting like maniacs. Everything seemed strange and different. The people's first thought was to protect themselves and their families, and yet at the same time everyone was excited, too. Nothing like this had happened in the village before, and it was with a kind of fearful pride that they realized that their little village had been chosen to resist the great forces of darkness.

Mr. Parris and the ministers he called in to help him repeated endless challenges against the devil. Each member of the church knew that these challenges included him. Each man saw his neighbor frightened and so became more frightened himself. No one dared leave the only protection offered the people — the protection of Mr. Parris and their church. Eventually they came to believe that if they worked together wholeheartedly and without mercy, they could root out the evil already growing among them. No one dared hesitate.

There are many theories about the behavior of the girls themselves. Ann Putnam was the ringleader, and she was a nervous, imaginative child, full of strange fancies and delusions. She may actually have convinced herself that she was being tormented by witches. On the other hand, she may have seen that pretending to be tormented was a wonderful way of attracting attention. Many years later Ann was to say, asking public penance, “I did it not out of any anger, malice, or ill will.”

Originally, the only girls bewitched were those who had gathered around Tituba. Two or three others joined them later. All of these girls had one thing in common. They were willing, originally, to risk severe displeasure and punishment for the sake of the excitement offered by Tituba and her magic. Moreover, their forbidden amusements could not have been kept secret much longer, because of the growing nervousness among the weaker girls. If they had not fortunately become bewitched just in time, they would all have been in very serious trouble. Certainly they did not at first expect to get anyone else into trouble, or do any harm. They were most unwilling to put a name to any witch when their afflictions began. It was only after the most searching questioning by Mr. Parris and the other ministers that it began to be clear that the girls must either name a witch or become objects of deep suspicion themselves.

3. A BLACK MAN FROM BOSTON

FOR MOST OF the people in Salem Village this was the first time the devil had come close enough to be recognized, but everyone knew the proper actions to be taken. The witch must be examined in the correct legal manner and questioned with regard to her crimes. These crimes were supposedly the cause of her arrest. In the first cases, the accusation was the tormenting of the girls. In later cases, the witches were accused of a wide variety of demonic acts, ranging from destruction of property to actual murder. In reality, however, it was assumed that all that was necessary was proving the prisoner a witch. That would demonstrate that she had committed the crimes.

If possible, the witch must be made to confess that she had deliberately chosen to follow the ways of the devil, and that she had signed his great black book, in which were recorded the names of all the devil's people. The more information she could give, the better, particularly with regard to the names of other witches. Also, if she described the celebrations and meetings she attended, and the laughing and singing the devil encouraged, then it would show godly folk that such gaiety was the direct road to damnation.

The preliminary examination upon suspicion of witchcraft was an attempt to determine whether there was enough evidence to hold the witch in prison to wait for a formal trial and a sentence. If the preliminary examination showed that there was not enough evidence to justify holding her for trial, she was released. Of course, there was always the possibility that she might be arrested again.

Since the judges could obviously not get hold of a copy of the devil's big black book, they had no way of knowing who had signed it and who had not. If the witch confessed, fine. If she could not be persuaded to confess, the court had to rely on various other forms of evidence which were traditionally believed to be proof of witchcraft. The most important of these was what was called spectral evidence. If the specter, or ghost, or spirit, or apparition, or vision which resembled a person appeared to another person who was afflicted by witchcraft, it was regarded as absolute proof that the first person was a witch, whether she knew it or not. The judges reasoned that only a person in league with the devil could send a ghostly form to trouble innocent people. And if the person accused protested that she knew nothing about it, and had no acquaintance whatsoever with the devil, that was even worse. It was assumed that her apparition had signed the devil's book for her.

Sometimes when particularly ignorant or foolish people were accused and heard that their spirits had been doing witchcraft without their knowledge, they were frightened enough to believe that the accusation was true. Then they were encouraged to think back as carefully and closely as possible for some small incident which might show that without knowing it they had encountered and encouraged the devil. Dreams were very popular for this. A violent nightmare, particularly one about being chased by some indescribable monster, was the clearest possible indication that the devil was after you. Many confessions hinged on such stories. One or two of the witches said sadly that if they had only realized what their bad dreams really meant, they would have hurried to the minister for protection.

There were many other ways of proving witchcraft. Since witches were supposed to be able to do magic, the possession of anything that looked like a magical appliance was very good proof. A doll, for instance. Images of the human form were specifically forbidden by the Bible. A skillful witch could fashion a rough little doll to represent an enemy, and cause the enemy great harm merely by hurting the doll. This is called image magic, and it is found in some form in every system of magical belief. It was present in Tituba's voodoo background and in the Puritan Bible teachings. Among Tituba's people it was no doubt believed that an enemy could hurt you if he managed to secure clippings from your fingernails, or a lock of your hair, or even if he caught your shadow or your footprints under the proper circumstances.

Even words could be evidence. A threat might be remembered and brought out against an accused person. Witches were able to put curses on people, and a witch who wished evil to someone was of course responsible when that person came to harm. A suspected witch in England was found guilty because, quarreling with a neighbor, she said some words under her breath, and not ten minutes later her neighbor's wagon went over a rock and broke an axle.

So the people of Salem Village felt that they had many ways of determining whether the three women named by the afflicted girls were actually witches. In England and Europe witches were tortured to make them confess, but the people of Salem Village would have thought themselves barbarians if they had used any such methods. The principal evidence was that of the afflicted girls, whose group was soon enlarged to include several married women. The most important of these was the mother of little Ann Putnam — Ann Putnam senior. In spite of the fact that these grown women were included, the group was always referred to as "the afflicted children."

On the first day of March 1692, no work was done in the homes or fields of Salem Village. Early in the morning, as though it were a Meeting Day, the people dressed in their best. They gathered excitedly around the big house of Nathaniel Ingersoll, which was half dwelling, half inn, and the main center of gossip and news in the town. It had been assumed by everyone that the examination of the witches would surely be held at Ingersoll's. By early morning almost the entire population of the village was assembled. The grownups were talking anxiously and quietly together; the children were running off down the road and back again, with wild excited shouts. The afflicted children were in a room of the inn, attended by parents and relatives.

Before anyone had time to grow really impatient, some children came running down the road, shouting that the magistrates were in sight. The people watched in wonder as the procession came nearer. The two magistrates were dressed in all the elaborate finery which belonged to their high office, and with them rode the constables and most important men of the village, all dressed in their best, and all looking very serious and important.

The magistrates were people of importance and prestige in the Salem Village neighborhood. It was considered a great honor to the whole village that these men had consented to conduct the examination of the witches. Both of them were prominent men in the Massachusetts colony, and their dignity and authority awed the villagers. John Hathorne, the presiding magistrate, was a handsome man, though cruel and narrow-minded. Jonathan Corwin, the second magistrate, was less proud and less handsome. But he was an ambitious man, happy to be the center of so much attention.

Both Hathorne and Corwin were men of education and intelligence. They both, however, believed firmly in the power of the devil and in witchcraft. They saw their duty clearly in Salem Village. They were to discover evidence of witchcraft, to examine and try witches. They would not deliberately condemn anyone who was innocent. They would not accept false evidence. They would assure every accused person a fair trial. But it was well known that the devil loved to confuse and tangle those who sat in judgment, and Hathorne and Corwin were both determined that they were not going to be misled by any devilish tricks. If the devil tried to come to the assistance of his people during these trials, he was going to find that Hathorne and Corwin were more than a match for him.

The parade of legal might drew rein before Ingersoll's inn, and it was immediately apparent that there was not going to be room for everyone inside. A brief consultation took place among the magistrates, Mr. Parris, and several visiting ministers. Mr. Parris was of the opinion that this was a matter of enough serious heavenly importance to be conducted in the meeting house. He overruled the doubts of the others about the fitness of holding a trial in a house of religion. And so off to the meeting house paraded the magistrates, the village leaders, the afflicted children and their companions, and, finally, the rest of the population of the village. They crowded hastily into the meeting house.

The magistrates were seated at a long table placed directly in front of the pulpit, where they would face the people in the audience. The afflicted children were allowed to sit in the front row. Between the magistrates and the afflicted children a space was left, where the prisoners were to stand.

When everything was quiet, and everyone had settled down, Mr. Parris mounted his pulpit and prayed for the help of heaven in the examination to come. When he was finished, Constables Locker and Herrick brought in the three accused women. Sarah Goode was defiant and pulled away from Constable Locker because he held her too roughly. She glared at the judges and the assembled people. Sarah Osburn was frightened, and Tituba was confused. Although all three women were fairly well known to the people of the village, the spectators now craned their necks and tried to stand on the benches to catch a glimpse of them. Because of the general pushing to see the prisoners, the magistrates directed the constables to bring the three women up onto the platform beside the magistrates' table so that they could be clearly seen.

The first evidence was given by the constables. They reported that the three accused, and their homes and possessions, had all been thoroughly searched, and no sign of magic or fiendish property had been found. The prisoners were then asked whether they pleaded guilty or not guilty, and all three said firmly that they were not guilty. Sarah Goode was the first to be examined. During her examination Tituba and Sarah Osburn were taken back to Ingersoll's inn to wait.

The examination of Sarah Goode, which is preserved in legal records of the time, is a clear example of the kind of "fair" trial given the witches. Since Sarah Goode was the first person accused in Salem Village, the trial was a novelty to both audience and accused, and no one was quite sure how to behave. Sarah Goode was very angry and very frightened. She was a poor, ignorant woman who had not been very faithful in her churchgoing, and she was almost speechless before the fierce gaze of the magistrates. Moreover, so many important people seemed to think she was a witch that she was almost persuaded that they were right.

When she looked around from her place on the platform, the faces she saw were faces she had known all her life. Many of these people had been unkind to her, and she had quarreled with many of them. She knew that most of the people in Salem Village disliked her, but now she could see that they were afraid of her. It was almost enough to make her afraid of her own self. On her right was the long table, and the magistrates and clerks and ministers leaning over it to look at her. Below her, in the front row, she could see little Ann Putnam, fresh and neat and clean, sitting beside her mother. She had known Ann since the child was born, and her mother, too. Ann Putnam senior had once driven her from the door when she came begging food. There was little Betsy Parris, and Mercy Lewis, and Mary Warren, all of them seeming so honest and obedient.

"Sarah Goode," said Magistrate Hathorne at last. He leaned farther forward to watch her carefully, and the courtroom was very quiet. "Sarah Goode," he said gravely, "what evil spirit have you familiarity with?"

Sarah Goode looked around helplessly and tried twice to speak before she could make the word come out. "None," she said finally.

"Have you made no contracts with the devil?"

The people in the meeting house shivered and moved closer together, thinking of how Goody Goode, right up there on the platform, might have seen and even talked with the devil himself.

"No," said Sarah Goode. But no one believed her.

"Why do you hurt these children?" Judge Hathorne demanded sternly.

"I do *not* hurt them," said Sarah Goode with indignation. She was frightened and confused when they talked about the devil, but she knew Ann and Betsy and Mary and Mercy and the rest so well that their accusations only made her angry. "I scorn it," she said contemptuously.

"Then whom do you employ to do it?" Judge Hathorne asked. "To hurt the children?"

"I? I employ nobody."

"What creature, then? If not a person, what creature?"

"No creature," said Sarah Goode. "I am falsely accused."

"Have you made a contract with the devil?"

"No," said Sarah Goode flatly, looking Judge Hathorne in the eye as she spoke.

Judge Hathorne shook his head and whispered to Judge Corwin. Then Judge Hathorne turned to look down upon the afflicted children in the front row. “Children,” he said gently, “look here on Sarah Goode, and tell if she is the person who hurts you.”

Gravely, Ann and Betsy and Mary and Mercy and Abigail and the rest turned their eyes to look at Sarah Goode. Then, so suddenly that the meeting house was thrown into a wild clamor, Ann Putnam screamed and leaped to her feet and then fell onto the floor, doubled up and screaming for help.

Before anyone could come to Ann’s assistance, the whole group of afflicted children were screaming and rolling on the floor and dashing themselves blindly against the benches and walls. The audience was in dreadful confusion. A woman fainted and her husband almost had to fight his way to the door to carry her outside. Everyone was anxious to get as far away from the witch as possible.

“She is pulling my arm,” Ann Putnam was yelling, “pulling my arm and biting me because I told on her!”

The others, rolling and kicking so madly that it was impossible to get close enough to hold them, cried out that Goody Goode was pinching them, scratching them, biting and pushing.

“She is going to bite Mary Warren,” Mercy called out, and Mary Warren shrieked and gasped that she was bitten.

The magistrates stood up behind their table to watch in shocked silence. Meanwhile, Sarah Goode stood on the platform, forgotten, her face white and her eyes staring, too frightened to move. At last Mr. Parris, accustomed to making himself heard in his own meeting house, was able to raise his voice above the noise. “Turn her away!” he shouted to the constables who waited helplessly near Sarah Goode. “Turn her eyes away so that she cannot look upon them.” The constables seized Sarah Goode’s arms and whirled her around so that her back was toward the afflicted girls, and like magic there was quiet again.

All over the meeting house people stood, hesitating in the act of flight. Judge Hathorne still had his mouth open. The afflicted girls got up off the floor, dusted off their clothes, and went back to their seats. They were no longer neat and clean. Their clothes were torn and their faces tear-streaked, their hair was tangled, and people near them could see the marks of teeth on their arms. Sobbing a little still, they sat down in the front row again.

“She has bitten them,” someone whispered. And the words ran like a wind through the meeting house. “There is blood on Mary Warren’s arm. She has bitten them.”

“Sarah Goode,” Judge Hathorne cried out, “do you not see *now* what you have done? Why do you not tell us the truth? Why do you thus torment these poor children?”

“I do not,” said Sarah Goode helplessly. “I do not torment them.”

“How came they thus tormented?”

“What do I know?” Sarah Goode was more bewildered than anyone else in the meeting house. Here was surely witchcraft, and yet she *knew* she had done nothing. She had only stood here amazed while the children were tormented, so who *could* have done it?

“Who was it, then,” asked Judge Hathorne softly, “that tormented the children?”

Shaking her head in wonder, Sarah Goode said at last, “It was Osburn.” It must have been, she was thinking, because *she* had not done it. It must be that Osburn and Tituba were tormenting the children. “It was Osburn,” Sarah Goode said, nodding her head.

* * *

This was the examination of Sarah Goode. It was perfectly clear to the judges and to the people that she was guilty. She had bitten the children right before their eyes. When she was turned around, the children were quiet. The children saw her apparition when it came to attack them, and recognized it clearly. No further proof was necessary. It was a good thing, too, that Witch Goode had been frightened into naming her accomplice, Osburn. Indeed, the devil was going to find that he had picked the wrong place when he decided to settle in Salem Village.

The people in the meeting house sat back comfortably as Sarah Goode was taken back to prison and Sarah Osburn brought in. Because of the horrible experience with Sarah Goode, this witch was placed so that she could not look down at the children without turning entirely around to do so, and the constables stood ready to catch her if she tried to move.

The case against Sarah Osburn had grown much stronger since Witch Goode had incriminated her. Otherwise, it was much the same case. Her spirit had tormented the afflicted children. No one liked her much. She had at one time been a respectable and well-to-do woman, but after the death of her first husband she had married again, but had not been happy with her second husband. People began to wonder, now, about the death of her first husband. Could it have been due to witchcraft? And was her second husband afraid of her because of it? Anyone who could bewitch a man to death would surely feel few scruples about tormenting a group of young girls. Wild speculations began to fly about the audience, and people whispered to one another things they never before had dreamed of saying — cruel, unprovable things which would not have occurred to them a week earlier.

Probably Sarah Osburn was as ill mentally as physically. She was a semi-invalid and did not come often into the village. She frequently missed service in the meeting house. She was an unhappy, lonely woman, and in her confusion she made a bad appearance in the court. It was reported by the constables who came to arrest her that she had been surprised at the accusation and had said ruefully that she was more likely to be bewitched herself than to be a witch. When Judge Hathorne, in great excitement, asked her what she could possibly mean by such a statement, poor Sarah Osburn could only answer truthfully, “I was one time frighted in my sleep, and either saw or dreamed I saw a thing like a man all black, which did pinch me and pull me by the hair.”

Before the judge could speak, a nervous stirring began in the audience. Finally a woman rose and said, red-faced, that she wanted to tell something on Sarah Osburn. The judge bowed graciously and bade the woman speak, and the woman, with much hesitation and correction from her husband and her friends, finally explained that Goody Osburn had long ago told her this story about the black man and the dream. Goody Osburn had also told her, the woman said, that she would never believe that lying spirit again.

“Well,” Judge Hathorne said, and turned to Sarah Osburn. “Now,” he continued, “what lying spirit *was* this that you would not believe again?”

“It was a voice,” said Sarah Osburn miserably. “I told her of a voice I thought I heard, dreaming.”

“What did it say to you?”

“That I should not go to meeting anymore. But I said I would go, and I did go, the next Sabbath Day.”

Mr. Parris leaned over, then, and whispered in the judge’s ear. “But,” said Judge Hathorne, “Mr. Parris tells me that you have not been at meeting since. It must be the devil who tempts you to stay away from meeting.”

“Alas,” said Sarah Osburn, “I have been sick and not able to go. It is well known that I have been sick.” She turned to appeal to the audience, moving so suddenly that the constables were not prepared. “Will no one defend me?” she cried.

But no one could hear Goody Osburn. The minute she turned and looked toward the audience, the girls in the front row were thrown again into their convulsions. They screamed and howled so loudly that no other voice could be heard. It was not until the constables had caught Sarah Osburn and wrenched her around again that quiet once more descended upon the meeting house.

“Do you see *now* how your devil defends you?” Judge Hathorne demanded of Sarah Osburn.

The evidence was complete, and Sarah Osburn was taken to prison to await trial and sentence.

Tituba had been saved for the last. After the plain drabness of the first two witches, Tituba was an exciting sight, with her dark skin and her earrings and her colored turban. In the audience people whispered to one another that they wondered that they had not perceived long ago that Tituba was a wicked creature. Now that she stood on the platform, everyone could see how strange and unusual — and of course wicked — she was. People who had seen her every day now shivered with fear.

Tituba, for her part, was perfectly ready to testify to anything that was asked of her. She had only pleaded not guilty in the first place because the others did. She did not understand more than half of what the judges wanted, but she was willing to help in any way she could, and she made it clear at once that she wanted to help. Moreover, she understood that the one thing she was *not* to testify about was the violent whipping Mr. Parris had given her to make sure that she told the truth.

“Why do you hurt these children?” Judge Hathorne asked her.

“*I* do not hurt them,” Tituba said readily.

"Who is it, then?"

"The devil," said Tituba.

"Did you never see the devil?" asked the judge.

"The devil came to me," Tituba told him, "and bid me serve him."

The audience was silent, fascinated, and the afflicted children nodded to one another. The judges bent forward to listen, and Tituba continued, "There are four women who hurt the children."

Throughout the meeting house there was a sudden shocked silence. Witch Goode was one. Witch Osburn was two. Tituba was surely three. Then suddenly there was a great burst of chatter and questions and quick startled sounds as people turned to look upon one another in fear. Who was the fourth witch?

"Also," said Tituba loudly, over the confusion, "there is a tall black man from Boston who meets with them. I have seen them all."

Judge Hathorne, standing behind the platform, asked, "*When* did you see them?"

"Last night," said Tituba, "at Boston. There are four women and one man. They hurt the children, and they tell me if I will not hurt the children *they* will hurt *me*."

The only people quiet in the meeting house were the afflicted girls, who smiled at one another as though this were no more than they had expected. Judge Hathorne had to stop his questioning until order was restored in the meeting house.

When it was quiet enough for Tituba to continue, she went on to say that she had four times been visited by an apparition like a great black dog. This dog spoke to her and demanded that she serve him as a convert to evil. When she was afraid, the dog changed to a man and threatened to hurt her.

And when she was too afraid to answer him, he began to speak kindly and offered her a yellow bird as a gift, which she refused.

"And," Tituba added, "he told me he had more pretty things that he would give me if I would serve him."

"What were those pretty things?" the judge demanded eagerly. Pretty things were not usual in Salem Village, and the audience waited tensely.

But Tituba only shook her head and said sadly, "He did not show me them."

She had seen two cats, though, she said. One of them was black and one was red. And the previous night the four witches and the black man from Boston had pulled and hauled her to the Putnam house, where they made her pinch little Ann.

Ann Putnam confirmed this. She had certainly been tormented the night before by Tituba and Goode and Osburn and — now that she thought of it — by a black man from Boston, and *two* other witches.

The other afflicted children joined in. Some of them had seen the black man from Boston and Tituba and Goode and Osburn. And almost all of the children now recalled that they had seen two mysterious witches wrapped in shawls whom they did not recognize. However, it was generally agreed that the black man from Boston was directing the others.

Apparently no one at the time questioned how they all knew that the black man was from Boston, but they were all quite positive on this point. The fact that the black man came from Boston seemed to be positive proof of his wickedness.

Judge Hathorne, eager to secure all possible information from this ready source, asked Tituba how she and the other witches — not to mention the gentleman from Boston — traveled from place to place to torment the children.

“We ride upon sticks,” Tituba told him.

“Do you go through the trees or over them?” inquired the judge with interest.

But Tituba did not know. “We see nothing,” she said, “but are there presently.”

Tituba also said that Sarah Goode had gotten one of the yellow birds from the generous stranger, but that Sarah Osburn got a thing with a head like a woman, and two legs and wings.

At this moment Abigail Williams shouted out that this was true. Only the day before she herself had seen this creature, with its head and wings, and while she watched, it had turned into Goody Osburn.

When Tituba announced that Sarah Goode had sent a wolf to bother Elizabeth Hubbard, Elizabeth jumped up and said that was true. She *had* been teased and tormented by a wolf. She turned to the people around her and demanded, “Did I not say it? Did I not complain of a great wolf?” The people around her nodded and said why, yes, now that she mentioned it, they *did* remember her complaining about something like a wolf.

Tituba’s evidence went on and on. No matter what was suggested to her, she agreed with enthusiasm, and every new fact was supported by the afflicted children. Information began to pile up. The witches met with the black man from Boston, who told them what to do. They traveled through the air to wherever they wanted to go, they kept yellow birds and cats and strangeheaded monsters. They tormented the children because the children told on Goode and Osburn. Worst of all, Tituba and the children insisted over and over again, there were still two witches unidentified. No one was safe until these two were caught.

A child living in Salem Village would have found that first day a time of excitement and fear. The children were as well aware of witchcraft as their mothers and fathers. They believed that the witches in the village were as concretely dangerous as sickness or broken bones or storms which might bring trees crashing down upon the houses. Yet, to a boy or girl sitting in the meeting house that morning, it must have seemed that this was an occasion much more interesting than the usual meeting with Mr. Parris's endless sermons. Although they would have seen the usual plain bare walls and the same people who sat listening to Mr. Parris every Sabbath, they must have been impressed by the splendid clothes of the judges upon the platform. They must have stretched their necks to see the afflicted girls sitting in the front row. If they looked to either side they would have seen sudden lines of deep worry on the faces of their mothers and fathers.

Their parents had probably given them strict instructions, enforced by threats of the most dire punishments, not under any circumstances to go near the Putnam house, or the Parris house, or any places where the afflicted girls gathered together. If they met any of the girls on the street, they were to run directly home and shut the door behind them. Moreover, if by some chance they were around when Goody Goode or Goody Osburn or Tituba was being escorted to or from prison, and one of the witches should glance in their direction, the children were to hide. At once. Witches already so deeply involved might not hesitate to torment any child they saw.

Any mother certainly would only have permitted her children to come that morning because she believed that all the witches were safely under guard and could not do much harm. When it seemed, however, that there were still two witches undiscovered, and that horrible man from Boston who might come back at any minute, perhaps even walk right into the meeting house with his terrible flashing eyes and his pack of black and red cats …

The group of familiar faces in the meeting house must have seemed strangely altered. Hard as it was at first to believe that Goody Goode and Goody Osburn were real witches, it must have been much harder to think that there were still two people sitting there among the rest, just like anyone else (perhaps in the row ahead?) but secretly thinking of evil, perhaps even now choosing a new victim.

People looked with apprehension upon their neighbors. Goody Proctor was a godly woman, but the witchcraft had come right into her house and caught her own servant, Mary Warren. Could Goody Proctor be a witch too? Mr. Parris was a minister, but even his house was not safe. Goody Bishop was always nice to the children in the village, but the grownups said she was "willful." There sat Goody Cloyse. The Cloyses were proud people, and hard to get along with, and they had no love for Mr. Parris. Still, no one could say a wrong word about the Cloyse family. They were related to Mr. Preston, who sat upon the platform with the magistrates. Even Abigail Hobbs, whom everyone knew to be a wild creature, wandering in the woods at night, did not have the air of a witch as she sat with her hands folded in her lap, looking as worried as everyone else.

But perhaps the Cloyse family was so proud because they had gotten their land and their big houses with the devil's help. Maybe there was a reason why the witchcraft started in Goody Proctor's family. And who could tell what Abigail Hobbs met in the woods at night?

A woman leaned over to whisper to her husband. "I note that Goody Corey kept her word," she said. "She *said* she scorned to watch what she could not believe."

With the three witches back in prison, safely chained down, the villagers left the meeting house, avoiding one another, not stopping to talk. Only a few brave people dared stop by Ingersoll's inn, and they did not linger long.

Almost everyone wanted to be safe at home, with doors and windows locked. The children went uneasily to bed, glancing into dark corners for the flash of unholy eyes, and the mothers and fathers sat long by the firelight. It was clear that their homes and their children were not safe until the two unknown witches were found and imprisoned.

It was also clear that it was the duty of every soul in the village to make this battle a personal one. Each family was called upon to defend its own home and to work with the ministers and magistrates to find the witches. The first thing to do was to try to remember every slightest incident, no matter how long ago, which might indicate that some person had fallen to the enemy. Every action was important, every word, every quarrel.

Mr. Parris spent long hours with the afflicted girls, sometimes working alone, sometimes assisted by ministers from neighboring parishes whom he invited to help him. When Mr. Parris was not with the girls, their parents and relatives stayed by them always. Because there were still two witches at large, the girls were still tormented, but for several days they could not see their tormentors. They moaned that their eyes were misted over to keep them from seeing, and when they tried to speak any name, they were choked and could not make a sound.

From the pulpit in the meeting house the people of Salem Village heard that they were chosen among all the people of the world to fight the devil face to face. Mr. Parris begged the people of the village to turn informer on their friends and neighbors — even, if need be, on their own families. The afflicted girls were shown off everywhere, and whenever there was enough of an audience collected, they could be relied upon to throw themselves into fits. The girls were the center of attraction everywhere, were exhibited to all visitors in the town, and were beginning to be famous in neighboring villages.

Moreover, the fits of the afflicted girls became more elaborate as time went on. At first their fits were largely a matter of yelling and rolling around on the floor. Then, as their fame and their audiences grew, they fell to biting and scratching and making horrible faces to show what agonies they were suffering. So long as people believed that they really *were* suffering, their fits were horrible to watch. It was dreadful to see a dozen girls all at once writhing with every appearance of violent pain, showing fresh bites on their arms, long red scratches on their legs, and staring wildly at the empty air, pointing to where a witch was coming at them with a knife.

One fact that made the performance even more convincing was the teamwork among the girls. When Mercy Lewis cried out that a witch was approaching Mary Warren, Mary would then scream and fall down as though struck. Sometimes they would huddle together, as though protecting one another, and then all at once fall scrambling to the ground.

For nearly two weeks after the arrest of the first three witches the excitement continued in the village. The witches were examined further, but neither Sarah Goode nor Sarah Osburn would confess to anything, and Tituba still could not reveal the names of the other two witches. On March seventh the three witches were formally escorted to prison in Boston, with much ceremony and public attention. For a week after that the afflicted girls insisted that they could not name any new witches.

Then, guided again by young Ann Putnam, people began to murmur around the village that another witch had been discovered. Thomas Putnam was heard to observe that people who pretended not to believe in witches generally had the most to fear from an investigation. Goody Bishop remarked that *she* had heard, on the best authority, that some people were not as respectable as they seemed. It was generally agreed that refusing to attend the examinations of the witches showed a guilty conscience.

On March 19, 1692, a warrant was issued for the arrest of Martha Corey upon suspicion of witchcraft.

4. GREAT NOISES BY THE AFFLICTED

WITH THE ARREST of Martha Corey the entire pattern of the witchcraft fever changed. Overnight people began to realize that, rather than rooting out four or five bad characters, they were forced to deal with what seemed a widespread and deeply ingrown evil. It required some courage on the part of the afflicted girls to name Martha Corey, because she was neither defenseless nor stupid. She was an elderly, respectable matron who was well thought of in the church, intelligent and well educated for her time. She had stayed away from the first examinations to show her disapproval of what was going on. She had declared frequently that if she did believe in witches — and she was not at all sure that she did — it would not be in witches like poor old Goody Osburn or crazy Sarah Goode.

When it was told in the village that Goody Corey had been "cried out on" by the afflicted girls, it was whispered, too, that this was only the beginning, that the circle of witches had only been partly uncovered. People began to imagine that there must be a witch society in their town, an organization known as a coven. This meant a group meeting to make plans together, rather than a few witches operating individually and without any kind of special organization.

Martha Corey was a woman of great courage. When the constables came to her house to investigate her, she laughed in their faces and told them, "I know what you are come for. You are come to talk with me about being a witch, but I am none."

The constables did not think it was entirely proper for a woman to laugh at them when they told her she was accused of witchcraft. But Martha

Corey continued to laugh at them and at everyone else. Her suspicions that there were no such things as witches were easily confirmed when she saw that she herself was accused. She knew herself to be innocent, and so believed that she would be able to prove before the people and the magistrates that not only she but the “witches” before her were harmless women, falsely accused.

Unfortunately, Martha Corey did not correctly estimate the state the village had gotten itself into. She lived far enough out of town to be out of reach of common gossip, and so she had no notion of the terror the witches had inspired. She came into the village to meet young Ann Putnam face to face and force the girl to admit she was wrong. But when Goodwife Corey entered the room where little Ann lay in bed, Ann was immediately taken by such a dreadful convulsion that her parents had to push Goodwife Corey out of the room. They did this, they said, in order to save Ann’s life. When Martha Corey left Ann’s room and could no longer look upon Ann, the child was quiet and peaceful. Thomas Putnam lost no time in reporting this to Mr. Parris. Thus poor Martha Corey, who had been so sure that there were no witches, found herself the next to stand up in the meeting house before the magistrates.

Even then, however, Goody Corey could not take the whole thing seriously. She felt so safe in her own religious convictions and in the knowledge of her own innocence that she was sure no evidence could hold against her. Her first remark to the judges, before they could ask her a question, was “Give me leave to go to prayer.”

She knew as well as the judges that witches cannot pray. And at first, every time Judge Hathorne asked her why she tormented the children, she answered only that she would tell him nothing until he allowed her a few minutes at prayer. At last Judge Hathorne grew impatient and said that she was not there to pray, but to prove she was not a witch.

"I never had to do with witchcraft since I was born," Goody Corey said calmly. "I am a gospel woman."

But at that very moment Ann Putnam shouted out, "Look, there is a black man whispering in her ear. Do you not see him?"

The other children took up the cry. All of them saw a black man whispering in Goody Corey's ear, telling her what to say.

At last Judge Hathorne asked, "What did he say to you when he whispered in your ear?"

Martha Corey smiled a little before she answered. At last she replied, "We must not believe all that these distracted children say." Her voice was patient, and she held out one hand to Judge Hathorne, as though she was sure he would understand.

Immediately, in imitation of the gesture, Ann Putnam's arms were forced out in front of her and held stiff. Then the arms of the other girls stretched out. And as long as Martha Corey held out her hand, the arms of the afflicted children were held taut and rigid, while they begged Goody Corey to let them go. When Martha Corey dropped her hand, the arms of all the children fell too.

Judge Hathorne continued, his voice severe. "Cannot you tell me what that man whispered?"

"I saw nobody," said Martha Corey.

The children then began to cry, and fall onto the floor, and ask pitifully for help. They cried that their lips were being bitten, and it was clearly seen that there was blood on their mouths. When they continued begging Goody Corey to release them, everyone could see that Goody Corey was biting her own lips, and so causing the children's lips to be bitten. When, in surprise, Martha Corey stopped biting her lips, the children were free of pain.

"We must not believe distracted persons," Goody Corey said urgently to Judge Hathorne.

But her case was already lost. If she turned even slightly toward the afflicted children, they fell screaming to the floor. If she made the smallest gesture, their arms and faces were wrenched into a distortion of the same gesture. And whenever she tried to speak, the judge shouted for her to be quiet.

"She will not come to service *next* Sabbath," Abigail Williams howled.

"I do not care," said Goody Corey flatly. She would have spoken more, but Judge Hathorne raised his voice above hers.

"Tell me the truth, will you?" he cried out. "Did you not say that the magistrates' eyes were blinded, and you would open them?" This, of all the things he had so far heard in that meeting house, was the remark which most angered Judge Hathorne. Martha Corey had said, before her examination, when she was permitted one brief prayer, that she trusted that the blindness of the judges would be removed, and they would see the truth. It was not a strange prayer under the circumstances, but Judge Hathorne interpreted it as an insult intended for himself and could not forget it. He could not possibly believe that there was any chance of *his* being wrong, and he blamed Goody Corey for hinting at such a thing.

Again and again during the examination of Goody Corey the judge returned to this unfortunate remark, and every time he referred to it, Martha Corey laughed out loud. She could see that she had wounded his vanity, and in spite of her danger she found him ridiculous. Her laughing, of course, only made things worse.

"Well?" he said to her. "You said you would open our eyes. Well?"

Martha Corey only laughed again.

The judge scowled furiously. “Do you believe you shall go unpunished?” he asked her, raging.

“I have nothing to do with witchcraft.”

Someone called out from the crowd in the meeting house that Goody Corey had said she would help no one to find out witches. Judge Hathorne, who seemed aware only that Goody Corey was laughing at him, demanded again, “Did you not say you would open our eyes? Why do you not? Why do you just stand there laughing?”

“I cannot help it,” said Martha Corey weakly, laughing so that she could hardly speak. “I cannot help it.”

“Is it a laughing matter to see these afflicted persons?” said the judge grimly.

“I cannot help it,” said poor Martha Corey.

The afflicted children, perhaps perceiving that the judge was almost beside himself, gave him a chance to recover by putting on a demonstration of fits and convulsions that almost ended the examination entirely. By the time they were quiet again, the judge was able to proceed, and Martha Corey’s examination continued. Again and again she denied having practiced witchcraft, more sober now that she saw her denials convinced no one.

Her examination filled a whole day, and to the very last she persisted in her two basic ideas: If there were witches, they were not such creatures as herself and Osburn and Goode; and secondly, the afflicted girls were poor distracted things, and no sensible person should believe a word they said.

Judge Hathorne was still smarting under Goody Corey’s mockery at the end of the day, but she no longer had the strength to laugh at him. She saw clearly by then that she was on her way to prison. When the examination was over and the constables prepared to take her out, she turned once more to the people of the village who had been her friends and neighbors and said, “Ye are all against me. What can I do?”

After Martha Corey had been bound in chains and taken to prison, her husband, old Giles Corey, was brought before the magistrates. After a good deal of arguing back and forth, he was persuaded to agree that his wife had sometimes acted very oddly. The cat had been acting oddly, too, he said. So had the cow. He couldn’t say that it *wasn’t* witchcraft. If the judges and ministers said his wife was a witch, he was not the man to argue with them.

However, Giles Corey went home and thought about the whole matter. And the more he thought, the more he doubted. The cat and the cow had both recovered, after all. Very soon Goodman Corey showed up in the village again, to tell the judges that he had made a mistake. But before he had time to finish telling them about the cow, Goodman Corey was in prison for witchcraft.

While Goodman Corey was at home wondering, however, the chase had gone on without him. Once everyone became convinced that a vast underground organization of witches existed, there was nothing to prevent the afflicted girls from crying out upon the highest members of the community. Some of these people, argued their neighbors, could have been secret witches for years, after all. Perhaps their very honors, their wealth, depended upon the assistance of the devil!

Rebecca Nurse, for instance, was the last person in Salem Village one would have thought of in connection with witchcraft. She and her husband were not actually members of the Salem Village church, but belonged to the neighboring congregation of Topsfield. They came to the Salem Village meeting house because it was more convenient for them, and because most of their family lived in or around Salem Village and attended that meeting house.

Rebecca Nurse and her husband had always been deeply religious, hardworking people, and perhaps there was resentment felt toward them because they had risen by their own efforts from poverty to a position of wealth and importance. Moreover, the great local family of which Rebecca Nurse was the matriarch had always been opposed to Mr. Parris's installation as minister in Salem Village. Also, there was a long history of land feuds between the villagers and the landowning faction to which the Nurses belonged. Worst of all, after the first hysterical scene in the meeting house at the examinations for witchcraft, the Nurses and allied families had pointedly withdrawn from the Salem Village church and switched to their meeting house in Topsfield.

None of this proved in any way that Rebecca Nurse was a witch, but it does suggest a reason for the violent reaction on both sides caused by her arrest. Mr. Parris and his witch-fearing villagers took old Goody Nurse from a sickbed and brought her before the magistrates. She was well over seventy years old, almost entirely deaf, and of a childlike simplicity in her religious convictions.

Thomas Preston, who signed the first witch-warrant, was a son-in-law of Rebecca Nurse. Her sisters had married into the Easty and Cloyse families. They were all people of high standing, and they rose in a fury to defend the head of their family from the shameful charges brought against her.

Her examination was a cruel affair. Goody Nurse was largely unable to hear the questions asked her and relied upon simple statements of piety to defend herself. Ann Putnam senior was her principal accuser, and during the entire examination showed a strong personal hatred for Goodwife Nurse.

There was for the first time an element of sympathy for the accused among the audience in the meeting house. Most of the people had for so long regarded Rebecca Nurse as a saint that it was difficult for them now to see her as a fiend. Mrs. Putnam did what she could to prove the charges, and the afflicted children followed her lead. They screamed, ranted, accused Goody Nurse of frightful crimes, including murder, and continued their usual dreadful imitation of the prisoner's every gesture. In spite of all this, even Judge Hathorne was touched by the pious manner of the prisoner, and for the first time showed doubt of a witch's guilt.

Again and again Judge Hathorne asked Goody Nurse to repeat her innocence, and his questions showed that he thought her falsely accused. He could not compete, however, with the influence of the accusers. At one point Rebecca Nurse, in her earnestness, lifted both hands to heaven and cried out, "O Lord, help me!" The sincerity of this appeal was immediately lost in the actions of the afflicted girls. They copied the gesture and mimicked the words, some laughing coarsely, some crying out for help to release their arms.

"I pray God clear you, if you be innocent," said Judge Hathorne helplessly.

Mary Walcott and Elizabeth Hubbard stood up in their places. One of them swore solemnly that Goodwife Nurse had come to her at night and sat upon her chest to suffocate her. The other pointed out that a black man stood, even now, whispering in Goodwife Nurse's ear and that yellow birds were flying about her head.

Rebecca Nurse was so bewildered by such accusations that she could think of nothing to say. Then the other afflicted girls took up the cry. And Ann Putnam senior called out that Goody Nurse was not deaf, but could hear all the questions perfectly; it was the black man whispering in her ear who confused her. Goody Nurse's bewilderment and obvious ill health troubled Judge Hathorne, and he questioned her closely to discover whether she had become sick as a result of her association with the devil. When Rebecca Nurse denied any association with the devil, Judge Hathorne asked, puzzled, "Then how come you sick? Have you no wounds?"

"I have none but old age," said Goodwife Nurse with simple honesty. Wearily, she leaned her head to one side, and instantly Abigail Williams cried out that Witch Nurse was breaking Betty Hubbard's neck. Attendants with Elizabeth Hubbard begged in great alarm for Goody Nurse's head to be held up again, for the child's neck was cruelly twisted. It was not until Rebecca Nurse was forced to raise her head again that Elizabeth Hubbard gave up her agonizing position.

During the first few trials the afflicted children had confined their demonstrations to short periods of time, and between fits they were reasonably docile. However, with the trial of Rebecca Nurse, and urged on by the malice of Ann Putnam senior, their performances became largely uncontrollable. From that time on, the examinations were conducted through the unceasing howling and acrobatics of the children. Much of the court record shows gaps in the testimony, where the questions could not be heard because of the din in the room.

The examination of Rebecca Nurse ended in a scene of the wildest confusion. The record itself was cut short, finally, because "great noises by the afflicted" prevented the reporter from hearing a word that was said. There is no doubt, however, about the result of the examination. Rebecca Nurse followed the other witches to prison.

The sensational aspects of the examination of Rebecca Nurse did much to overshadow the very brief examination which immediately followed hers. Dorcas Goode, daughter of Sarah Goode, was questioned for no more than a few minutes before being sent to join her mother in prison on suspicion of witchcraft. Dorcas occupies a unique position in the history of Salem Village witchcraft. She was not quite five years old.

The constable held little Dorcas in his arms during her examination, and Judge Hathorne made little attempt to question a child obviously unable to understand more than a fraction of what he said. Ann Putnam, Mary Walcott, and Mercy Lewis accused Dorcas of biting and choking them. When a sudden doubt swept the audience, as it did to those who glanced from Dorcas's tiny hands to the strong solid throats of Ann and Mary and Mercy, the girls screamed further. Little Dorcas was even now sticking pins into them, they yelled. And indeed the pins were found — very lightly inserted — just where the girls insisted that Dorcas had come in apparition and put them. As a result, five-year-old Dorcas joined her mother in prison.

* * *

Once Rebecca Nurse and Dorcas Goode had been condemned as witches, there was no reason for the afflicted girls to hesitate in naming anyone else. For a court which could condemn to prison a religious old woman and a five-year-old child upon the evidence offered by the girls could be relied upon for any absurdity. The people of the village, however, were more reluctant. The condemnation of Rebecca Nurse had worried a good many people and angered many more. No one dared to defy the court and the afflicted girls upon the question of witchcraft itself, but the family of Rebecca Nurse was aroused, and doubts of her guilt were being openly announced.

At this point the people came to meeting on the following Sunday to find that instead of Mr. Parris they were to hear a visiting clergyman named Deodat Lawson who was noted for the violence of his sermons. Mr. Lawson arrived in Salem Village with a good sermon already prepared, and within a few minutes after his arrival was visited at Ingersoll's inn by Mary Walcott, who fell into a fit at the sight of him. Her attendants explained to Mr. Lawson that the fit was caused by the extreme fear he inspired in the witches who tormented her. This horrible experience so unsettled Mr. Lawson that he retired to rewrite his sermon, to make it more emphatic. The result — which he delivered in the Salem Village pulpit on Sunday morning — was so eloquent that the sermon was printed and sold not only in Massachusetts but in the whole of New England and, finally, in England.

Mr. Lawson told the unhappy Salem Villagers in the most graphic terms that their sins had brought this great plague upon them. "Your sin will find you out," he told them. "You shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord, and doomed to those endless, easeless, and remediless torments prepared for the devil and his angels. If you have been guilty, the prayers of the people of God are against you."

He begged the people to forget any weakness, any softness toward any other human being. He entreated them to give up compassion and kindness and brotherly love, and he announced at last, ringingly, that it was the Lord's command that they should turn upon one another with distrust, to seek out and destroy any upon whom the slightest suspicion rested. No one must be allowed to escape because there was a chance that he might be innocent. "And," Mr. Lawson explained, "if innocent persons be suspected, it is to be ascribed to God's pleasure."

Mr. Lawson finished his sermon on a mournful note. He greatly feared that some persons, accused and found guilty and imprisoned, might attribute their accusations to the malice of others. They might even, he said, feel some resentment toward the people who had caused them to lie in chains in prison. He earnestly prayed that such unworthy reactions would be suppressed.

Thus Mr. Lawson’s instructions to the people of Salem Village and, eventually, to all New England and England, were to carry tales against their neighbors and, if possible, dig out enough evidence to accuse them. If they, in turn, reversed the process and accused the *accusers*, the latter were not to feel angry but to submit quietly and be thankful that their crimes were discovered in time.

As in all such epidemics where there is no actual disease germ to be communicated, the sickness was not controllable. Everyone was in danger, because no one, not even saintly Rebecca Nurse, has ever spent a lifetime cautiously enough to escape all criticism. One unfortunate woman was subsequently arrested because friends remembered a quarrel she had had with her husband some five or six years before. Among the angry statements passed back and forth at that time were several by the husband to the effect that his wife was crazy, or bewitched, and that if he had any sense he would send her back home to her parents.

Once the accusation was made, evidence could easily be found. The witchcraft epidemic resembled other such great waves of fear and distrust in that proof, as such, was never required. The mere accusation was enough to destroy the person against whom it was aimed, and any kind of trivial incident, true or not, was considered sufficient evidence to support the accusation.

Mr. Lawson’s sermon went on for more than three hours, but no one in the meeting house yawned or fidgeted. When Mr. Lawson paused for breath, the afflicted girls supplied excitement with their screaming and yelling.

Beyond the frightening effect which it had upon the congregation of Salem Village, Mr. Lawson's sermon had one other immediate result. It brought the attention of the whole country to the witchcraft cases. What had begun as a private affair in Salem Village was now seen as the responsibility of the colony as a whole, and, eventually, of the English government.

The following Sunday Mr. Parris, not to be outdone by a visiting minister, mounted his pulpit and announced a sermon of his own on the devils loose in his church. Sarah Cloyse, sister of Rebecca Nurse, smarting under her sister's unjust arrest, stood up in meeting, looked for one moment with furious indignation at Mr. Parris in the pulpit, and then turned and marched out of the meeting house, slamming the door behind her.

After a moment of shocked silence, Mr. Parris bent his head charitably in prayer. Before the week was out Sarah Cloyse joined her sister in prison.

It was then a little more than six weeks since the first signs of witchcraft in Salem Village. The villagers felt they had reason to congratulate themselves upon their prompt and thorough actions. Sarah Goode, Sarah Osburn, Tituba, Dorcas Goode, Martha Corey, Giles Corey, and Rebecca Nurse were all in prison, being held for trial. Sarah Cloyse was awaiting preliminary examination, with enough evidence coming forward to guarantee her imprisonment. Within a day or so Sarah Cloyse was joined by Elizabeth Proctor, wife of the John Proctor who had whipped Mary Warren. The principal witness against Elizabeth Proctor was to be Mary Warren herself, who had waited a long time to get even.

5. THE ROAD TO GALLOWS HILL

When the court convened again on April 11 in the Salem town meeting house, it was no longer a local court. Thanks to Mr. Lawson, to the immense publicity attending the witches going to jail in Boston, and to the rumors of accusations against people in high places, the whole colony of Massachusetts was now involved. The people of Salem Village, and the curious visitors who now began to stop off in Salem Village to see the girls afflicted by witchcraft, gathered in the meeting house in Salem town that morning and gazed with awe upon the deputy-governor of the State of Massachusetts, who was to preside at the examination. He was Thomas Danforth, Esq. representing the highest tribunal in the colony. Although this examination was still officially only a preliminary, the court included four new judges in addition to Danforth and Hathorne and Corwin. These additional judges were representatives of towns all over Massachusetts, and they were accountable to no authority except the government in England.

These seven judges were responsible for the imprisonment of more than two hundred people in a period of about five months. Their names were Thomas Danforth, James Russell, John Hathorne, Isaac Addington, Major Samuel Appleton, Captain Samuel Sewall, and Jonathan Corwin.

Sarah Cloyse and Elizabeth Proctor were brought before this august tribunal for a preliminary examination upon suspicion of witchcraft. Against them appeared a witness who had, up to now, been fairly unimportant. He was called John Indian, and he was Mr. Parris's second slave, perhaps Tituba's husband. When Tituba confessed, suspicious glances had fallen upon John, who chose a most sensible manner of preserving himself. He declared that he, too, was bewitched. However, since he did not actually join the afflicted girls in their public displays, he was left alone in the general excitement. He was enjoying himself immensely, and perhaps even profiting a little, in his position as a sort of guide around the town. Visitors to the town were glad to have John Indian show them around and point out the meeting house and the houses of the afflicted children.

Now, before the highest court in the land, John Indian appeared as the first witness in the witchcraft proceedings. He was questioned by Deputy-Governor Danforth, and testified that Goody Proctor and Goody Cloyse had tormented him. They choked him, he said, tried to force him to sign the satanic book, and pinched and bit him. At this point Sarah Cloyse cried out, “Oh, but you are a grievous liar!” She was silenced by the court.

Mary Walcott tried to testify against Sarah Cloyse, but fell into a fit before she could say more than a few words. The method now used to bring the afflicted out of a fit was one which had been found very practical in Europe and other places where witchcraft had been prevalent. The afflicted person in a fit was brought to the witch, and the touch of the witch ended the fit at once. The trials were thus being constantly interrupted by the passage back and forth of the afflicted girls being brought up to the witch for touching.

Mr. Parris asked many of the questions now, bustling and officious before the important people. His questions reveal a curious advance knowledge of what the witches were accused of doing. For instance, he asked, “Abigail Williams, did you see a company (of witches) at Mr. Parris’s house eat and drink?” Up until this moment, no mention had been made of such a company, or such a celebration, but Mr. Parris seemed to know enough about it to ask the question in the manner he did. Because of this knowledge, the learned magistrates were content to sit back and let him ask a great many questions. He knew far more about all of it than they did!

Many people have wondered if perhaps Mr. Parris was not very nervous about the coming of the highest judges and took precautions to make sure that all would go smoothly. In questions like the one to Abigail Williams, the court record sounds as though Mr. Parris had coached the girls in what they were to say. Naturally he wanted his own congregation to perform as well as possible before this audience. Under his careful questioning, the girls testified to a great gathering of about forty witches. This satanic congregation, the girls said, was led by Goody Cloyse and Goody Proctor, under the supervision of a white man, a “fine, grave man, and when he came, he made all the witches to tremble.” At this party the witches feasted upon the blood of their victims, provided by Goody Cloyse and Goody Proctor.

The horror of these accusations, sworn to by a slave from the West Indies and a pack of wild girls, was more than Sarah Cloyse could endure. After her one despairing cry at John Indian, she made no further attempt to interrupt, but suddenly, in the middle of the testimony, she asked weakly for water and fainted. The girls immediately shouted out, “She has gone to prison to visit her sister Nurse!” So the constables dared not bring her water or try to revive her.

The learned judges sat up on the platform during this scene, silent observers. Any one of them could have stopped the display by exerting a moment’s authority. For many years afterward, Judge Sewall was to observe a day of public, personal penance for his part in the procedure. But that day he sat like the rest, horrified, aghast, convinced. When the afflicted girls cried out that there was a yellow bird flying over Goody Cloyse’s head, all the people in the meeting house covered their heads for fear of a touch from the invisible yellow bird.

Elizabeth Proctor's examination followed the same pattern. She was accompanied to the examination by her husband, strong John Proctor. None of the afflicted was able to speak against Goody Proctor. The reason given was that the witches had thrust their hands roughly into the girls' mouths so that they could not make a sound except groans. Only John Indian was capable of speech, and he repeated his former evidence against Goody Cloyse. Mary Warren was oddly silent; there was enough evidence without her.

Elizabeth Proctor turned to the afflicted girls and spoke to them gently. "There is another judgment, dear child," she said to Abigail Williams. But Abigail was staring upward, and Ann Putnam with her. "Look you!" Ann said in a piercing whisper. "There is Goody Proctor, up on the beam!"

Everyone stared frantically upward, and those who sat directly under the beam upon which Goody Proctor was supposedly perched scattered wildly, to get out from under.

John Proctor, standing beside his wife, turned furiously upon the afflicted girls and raised his voice in an angry shout, to say that they were liars and deceivers. When he stopped for a moment, out of breath, Ann Putnam murmured quietly, "Lo! There is Goodman Proctor on the beam by his wife!"

Great cries were raised by all the girls that Goodman Proctor was a wizard. Abigail Williams shouted, "There is Goodman Proctor, going to hurt Goody Bibber!" and Goody Bibber fell rolling onto the floor. Abigail Williams ran forward, raising her hand to strike Goodman Proctor. But when she came near, her hand opened and fell helpless, and she howled that her fingers were burned. Ann Putnam crouched on the floor, staring with wide frightened eyes at Proctor and his wife, and uttering pathetic pleas to them to stop tormenting her. Elizabeth Hubbard sat frozen and helpless in a trance during the whole examination.

If we add to the imagined picture of this scene the shouting and yelling of the audience, with people running back and forth to avoid invisible menaces, benches being overturned, and fainting women and children being hurried out of doors, we can begin to understand the fear that swept the country. No one could think clearly in that bedlam. No one took a moment to reflect that if the afflicted were quieted, the hysteria would stop. It seemed only that the devil and his legions were loose.

Judge Sewall wrote in his diary, of this scene, “ ’Twas awful to see how the afflicted persons were agitated.” Later, he added in the margin, remorsefully, “Alas, alas, alas!”

The records of these examinations are still in existence, and there is a frightening similarity in the scenes, day after day. Order was never kept in the court, and the judges were almost helpless to control the confusion which broke out whenever the afflicted girls cried out that they were being tormented. The people of Salem Village had never seen a theatrical performance. In fact, all such forms of entertainment were expressly forbidden. So it is not surprising that they flocked to the meeting house for every examination. There they could see a performance which was most certainly never dull.

After the Proctors were sent to prison, Mary Warren apparently had a change of heart. She confessed that she “did but dissemble”; that the actions of herself and the other afflicted children were all pretense. Naturally the others immediately declared that Mary was a witch. She was taken to be held for trial. Even then she said again and again that she had been distracted, and could not now believe that she had committed so cruel a deed as to accuse her benefactors. Nor was that all. She said that the magistrates might just as well have gotten their evidence from a local halfwit "that had been distracted many years, and take notice of what *she* said, as well as any of the afflicted persons."

Mary Warren's examination was a mournful business. She had made a noble attempt to resign from the circle of the afflicted and destroy their power, but there was no one to believe her. The people and the magistrates were only too ready to take it for granted that because of the torments of the witches she had surrendered to them and signed the devil's book. In other words, it was believed that she herself was a witch now, for only a witch would attempt to deny the evidence of the afflicted girls.

When Mary protested her innocence in court, the afflicted girls fell into fits. When Mary, helpless to make the court believe her, burst into tears, the afflicted girls cried out triumphantly that she was afflicted again, because she repented of her witchcraft. "I will speak!" she cried out finally. "Oh, I am sorry for it, I am sorry for it!"

For almost a month Mary remained in confinement in Salem Village, where she could be examined almost daily by Mr. Parris and the magistrates. She was desperately confused by her own position. She believed absolutely that she and the other girls had been deceitful in their torments, and that they had all lied. Yet, when she attempted to tell the judges so, she found that she had proven herself a witch. After thinking the matter over, under Mr. Parris's urging, she finally adopted the only safe way open to her. She confessed fully that she had given in to the witches and had signed the devil's book. She now repented, she said, of her witchcraft. It was the witches who made her swear falsely that the afflicted girls were lying.

Everyone felt very sorry for Mary because she had not been brave enough to resist the tortures of the witches. On the other hand, her confession freed her of all blame, and she meekly took her place again among the afflicted, ready to give further evidence against the Proctors.

Slowly the prisons began to fill with witches. Abigail Hobbs, who wandered the woods at night, eagerly gave even more information than she was asked for and managed to incriminate half a dozen persons, including her own father.

Giles Corey, examined further during these sessions, took a bold stand. He declared himself not guilty. Then one of his neighbors stood up in the meeting house and declared that *he* had heard that Goodman Corey once saw the devil in the shape of a black hog and had been very much frightened. Judge Hathorne turned to Corey and demanded why he had been so frightened, if it was not the devil he saw? Corey drew himself up, angry and defiant, and scowled at the judge. “Frightened?” he said scornfully. “I do not know that I ever spoke that word in my life.” Suspicion of witchcraft he could endure, but not suspicion of cowardice. He refused to speak another word.

Always, just as the pattern began to become monotonous, someone new was found to change the pattern. The examination of Goody Cloyse brought forth the stories of the great meetings of witches. But Abigail Hobbs added a wealth of detail to this bare outline. She testified that the meetings took place in Mr. Parris’s pasture, that the witches ate red bread and drank red wine — sometimes blood, but wine when blood was scarce — and listened to long talks delivered by none other than the black man from Boston, assisted now by the “fine, grave” white man. Abigail Hobbs’s confession was immediately followed by a similar confession from her mother, who saw the cold eye of suspicion turning upon the whole family. But it was Abigail herself who named and accused her father.

Nehemiah Abbot came up for examination shortly after the Hobbs family was marched off to jail. Goodman Abbot's case is unique. He was the *only* person brought up for examination during this period to be released. During his examination something went very wrong with the spectral evidence. While Goodman Abbot stood nervously on the platform, looking apprehensively from the judges to the afflicted girls and back again, the girls quarreled among themselves. Mercy Lewis said that Goodman Abbot was not the right man. Ann Putnam said yes, he was, too. Mercy said no, he was *not*. Mary Walcott looked at him dubiously, trying to make up her mind. Mercy said Ann could do as she pleased about Goodman Abbot, but he was not the one who was tormenting *her*. Ann had a small fit and said it was caused by Goodman Abbot, who was now sitting on the beam above. Mercy Lewis said no, he was not.

Poor Goodman Abbot, shifting from one foot to another, put in timidly that *he* did not think he was the right one. At last the judges irritably directed that Goodman Abbot be taken outside, where the girls could get a better look at him by daylight. The girls went outside and walked around and around Goodman Abbot, inspecting him carefully and making loud comments upon his personal appearance. Finally, after a great deal of discussion, they agreed. Goodman Abbot had been right all the time. He was innocent.

Mary Easty, sister of Rebecca Nurse and Sarah Cloyse, was accused, examined, and sent to prison. By this time the judges may have begun to wonder at the determination of the afflicted girls against this particular family, and the violent personal hatred still shown by Ann Putnam senior. They questioned the afflicted closely about whether or not they might again be mistaken. The girls refused to change their minds, however, and Mary Easty joined her sisters in prison.

The accusations began to aim higher and wander farther afield. Thomas Putnam, in association with several other prominent citizens of Salem Village, addressed a solemn communication to the judges, telling them that there were rumors of “high and dreadful” evil-doing still to be brought forth. This was certainly true.

Within a day or so a warrant was procured against a Mr. Philip English, a gentleman of wealth and property living in Salem. His wife was also named. The principal evidence against them was supplied by a man who had lost a lawsuit to Mr. English. Mr. and Mrs. English were more fortunate than those accused before them. They were wealthy, and they were members of a social world completely outside the restricted Salem Village limits. They gathered together what money and property they could and escaped to New York. There they stayed until it was considered safe for them to return to Salem. A large part of their property in Salem was stolen while they were gone, but they saved their lives.

Another case resembling that of the Englishes is that of Mr. and Mrs. Cary. The Carys lived in Charlestown and were, like the Englishes, wealthy and prominent people. When the Carys heard that Mrs. Cary had been cried out on in Salem Village as a witch, they were so confident of Mrs. Cary’s innocence that they neglected the very practical example set them by the Englishes. Instead of staying sensibly in Charlestown, or fleeing to the safety of New York, where the Dutch laughed at witches, the Carys went to Salem Village. They believed that the accusers of Mrs. Cary would have to proclaim her innocence when she confronted them. They came to the meeting house on the twenty-fourth of May and stayed almost all day, watching the examinations with growing horror and wondering if they had strayed by some accident into a madhouse. No one paid any particular attention to them. They noticed that the afflicted girls were allowed to wander freely around the meeting house, speaking impudently to anyone and creating whatever disturbance they pleased. If they were restrained in any way, they fell into fits.

After the day's examining was over, Mr. Cary spoke to one of the officials present, asking if he might have a few words with the girl who had accused his wife. Mr. Cary told the official that he and his wife were most anxious to discover whether or not the girl had really meant Mrs. Cary or had confused her with someone else. Trustingly, Mr. Cary went on to tell the official his name, his address, how he and Mrs. Cary had received word that she had been accused, their trip to Salem Village, and so on. Mr. Cary stated that he and his wife would be waiting at Ingersoll's inn for a quiet word with his wife's accuser, and the official promised to produce her.

Less than an hour later, while Mr. and Mrs. Cary were drinking tea in Ingersoll's inn and listening with fascination to John Indian, who was delivering his regular monologue for visitors, the door of the inn burst open and the whole tumbling, shrieking crew of afflicted girls came in. Howling and yelping, they rolled on the floor, kicked over the table, and smashed the china, blaming it all on Mrs. Cary.

The Carys stood dumbfounded. A warrant for Mrs. Cary's arrest was produced as though by witchcraft. Then it developed that the judges had come along to the inn with the afflicted girls and were even then waiting in another room to conduct a preliminary examination of Mrs. Cary. Mr. and Mrs. Cary had no time to think, much less speak. They were hurried down the hall to the room where the judges were waiting, and Mrs. Cary was found guilty on the spot. John Indian, who not long before had been telling the Carys about the witchcraft, showed up now as a witness against Mrs.

Cary, saying that he had known her all the time. He fell into a fit, and the judges, in an effort to bring him out of it, held Mrs. Cary's hand so that she might touch him. John Indian seized her hand and pulled her roughly down onto the floor. Mr. Cary was naturally angered at seeing his wife treated in this fashion, and he leaped forward to defend her, upon which the constables took him by the shoulders and thrust him out of the room. He was forced to wait in the hall while his wife was examined further, and a couple of the afflicted girls, waiting outside, told him that he had better behave or the same would come to him.

Luckily the Carys, although they had behaved foolishly, had influential friends. Mrs. Cary was rescued from prison, much against her will since she still believed that she could stay and prove her innocence. The Carys, like everyone else who could manage it, fled to New York, and while there Mr. Cary wrote a complete account of their treatment in Salem Village. He was astonished to discover that such things could really happen, and he felt that he would not have believed such a story if it had been told to him.

There were people in Massachusetts, many of them in and around Boston, who had distrusted the witchcraft trials from the beginning. Some of these people were clergymen who disapproved of the narrow interpretation of scriptural texts which defined witchcraft. Some were thoughtful persons who could not believe that common justice or humanity would admit the use of spectral evidence against the accused. But most of these people, no matter how enlightened, did not attempt to dispute the existence of witches. Instead they tried, through writing sermons and pamphlets, and using what influence they had, to make sure that the accused people had fair trials upon actual evidence.

Foremost among these enthusiastic workers was Robert Calef, a Boston businessman of great wit and literary talent. Calef devoted all his energy to the writing of pamphlets which were published and circulated around Boston and, eventually, throughout the whole colony. Calef saw to it that Mr. Cary's account of his adventures in Salem Village was widely read. He also published a good deal of material showing clearly that the use of spectral evidence was against the law, that the statement of an afflicted person that witchcraft was done by an apparition was not admissible as evidence, and that, in any case, the evidence brought forward in Salem Village was imaginary and false. Calef's particular target was Cotton Mather, the colony's main champion against the devil. Calef secretly attended upon one occasion when Mather was engaged in driving out a devil, and he wrote such an unkind and funny account of Mather's operations that for several weeks Mather was too embarrassed to show his face around Boston. As a result, Mather hurried off to Salem Village to get a firsthand report there, and his presence caused a sensation at the trials.

It is interesting to note that the afflicted girls in Salem Village cried out upon Robert Calef shortly after Mather's visit. Calef's answer, which reached them with all possible speed, was an announcement of a slander suit for a thousand pounds. The accusation against Calef was immediately withdrawn, and his name was not mentioned again in Salem Village.

But while opposition was beginning to develop slowly, the examinations in Salem Village continued. The high and dreadful things hinted at were coming to pass. The afflicted girls announced that they had identified the person at the heart of the demonic conspiracy. What was more, they named him, to the astonishment and dismay of the entire village. The "black man" was not from Boston, after all. (Perhaps Calef's reaction had warned them.) He was none other than their own former minister, George Burroughs, who had sown this seed in Salem Village before he left them.

A number of people recalled clearly that Burroughs had left the ministry of the village because the people literally starved him out. They refused to pay his fees, and when he found himself penniless, he had been forced to seek a parish elsewhere. When he was at the point of leaving the village, however, the villagers arrested him for overlooking a small bill. Fortunately there were still men in the town brave enough to defend Burroughs, and he was allowed to leave. But he left many enemies behind him, among them the now familiar figures of the Putnam family.

Ann Putnam's evidence against Burroughs was based upon information she said had been given her by the ghosts of his first two wives, both of whom had died in Salem Village. Ann's description of these two ghosts is both horrible and surprising, since both of them died before she was born. Her mother, however, had known both the wives. Both ghosts declared to Ann that they had been murdered by Mr. Burroughs, and showed her great wounds to prove it.

Mr. Burroughs was living in comparative comfort with his third wife in a little village in Maine, where he was known and respected as a conscientious minister. He could not escape the malice of Salem Village, however. When he faced his accusers, it was with dignity, as befitting a minister of the gospel who had spent his life fighting Satan and his devils. But the evidence of the ghosts of his wives was too strong. He was found guilty of murder by witchcraft and identified by all the afflicted as the wizard who presided over the unholy rites in Mr. Parris's pasture.

The heart of the witchcraft conspiracy had been captured. All that now remained was to round up the remaining witches, no matter how many there might be.

Since May of 1692 a new royal governor had been established in Boston. His name was Sir William Phips, and from the very beginning he was helpless before the witchcraft epidemic. The man responsible for his coming to Massachusetts was Increase Mather, father of Cotton Mather, and Sir William arrived to find himself surrounded by influential men who wanted every witch and wizard driven out of New England.

One of Sir William's first acts was to appoint a special court for the witchcraft trials, without consulting the elected representatives of the people and without giving the situation adequate study. In June the court, composed of learned and prominent men appointed by Sir William, opened at Salem to bring to trial for their lives those witches who had been sent to prison in Boston after preliminary examination.

The trials went much more slowly than the examinations, and with much less sensation. Order was largely maintained in the court, and evidence was given by sworn witnesses rather than by anyone who chose to stand up and make remarks. The results did not differ to any great extent, however. The same type of evidence was entered, by the same people. The judges were as firm as the earlier ones had been in their belief of the guilt of the accused.

When Rebecca Nurse came to trial, after long weeks in prison, the people who knew her were shocked at her condition. She had been old and sick when she was arrested, and all the efforts of her family had been unsuccessful in procuring her any comforts in prison. She was tried for murder by witchcraft, accused of the deaths of two Salem Villagers. At her trial, a written statement was submitted by those who had attended the deathbeds of the two she was supposed to have killed, swearing absolutely that both had died naturally, and not as the result of any witchcraft. The jury, reasonably enough, brought in a verdict of not guilty. The judges sent the jury back to deliberate further, instructing them not to return until they could find Rebecca Nurse guilty of murder by witchcraft. Obediently the jury changed its verdict.

The court trials could not keep pace with the preliminary examinations. More than two hundred people, perhaps as many as three hundred, were in prison awaiting trial. Of these, the ones first tried were almost without exception found guilty. They were not tried in the order in which they had been sent to prison. Little Dorcas Goode, for instance, was never tried at all, although she had spent long months in prison with her mother. Tituba, also, escaped trial, although her final fate is unrecorded. Sarah Goode, Rebecca Nurse, the Proctors, and George Burroughs were all tried and found guilty. In the cases of the Proctors and Rebecca Nurse, the court and jury deliberately ignored lengthy and sincere petitions for their release signed by influential friends and well-wishers and testifying to an absolute belief in their innocence.

Cotton Mather was present at the trial of George Burroughs and was much gratified at the stern and unyielding determination of the judges.

Martha Corey was tried and found guilty. Her husband, Giles Corey, took a sterner course. He knew that convicted witches and wizards forfeited their property to the government. He knew, too, that he was no wizard, and he scorned to be tried in public shame. Moreover, he had been angered to such a degree that he felt it beneath him to answer the questions asked him. He therefore refused to speak at all. When he was called into court, he could not be brought to say either “Guilty” or “Not guilty.” He stood mute, and no questioning or threat could shake him. It was therefore not possible to bring him to trial, and although the punishment for his actions was, legally, that he be put to death, Corey knowingly chose that way. Because of that, his property went without hindrance to his sons. But his attitude in court and even his death showed clearly to all of New England the contempt he felt for his accusers. His courage and pride made him something of a popular hero, in spite of the taint of witchcraft, and people on their way to court to see the witches tried sang snatches of ballads praising Giles Corey.

Meanwhile, the afflicted girls were quite busy. Two of them (their names are unrecorded) had been sent for by a citizen of Andover. His wife was sadly ailing, and he hoped that the bewitched girls from Salem Village might be able to see if she suffered from the malice of a witch. Both the husband and the rest of the people in Andover had good cause to regret this rash act. The afflicted girls declared eagerly that there was indeed witchcraft in Andover, and they guaranteed to find out the witch or witches. One shortsighted Andover resident suggested that it might be a good idea if all the Andover women, rich or poor, respectable or not, godly or otherwise, lined up to be reviewed by the afflicted girls. Accordingly, the women of Andover presented themselves so that the girls could "see" the witches. It came as a great shock to everyone, and particularly the women, when the girls confidently identified nearly everyone as guilty. The Andover magistrate signed forty warrants and then threw down his pen, declaring he had done enough and would arrest no more. The girls at once turned upon him, and he and his family had to flee for their lives.

The Andover witches joined the Salem Village witches in prison. By this time all the prisons in Salem, Ipswich, Boston, and Cambridge were sadly overcrowded.

By September 22, 1692, Giles Corey and nineteen other persons had been executed publicly. There is no way of knowing the numbers who died in prison. The nineteen who were hanged on Gallows Hill outside Salem were:

BRIDGET BISHOP
JOHN WILLARD

SARAH GOODE

SARAH WILDES

ELIZABETH HOW

SUSANNA MARTIN

REBECCA NURSE

GEORGE BURROUGHS

JOHN PROCTOR

GEORGE JACOBS, SR.

MARY PARKER

MARTHA CARRIER

MARTHA COREY

MARY EASTY

ALICE PARKER

ANN PUDEATOR

MARGARET SCOTT

WILMOT REED

SAMUEL WARDWELL

Elizabeth Proctor was condemned to death, but reprieved. Sarah Osburn is known to have died in prison.

Not one person who confessed to practicing witchcraft was executed. The persons executed were those who insisted upon their innocence. Giles Corey was ordered pressed to death by heavy stones for refusing to speak at all. His execution may have marked a turning point in the witchcraft epidemic.

6. THE DEVIL DEPARTS

ON SEPTEMBER 22, 1692, the day of the last execution, the witchcraft delusion began to disappear. No one realized it at first. The afflicted girls continued crying out upon anyone within reach, the preliminary examinations continued, and the prisons stayed crowded. The special court in Salem adjourned, to meet again in two or three weeks and resume the trials. A change had taken place, however, in the feelings of the people. Perhaps it was due to the courage of Giles Corey. Perhaps everyone was growing weary of supernatural terrors. Perhaps the change was due to the deplorable condition of the colony in general. Perhaps it was a combination of all these things. In any case, a slow change of opinion took place. People simply stopped believing that their friends and neighbors were witches.

The accusations had grown almost frenzied, and Judge Corwin, who had never pursued the examinations with the enthusiasm shown by Judge Hathorne, began to show distinct signs of leniency. The girls immediately cried out that he was trying to protect his mother-in-law, a gentle old lady who lived in the highest Boston society. The girls said she was a witch, and that she tormented them. No one believed them, and Judge Corwin became even more doubtful of witchcraft accusations. The girls cried out, then, against a prominent minister who had publicly rebuked them, and Judge Hathorne told them sharply that they were mistaken. The wife of Sir William Phips, the royal governor, was accused, and the accusation was ignored. The girls cried out on Mrs. Hale, the generous and beloved wife of an important clergyman. Mr. Hale had been one of the most enthusiastic hunters of witches, and had done much to further the investigations and trials. When, however, his own wife was accused, he perceived that he had long been in error, and he repudiated the afflicted girls and their evidence.

Other incidents followed, showing that the tide had turned. The afflicted girls, being taken for a walk one September afternoon, met an old woman on a bridge who would not let them cross. Irked, they fell into fits, screaming that the old woman was a witch who meant to hold them there forever. The old woman looked at them coldly and walked away, passersby turned their heads to look at something else, and the girls got up sheepishly and went on with their walk.

Then, from Andover, came word that half a dozen actions for slander had been started against the accusers. The doctrine of "spectral evidence" became suddenly an extraordinarily unpopular one to hold. The special court was dissolved altogether and a new one established. This court, which met at Salem in January 1693, began to release prisoners with unusual speed. The new court included all of the judges who had formerly been on the special court, but it did not admit spectral evidence. As a result, in a series of trials lasting through the spring of 1693, no one was found guilty. At last, in May of that year, Sir William ran out of patience and issued a proclamation discharging all the witches left in jail. This proclamation released one hundred and fifty people.

Once the epidemic was over, the people of Massachusetts could sit back and try to estimate the damage done. Twenty innocent people had been executed, and others had died in jail. Those acquitted and released by proclamation could not be set free until they had paid jail and court fees, as well as board for the whole time of their imprisonment. As a result, some of these unfortunate people had to stay on in jail because they could not pay their way out, and some of them were utterly impoverished by the payment of their prison fees.

Many people of wealth, fame, and influence had fled to other colonies to escape unjust accusation. Most of these people showed no desire to return. Their Massachusetts property had in most cases been confiscated and dishonorably plundered, their reputations injured, and their loyalty to Massachusetts hopelessly destroyed.

The property of all the accused had been seized, sometimes with shocking haste, sometimes illegally, by dishonest officials. The heirs of many of those who died filed claims for restoration, but few received anything. Suits were brought by those released, in a vain attempt to recover property taken or wantonly destroyed by court officials; but few of these received anything. Many of those who had suffered so severely and unjustly left the colony forever and made no secret of their resentment.

The whole colony, moreover, had suffered. The people had been so determined upon hunting out and destroying witches that they had neglected everything else. Planting, cultivating, the care of houses, barns, roads, fences, were all forgotten. As a direct result, food became scarce and taxes higher. Farms were mortgaged or sold, first to pay prison fees, then to pay taxes; frequently they were abandoned. Salem Village began that slow decay which eventually erased its houses and walls, but never its name and memory.

The afflicted girls retired abruptly from public life. The suits against them were allowed to lapse, and the girls endeavored to settle down quietly as private citizens. We do not know what happened to most of them. Later documents indicate, however, that some of the girls ended their lives in disgrace and poverty. The elder Ann Putnam died not long after her victims. The younger Ann Putnam lived quietly on in Salem Village, a semi-invalid. She brought up her younger brothers and sisters after the death of her parents, and in the year 1706, before a great audience in the meeting house of Salem Village, she was received to Communion upon the reading of a public confession. Part of her confession says: “I desire to be humbled before God … that I … should … be made an instrument for the accusing of several persons of a grievous crime, whereby their lives were taken away from them, whom now I have just grounds and good reason to believe they were innocent persons.” She particularly asked pardon of the Nurse family, which had suffered so cruelly at her hands. Samuel Nurse, as representative of the family, accepted her confession, and Ann Putnam was admitted to Communion. She died ten years later.

Little Elizabeth Parris completely regained her health after a year spent in a wholesome atmosphere, living with relatives in Boston and playing with her noisy, unimaginative cousins. Her father was not so fortunate. Much of the shameful conduct of the witchcraft examinations was attributed to him, and he was held by the villagers to be largely responsible for the innocent people who suffered. He was driven from the parish after another year or so spent quarreling with his congregation, and he spent the rest of his life in obscure poverty. His house in Salem Village is nothing now but barren ground and the only record of him is in the story of the witchcraft epidemic.

Jonathan Corwin rose in importance and wealth, although never free from the reputation of the witchcraft trials. John Hathorne never conceded that he had been mistaken, and persisted all his life in maintaining that the witches were guilty, and that the part he had acted was honorable. One hundred and fifty years later a descendant of John Hathorne’s wrote *The House of the Seven Gables* — the story, in part, of a cruel man who had helped to bring witches to execution, and who died with the memory heavy on his conscience. In this story Nathaniel Hawthorne (the *w* had been added somewhere along the way) adapted the dying words of Sarah Goode, who stood on the scaffold and shouted at the clergyman who begged her to confess, “I am no more a witch than you are a wizard, and if you take away my life, God will give you blood to drink!” Unlike his ancestor, Nathaniel Hawthorne thought the witchcraft fever was “a terrible delusion.”

For many years a day of general fasting — of remorse and repentance for the evil of the witchcraft days — was observed in Massachusetts. For the rest of his life, Judge Sewall observed this day as one, also, of personal humiliation, and was accustomed to beg public prayers for himself to avert divine justice from him. His diary shows that after thirty years he was still attempting to atone for what he regarded as a mortal error.

In 1696 a document had been presented to the public, signed with the names of twelve men who had served as jurors in several Salem witchcraft cases. This document included these final apologetic words:

“We do therefore hereby signify to all in general (and to the surviving sufferers in special) our deep sense of, and sorrow for, our errors, in acting on such evidence to the condemning of any person; and do hereby declare, that we justly fear that we were sadly deluded and mistaken …

“We do heartily ask forgiveness of you all, whom we have justly offended; and do declare, according to our present minds, we would none of us do such things again on such grounds for the whole world; praying you to accept of this in way of satisfaction for our offense, and that you would bless the inheritance of the Lord, that he may be entreated for the land.”

On March 5, 1954, a New York newspaper announced that six of the women hanged as witches in 1692 had been cleared by the lower house of the Massachusetts legislature. But not until 1957 did the Commonwealth of Massachusetts officially clear the names of everyone who had been accused of witchcraft.

Although the Massachusetts witchcraft epidemic is a shameful chapter in our history, it had, strangely enough, some good results. For several reasons, Massachusetts is unique in the history of witchcraft. The later trials were the first in which spectral evidence was not allowed. The epidemic in Massachusetts lasted for sixteen months, and then stopped absolutely. After the last witches died on Gallows Hill in 1692, there was never an other execution for witchcraft in New England. The judges and jurors in Massachusetts were the only ones in the history of witchcraft trials to admit publicly that they had been wrong and unjust.

This public recantation of the judges and jurors did a great deal to lessen the enormous hold which witchcraft and sorcery had held for so long. People who had been writing and arguing that witches did not exist found support in the fact that the very people who had condemned the witches no longer believed in their guilt. Moreover, once people started doubting that the devil had his converts, it was possible to begin to believe that the devil was not an actuality, walking the earth with his demons.

Although there were witchcraft trials and executions in England for a dozen years longer, and for as long as a hundred years more in some parts of Europe, Massachusetts had taken the first step to end the persecution. The state and its citizens had shown that although they had acted in panic, they were honestly prepared to confess their error and make what restitution they could. Moreover, they had demonstrated that spectral evidence, guilt by association, and a belief that the prisoner was guilty before she or he was tried, are not means to be used in fighting any evil, no matter how frightening it may seem.

AFTERWORD

IT IS DIFFICULT to understand the seeming madness that swept Salem Village in 1692 without an understanding of the many factors which had been building for long centuries before. Since the establishment of the Christian church, a surprising amount of study and scholarship had been devoted to learning about its enemies. For nearly seventeen centuries before Salem Village was born, learned men had been endeavoring to control witchcraft.

Naturally, religious people at that time were anxious to determine the extent to which their church was menaced by supernatural powers. Everyone believed that there actually was a devil, a created being whose efforts were directed toward the working of evil. It was important to know precisely how effective the devil could be, and, of course, how best to fight against him.

The devil was believed to carry on his war against heaven through the use of human beings. Every person won to his service was a blow against heaven and the strength of the church. It was commonly believed that the devil worked in person among mankind, using all his weapons to urge humanity to his side. He could tempt weak souls with visions of wealth, power, and success. He could trick people and lie to them, and he could even endow some with his own supernatural abilities enabling them to work magic. He was assisted by numbers of demons, all of whom were subordinate to their master, but who were all permitted to transact bargains and enroll humanity among their numbers.

The amount of careful study given to the habits and powers of the devil and his army is astonishing. For instance, in the middle sixteenth century a French scholar announced triumphantly that after years of painstaking labor he had discovered the precise number of the demonic army. There were, he said, 7,409,127 demons, commanded by 79 infernal princes who were responsible only to Satan himself. This figure was indignantly denied about ten years later by another French scholar, who insisted that there were actually only 7,405,920 demons, commanded by only 72 princes. A year or so later, still another scholar entered the discussion. He explained that he had discovered the basic arrangement of the demonic army. It was divided into legions, cohorts, companies, and individuals, and these forces totaled slightly more than the population of the world. There was, in fact, one and a fraction demons for each member of the human race.

Each of these demons has a name, most of them brought to light by equally earnest scholars. As late as the end of the seventeenth century an English student published careful portraits of half a dozen of the chief demons. They were sketched, he said, from life. They are not an attractive-looking group.

There are also many specimens of demonic handwriting. One of them, signed by the demon Asmodeus, is so badly misspelled that it is almost unreadable. This was explained by pointing out that it was not necessary for a demon to learn to spell. His job was to torment mankind.

Prominent religious people frequently had conversations with Satan and with demons. They argued difficult religious questions, and the demons were considered excellent in debate, although not always truthful. There were many magical ways of summoning demons, although the use of such magic was expressly forbidden by both religious and civil law.

The demons were able to appear without being summoned, but they could not harm anyone so long as the proper religious protection against them was observed. They could, however, enter into the body of a human being and control it. This, called “possession,” was a frequent occurrence even as late as the end of the seventeenth century. The victim who was possessed would behave wildly and utterly without reason, shout out curses and blasphemies, and sometimes even endanger the lives of others. It required all the force of religious power to drive out the demon, and many important churchmen spent long hours in argument, persuasion, and prayer, mocked and abused by a demon who refused to leave a victim’s body.

The great work of the devil lay among the simple people, who did not care for religious argument and believed only that one had to be very careful to stay out of the clutches of the devil. They did not care to know the precise numbers of the legions of the devil. A man who harvested a good crop gave thanks to heaven for its blessings. When his barn burned, and his crop with it, he could only see that it was the devil’s work.

The devil’s methods were simple. He, or one of his demons, approached a human being with offers which were made as appealing as possible. If the victim was poor, he was offered vast wealth. If he was dissatisfied, he was offered power, love, or magical abilities.

These temptations often proved so irresistible that the victim agreed to forsake his church and become a member of the devil’s “church.” He was then given a devil’s mark, a demonic agent, or familiar, who might seem to others to be only an ordinary cat, dog, or bird, but who was actually an evil being. The familiar was both a servant and a spy. He performed whatever evil he was ordered to do, but reported back to the devil regularly.

Once the victim had been fully initiated into his position as a follower of the devil, he was known as a “witch” or a “wizard.” It is usual to think of women as witches and men as wizards. However, there is no sharp distinction, and the records show that the words were often used interchangeably.

The witch, who had bartered any hope of heaven in exchange for the devil's offer, found usually that the devil was a liar and a trickster. Vast wealth turned out to be a few cents, great power was only the delusion of madness.

But the witch was believed to have certain powers of magic. He or she could raise storms, start fires, cause sickness by the glance of an eye or the touch of a hand. He or she could harm humans and animals, and kill them if he or she chose. He or she could destroy crops and cause hallucinations. In addition, the witch could remove any spell he or she had cast and was able to heal sickness. Some witches preferred petty irritations. One English witch customarily sent a plague of fleas to any person who offended her. The witches were supposed to have control of poison, and it was a usual thing for wealthy and important people to call in a witch when an enemy needed destroying.

Witches were thought to be afraid of water and, naturally, of any true religious thing. Although they sometimes came to church in order to avoid suspicion, the church service was uncomfortable for them, and they sometimes secretly mocked the words and gestures. A witch was not able to pray. One of the great tests of witchcraft was to require the witch to say the Lord's Prayer. In demonic rites it was said backward, and a witch could not, however he or she tried, say it correctly. Many unfortunate people proved to the judges that they were witches simply because, during an examination, they became so frightened that they got the words confused.

By the end of the eighteenth century more than two million people of the "civilized" world had been executed for witchcraft.

In England the laws against witchcraft had become progressively more severe. In 1542, under English law, it was a crime to use “witchcraftes enchauntementes or sorceries.” In 1563, under Queen Elizabeth, a new Parliamentary act made the practice of witchcraft a crime punishable by exposure in the pillory for a first offense and punishable by death for a second offense.

When James I succeeded Elizabeth, however, his own superstition and fear produced an increase in general alarm over the subject. James wrote and published a treatise on witchcraft called *Demonologie*. It condemned the practice of witchcraft in all its forms and argued that only the most severe laws could restrain the witches. Thus, in 1604, the English Parliament under James passed a new act, making any practice of witchcraft punishable by death for a first offense. This law was in effect when the Puritans came to Massachusetts.

The Massachusetts colony was established during the period when witchcraft in England was one of the great topics of the day. Although the Puritans insisted that they had left England because of the oppressive nature of the English church, they did not want *liberty* of religion, but only conformity. They in turn persecuted all who differed from themselves in belief, and drove from their colony anyone who refused to accept their strict ways.

Just as the Puritans adopted a more stern view of religion, so their ideas about the devil became narrower. They saw the devil still as the enemy of mankind, but they thought that he was also the particular, personal enemy of the Puritans. They thought that since their religion was the truest, the devil was most anxious to destroy it.

Each individual among the Puritans felt that he was called upon to fight the devil personally. Also, they believed that most people outside the

Puritan faith were helping the devil’s cause because they were not strict enough. They knew that many people who believed themselves to be devout Christians nevertheless broke many religious laws and treated their religion carelessly. To the Puritans, neglect of their religion meant neglect of their whole pattern of life. The religious framework was the base of all their government and all their efforts to start a new home in Massachusetts.

In addition to religious fervor and intolerance, the isolation of Salem Village, the feuds between jealous villagers and wealthy landowning farmers, and the drabness of their everyday lives all seem to have contributed to the unique “witch hunt” of 1692. Psychologists have pointed out that there is such a thing as contagious hysteria. Groups of people can “infect” one another and copy one another’s symptoms. This kind of behavior is often caused by extreme fear or guilt such as the girls must have been suffering from dabbling in forbidden “magic” with Tituba.

In recent years scientists have even come up with the theory that the “afflicted children” may have eaten contaminated bread. A fungus called ergot sometimes infects the rye grain used in bread-making. This fungus can cause dizziness, headaches, and hallucinations. It is thought possible that the local grain crop may have contained this fungus in 1692. So far, however, this theory has not achieved wide acceptance.

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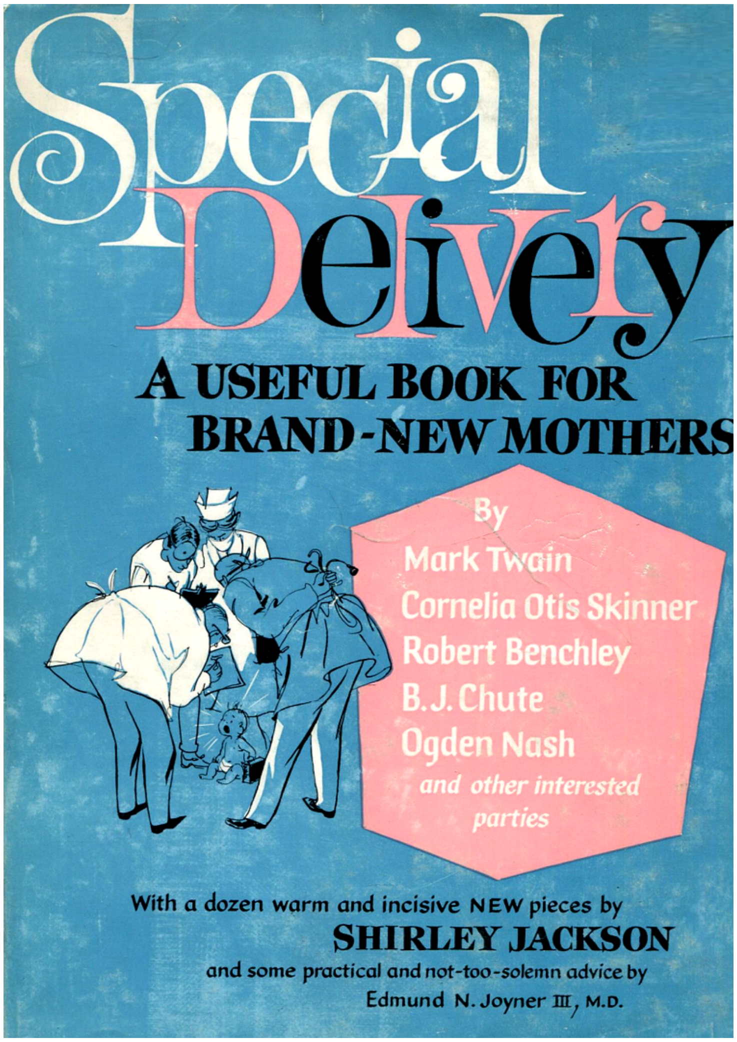
LUCKY GIFTS
WHY DOESN’T GRANDMA STAY HOME ANY MORE?
WHAT TO GIVE THE NURSES
HOW TO PERFECT MATERNAL FEELINGS OF GUILT
BLUES
DON’T WORRY WHEN BABY...
CLEVEREST MAN
A WISE SUGGESTION


Special Delivery
A USEFUL BOOK FOR BRAND-NEW MOTHERS
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With a dozen warm and incisive NEW pieces by
SHIRLEY JACKSON
and some practical and not-too-solemn advice by
Edmund N. Joyner III, M.D.

The first edition

DOING WHAT COMES NATURALLY

OUR MOTHER CAT Ninki was going to have kittens, an event anxiously awaited by our four children and by, presumably, the cat herself. We knew when the day came because early in the morning she came to the bed of our younger son, who is her particular honorary kitten, and awakened him by treading heavily on his stomach and wailing. When we came down to breakfast she followed, wandering in restless circles; clearly she felt the need for some kind of action and was helpless and even frightened during this disagreeable period of waiting. “I’m glad it’s you and not me,” I told her unsympathetically, pouring myself a second cup of coffee and remembering vividly the four separate mornings when I felt exactly like Ninki. The second time was the worst, I thought, because that was the morning I dropped my cup of coffee without even tasting it and fled to the hospital; the first time I reached the hospital with eight good hours to spare; the fourth was the time I knew enough to sit down and eat bacon and eggs before bothering to get my coat. “My,” I told Ninki, “I’m glad it’s you and not me.”

These were not Ninki’s first kittens by a long time, but the wonder and surprise is always new. The other cats — there are four — knew at once what was going on; in general, they kept a wary distance, although one of Ninki’s sisters washed her face for her, purring reassuringly, and even the big old male cat, who has certainly fathered more kittens than he cares to remember, edged respectfully away when Ninki came up to the milk dish; the dogs were uneasy, and stepped softly. Wholly intent upon her own terrifying situation — I remember, I was thinking, I remember! — Ninki broke all rules, ignored all precedent; meowing ceaselessly, she got onto her special child's lap at the table, insisted upon his holding her during breakfast, and begged shamelessly for his egg, even going so far as to put one slim paw up to nudge a piece of egg off the edge of his plate. We bore with her, although the other cats seemed to feel that this was carrying license too far, and regarded us in shocked surprise. Even after our dozens of generations of kittens, the act of birth is always an awesome thing, and our children were unwilling to leave for school; they finally went off at the last possible moment, speculating among themselves as to the number and color of the kittens who would surely be waiting for them when they came home.

Ninki followed me around, wailing still, while I did the dishes and dusted the downstairs rooms and did the perfunctory straightening up which I regard as adequate; Ninki is a last-minute type mother, like me, and never has her preparations made. The last time she barely made it to the linen closet, and the time before it was one of the living room chairs. Since we have just had the living room chairs re-covered I was most anxious to have her choose any other place, even the linen closet, and as I went from room to room I carried along the box I had made ready for her a week ago. I am not actually any more provident than Ninki, but I have made her a box every time and she has never used it yet. Even in her distracted state Ninki found a moment to be amused at my carrying the box around after her, and when I went upstairs to do the beds I found the box very useful for carrying up the mountains of toys that always seem to get brought downstairs just before bedtime every evening. I had finished the beds and was coming downstairs with a pile of dirty socks I had found cleverly hidden away behind the laundry hamper when I realized that there was silence behind me; Ninki was gone. Wondering briefly whether I had left any dresser drawers open, I wished her my best, and went on downstairs to see if the mail had come. I remember, I was thinking.

The children found her when they came home from school. She was in the laundry basket, on a pile of shirts waiting to be counted. She had two black kittens and two gray kittens. All her uncertainty and uneasiness were gone; she was smiling, purring, and half-asleep, her kittens asleep beside her in a warm little nest of love and peace. When the children leaned over her she opened her eyes wide to warn them to be quiet, and gave each kitten a quick little lick, to point out how beautiful they were.

She came down to dinner, slim and proud, and moved to the dish ahead of the other cats, who waited till she was finished before they approached. After dinner, she visited me where I was sitting reading a magazine, gave me a comradely nod, clearly invited me to see her kittens, and trotted back up to the laundry basket; I followed her, admired her kittens, and returned to my magazine, which told me:

“Instinct alone is not enough. Today’s mother must call upon science and all its resources before she can raise her children, and prolonged study on the care of children is essential for their guidance. What would we think, today, of a mother who depended entirely upon what *she* thought was right for her child?”

HOW TO MAKE A HUSBAND A FATHER

THE NEW FATHER is a familiar and irresistibly comic figure, for some reason, and his behavior at the arrival of his child is traditionally that of an irrational creature, caught in a situation of infinite confusion and bewilderment. He is supposed, for instance, to have spent the entire time of his wife's pregnancy bringing her shawls and footstools, scouring the town for out-of-season strawberries, and reading books which tell him that when labor pains begin he is to boil vast quantities of water. When his wife is ready to leave for the hospital he is expected to run back and forth mindlessly, wholly unable to remember the name of the doctor, the hospital, or his wife. At the hospital (provided he gets there at all, and is not left behind by a wife bent on more practical things) he will pace wildly up and down, catching nurses by the arm, and addressing every white-coated stranger as "Doctor." When he is informed that he has a child he will faint. He will then tiptoe to the bedside of his wife, who is getting a well-deserved sleep after the rough work is over, stumble heavily against the foot of the bed, and announce joyfully to his wife and the nurse that the baby is a boy, or the baby is a girl. After this, leaving an entire, usually perfectly efficient system in ruins behind him, he will rush out to buy football suits, tennis rackets, golf clubs, and enormous toy elephants for his child, who is already the biggest, handsomest, most wide-awake baby in the hospital nursery. He will have a fatuous smile on his face, and he will be unable to stop himself from telling everyone from the bus driver to the lady in the florist shop about his baby.

This comic pattern has somehow been foisted upon the American male, who is in almost all other circumstances a reasonable, practical person. Fathers who can contemplate the pending arrival of children with ordinary common sense are regarded as somehow not facing reality. A father who does not say, upon being presented his child for the first time, “No, no — I’m going to drop it” is a man clearly not equipped to survive in the modern world.

The only other male character whose role has been set up as infinitely ludicrous is the bridegroom, and it would be interesting to know why, on the two (presumably) most important occasions in his life, the male human submits to being made into a figure of fun.

Luckily, after the baby’s first few days in the hospital, his mother and father can bring him home, where they can all introduce themselves in private, and the father can settle down to behaving with his usual degree of efficiency. Most babies expect to be cared for by their mothers, and in most families it is found to be most convenient to have the mother stay at home and take care of the baby while the father pursues some gainful occupation to keep them all in canned milk. There are not many husbands who hurry home joyfully after a day’s work demanding to be allowed to help with the housecleaning and there are not many fathers who hurry home joyfully after a day’s work demanding to be allowed to help wash the baby’s diapers. Equally, a mother who has doggedly over a period of days (and what days they are! but they pass) evolved some kind of a working system for the baby’s day is not going to welcome a father’s sudden desire to take the baby out of his bed and give him a bath all over again.

Clearly, since the baby’s day is divided into sections of waking and sleeping and these are at first short periods of waking and long periods of sleeping, some of the baby’s short waking time should be allotted to his father, but this time ought to be chosen (as much as anyone really ever “chooses” to do anything with a baby) so that there is not going to be an evening interval in which Father comes through the front door to meet a screaming baby and an unkempt mother and a chicken still uncooked in the refrigerator. Every family has its own schedule, of course, but that schedule should not be set up by Baby, unassisted.

No one really likes changing diapers or sitting still for twenty minutes with arms and legs going to sleep while a small baby finishes a bottle. Once or twice, all right. Even twelve-year-old uncles will like to try it once. But all day everyday is too much for anyone, and the difference between mothers and fathers is that mothers have to keep on taking care of their babies long after the fathers have gotten tired of the whole business and have gone in to read the paper. This is not heartless or unreasonable; it is simply an animal truth.

It is going to take two, however, to cope with all of it. In some respects, having a baby is roughly like being in the path of a major hurricane. Or like having all your relatives come at once for a two-week visit. Or like finding a litter of nine Great Dane puppies left on your doorstep. Or like discovering suddenly that you have only one hand when you thought you had two. Or like discovering suddenly, as a matter of fact, that you have only two hands when you hoped you had four. There he lies, the little darling, so tiny and trusting and helpless, and before he has been home from the hospital for ten minutes it is perfectly clear that it is going to take at least two of you to cope with him.

A baby can do anything longer than his parents can stand it. That is one thing that all babies are born knowing. A baby has no decent reticence, no restraint. A baby does not care about the neighbors, about the family reputation, about the fact that the diaper service is late. He is a stranger to manners; it does not give him the slightest pause to observe that his mother and father have planned on a quiet cocktail, just the two of them, while dinner is in the oven.

"I am being firm with him," Mother says uneasily, her fingers trembling on the stem of her martini glass. "I promised myself I would be firm with him; after all, it's for his own good, poor little thing."

"Fine," Father says heartily. "Teach him that he can't always have everything he wants."

"What?" Mother says. "I can't hear you."

"Be firm with him, that's right," Father bawls.

"That's what I said. He'll be spoiled if I keep picking him up when he cries."

"Stop pacing the floor. He's all *right.*"

"What?"

"I said I never heard so much noise in my *life.*"

"There's nothing wrong with him — I checked the pins and the blankets and the sheet and the light and the window and—"

"What?"

"I said I checked the light and the—"

"*What?*"

"I said I'll just go and get him and you'll find your dinner in the oven."

Sometimes if Mother can hold out until her second martini she can win, but not often. And sooner or later there is going to come a time when the baby's father announces that he can no longer bear finding his dinner in the oven while the baby insists on being fussed over. He is sure that *his* mother always had a hot, nourishing dinner ready for his father every night and the children always tucked away in bed and doesn't Mother have enough time during the day to take care of the baby without spending all evening at it too? Mother here would be well advised to have a third martini, since she already knows from her mother-in-law that Father was the most beastly child who was ever born and teethed for six months without giving up whining for a minute. She would also be well advised to change her schedule.

In every house with a baby — and in many houses without a baby, as far as that goes — there is always the danger of falling in debt to an ironclad system of doing things. If the Venetian blinds have to be dusted on Tuesday and they don't get dusted on Tuesday, then they will be twice as dirty next Tuesday and take twice as long to do. If the baby is supposed to be bathed at four o'clock and for some reason he isn't bathed until four-thirty, then everything runs half an hour late for the whole day. I have met mothers whose homes ran like clockwork. Somehow *their* Venetian blinds were dusted every Tuesday, and their babies got their baths at four o'clock and no nonsense, and dinner was ready on time every night and their husbands always had that faintly proud expression of living in a house where everything ran like clockwork, and jumped like mad things if anyone made a sudden noise. Children are very lucky in a house like that; they never have to worry about where their next spanking is coming from. Most of us, though, go along figuring we're lucky if we can leave each day safely behind us and get enough sleep to face the next.

No baby ever developed an excruciating disease because he got a swift sponging instead of a bath. No baby ever starved to death because his bottle was five minutes late in coming. No baby ever suffered a serious trauma or even a mild neurosis because his mother finished her salad before she went in to pick him up. No baby ever grew up a juvenile delinquent because his father asked him please, dammit, please would he just keep *quiet* just one *minute* so people could get some *sleep?* No baby, not to put too fine a point on it, ever suffered half as much as his mother and father think he is suffering.

There is no *fair* division of labor. Most mothers will let the baby's father administer the bottle in the middle of the night and even concede, reluctantly, that he does it perfectly well, but once he has mastered the art of bottle administration in the middle of the night the baby's father is very apt to drift gradually back into his preferred method of spending the hours late at night, and sleep blissfully on while Mother drags herself out of bed to do the work. It gets very lonesome there in those chill silent hours with only a baby for company. Many fathers, indeed, cooperate enthusiastically in all the little baby routines, and take pride in being able to diaper a baby in four seconds, or with one hand tied behind them, but when it comes right down to hard facts most fathers really believe that taking care of the children is woman's work; they will take over when the boy is old enough to go fishing.

Actually, about all that a woman can ask of her husband during the first few weeks of living with a baby is that he be reassuring, comforting, patient, tolerant, and careful not to roll over when she's changing the baby on the bed. Beyond that, anything he does is whimsy, and not to be counted on for steady employment.

You can always tell an experienced mother by her lack of wasted motion; she never starts upstairs without taking up something that has to go upstairs, and she never heads for the kitchen without carrying something that belongs in the kitchen and she never crosses a room without taking something that belongs across the room; she is used to keeping both hands full all the time, and she knows that there is not enough time in the world to make two trips for anything. And you can always tell an experienced father by the way he looks at his wife and says, "Dear, the baby's crying."

WHO IS BOSS?

AFTER CAREFUL STUDY it is going to be clear to the earnest mother that the enormous propaganda on child raising in books, magazines, newspapers, and even advertisements is being largely written by the babies. Baby is the boss, the articles point out flatly; first you are waiting *for* him, and then you are waiting *on* him; Mother's life must be wholly centered on her child. Let there be no nonsense about who is making the decisions in *this* family.

Perhaps this is because twenty or twenty-five years ago the going rage in baby care was exactly the opposite. Children who were allowed a little freedom of choice were going to be "spoiled," and the worst possible thing an anguished mother could do was pick up a crying baby. ("If you pick him up now just because he's crying, then he'll expect to be picked up every time he cries and the first thing you know he'll just be crying to be picked up.") Mothers and grandmothers and fathers and grandfathers clung grimly to one another, resolutely steeling themselves against making one move toward a crying baby, the four hours between bottles was counted out to the very second, and any casual observer could set a watch by Baby's bath or playtime.

It is small wonder that babies, who are really as human as the rest of us, and as prone to small daily whims and failings — it is small wonder that the babies rebelled, and drove the army of parents to the other extreme, of permissive feeding and sleepless mothers, of discipline by reason and frightened fathers. As a matter of fact, the daily routine around the houses of extreme advocates of this theory makes the storming of the Bastille look like an amateur operation; nothing, in short, is closer to chaos than a family run by a small child.

In our family, there is a sharp division of opinion on the question of the reaching authority of the child. Our four children ardently support the cause of absolute indulgence, warmly seconded by their grandparents on both sides. My husband and I, bolstering one another secretly with reminders that we are firm, righteous, fair, stern although impartial, and beyond all else the heads of the family, have managed to fight the issue to a standstill somewhere between the two camps, and we've been lucky to come off as well as that. We never realized *how* lucky, though, until we entertained as weekend guests a family in which the two small children were being brought up entirely by the force of reason. *(Naturally* we know better than to let people with small children visit us for a weekend, but this time we couldn't help it; they didn't let us know they were coming.) Our children plodded their way through the weekend under their usual schedule of When-I-tell-you-to-do-something-you-JUMP-you-hear me? and There-are-many-little-children-all-over-the-world-who-would-be-happy-to-have-that-last-string-bean, and while they were finishing their milk and folding their napkins and doing it fast unless they wanted to feel the weight of somebody's good right hand, they watched in wonder while our visitors dined.

"Well, my goodness," the mother of the family said while the rest of us waited patiently for our dessert, "aren't these potatoes simply *delicious?* Judy darling, I guess you didn't even *notice* all those lovely mashed potatoes right there on your plate, did you? Now I'll just take a teensy bite and *then* you'll see how delicious these lovely mashed potatoes are, and then I'll take a little bite of Ralphie's string beans, and then I'll take a little bite of Judy’s lovely lovely hamburger, and I’ll just show you how *good* they are!”

“They taste terrible,” Judy said graciously.

“I know what *Judy’s* forgotten.” She beamed across the table at her husband. “Judy’s forgotten her *manners.* Judy’s forgotten that someone went to alllllll the trouble of peeling these potatoes, and putting them in a pot, and putting water in, and cooking and cooking and cooking them, and then mashing them and putting in good good butter and milk—”

“Salt,” I said. “I put in a little salt.”

“And salt, and then bringing them to the table just so Judy could eat them; look, Judy, *Helen* is eating them.”

Mothers like this always insist upon all children calling them by their first names, on the-theory, I believe, that artificial barriers should not be set up between, generations, artificial barriers like parenthood and twenty-odd years more experience. “Helen loves these potatoes,” this infatuated creature went on. I recall that at this moment my husband put down his fork with a kind of sick expression, and Judy began to spread her mashed potatoes all around her plate, while her mother cried out in a voice of shrill gaiety, “Look, Judy is making pictures with her mashed potatoes; funny Judy, do you think she doesn’t know that mashed potatoes are to eat? What a funny funny girl! But—” addressing her son— “*we* know that mashed potatoes are to eat, don’t we? And here funny Judy thinks mashed potatoes are for making pictures. Judy, *finger paint* is for making pictures, not mashed *potatoes.* You have finger paints in your nursery school, don’t you? Well, I guess in nursery school you would feel pretty silly if you tried to eat the finger paints, I guess. So aren’t you a silly girl when you try to paint with the mashed...”

No, she didn’t. Not Judy. And neither did Ralphie eat his string beans, but we didn’t finish dinner until after eight o’clock, when it turned out that Judy did not plan to go to bed. Judy wanted to stay up and play. Judy was told that certainly she could stay up and play if she liked, but she must be very quiet and stop banging on the piano like that, because other people were going to play bridge. Funny, funny Judy — suppose *she* wanted to play bridge and somebody else was banging away on the piano; well, she wouldn’t like *that,* would she? Well, just five minutes more, then, and after that she must positively leave the piano alone. Yes, Judy, those were cards that Helen was holding; Helen was playing bridge with the nice people and the reason everyone was so quiet was because they were thinking about the cards. Now Judy wouldn’t like it if *she* was playing cards and someone came along and did that, would she? Now Judy and Helen would get down on the floor and pick up every one of those cards. Funny Judy, let the piano sleep; it’s sooooo tired.

Funny Judy finally fell asleep in the hammock on the front porch about half-past twelve. In the morning she and her small brother began the real work of their visit, the systematic and thorough destruction of our entire family holding. As I rescued, one after another, the phonograph records, my best painted casserole, my grandmother’s Venetian glass liqueur set, my one good string of pearls (Judy had gone up to play on my dresser, I subsequently discovered), their mother would glance up indulgently from the book on child psychology she was reading. “It’s all right,” she assured me over and over, “let them play. They can’t hurt themselves.”

Departing, promising to mail back the toys belonging to our children which Judy and Ralph refused to give up, their mother kissed me fondly and said, in a tone of faint reproach, “You know, my children have learned a new word since they’ve been visiting you.”

“What word is that?” I asked, dense to the end.

“‘No,’” she said. “It’s a word *we* never use, of course. I don’t believe either of them has ever heard it before.”

I tightened my grip on the front doorknob. “Maybe they’ll manage to forget it,” I said.

“I hope so,” she said. “So *unhealthy,* you know, all this discipline...”

As I say, the babies are writing the books.

WE JUST CAME TO SEE THE BABY

Scene: The home of John and Mildred, parents of John Jr.

Time: John Jr.’s third week of existence.

Characters: Great-aunt Ivy, Great-aunt Henrietta, Great-aunt Jane, Grandma, all relatives on the baby’s paternal side. The baby’s mother. The baby.

The kettle is boiling for tea. The mother knows already that there is no lemon in the house and there are not going to be enough cookies.

AUNT JANE (*eagerly*). Are you sure you feel well enough to have company, dear? We really should have let you know we were coming, but we’re only going to stay a minute anyway —

AUNT IVY. We just came to see the baby.

AUNT JANE. You look tired, dear; is Baby *very* fretful?

AUNT HENRIETTA. He seems to be quiet right now, anyway. (To *the baby’s mother, accusingly*) I suppose you just put him down for his nap?

MOTHER. Well, as a matter of fact —

GRANDMA (to Aunts Ivy, Henrietta, Jane). Just wait till you see him — he’s the most beautiful baby you ever saw. Such big feet!

AUNT JANE. John Senior had big feet when he was a baby. He had the biggest feet I ever saw.

AUNT HENRIETTA (*to the baby's mother)*. Now, *he* was the crossest baby you ever want to see. Cried morning, noon, and night. GRANDMA (*indignantly)*. He was a lovely baby, always smiling. MOTHER. *My* baby —

AUNT JANE. What does the doctor say, dear? About your being so tired? MOTHER. I'm really nor tired at all, Aunt Jane, it's just the first few weeks —

AUNT JANE. Well, you ought to check with your doctor. You don't want Baby to catch anything from you, you know. GRANDMA. As a matter of fact, my grandson looks very much like John as a baby. The same eyes.

AUNT HENRIETTA. John was always a very cross baby. *(To the baby's mother)* I'm sorry the little fellow isn't well. What is it — a cold? MOTHER (*bewildered)*. But he's perfectly —

AUNT IVY. You can't be too careful, you know. I remember, with John, we all wondered what made him cry so all the time. Come to find out, it was his teeth.

MOTHER. My baby hasn't got any —

AUNT JANE. Yes, and remember the perfectly *awful* time we had? When he had pneumonia? *(To the baby's mother)* That's why I say, dear, you can't be too careful about these little colds. They *always* turn into something worse.

AUNT IVY. Does poor Baby have a little cold? (Eying the baby's mother very dubiously) Poor little fellow, only just home from the hospital. There hardly seems time for him to catch — AUNT HENRIETTA. But it doesn't take much to get the little ones down. You remember John only got pneumonia because they left off his flannel undervest. The one I made for him. AUNT JANE. Too bad, to think of these things being inherited. John was always a very sickly child.

AUNT IVY *(to the baby's mother)*. How about your family, dear? Are your sisters all as thin as you? MOTHER *(madly)*. We're all *terribly* healthy.

AUNT JANE (nodding profoundly). There, you see? A bad inheritance is a terrible thing for a child. Poor John. His first child, too, and the poor poor little boy.

GRANDMA (*to the baby's mother)*. Why didn't you *tell* me he was sick? MOTHER. He's not *sick,* I tell you, he's perfectly — AUNT IVY. He's *terribly* quiet.

MOTHER *(she is beginning to wonder herself, by now)*. He's asleep. AUNT IVY *(to Grandma)*. You remember that poor poor lady who used to live next door to us? The one whose baby broke his leg in the crib?

AUNT HENRIETTA. Poor little fellow, I can see him now. *(To the baby's mother)* He used to sit by the window, poor little mite, and watch the other children play. AUNT JANE. That was measles.

AUNT HENRIETTA. No, measles was when they thought John was going to end up with mastoid. *(Sighing)* We were very fortunate *then.* Of course *(to the baby's mother)* they didn't have those miracle drugs then. But of course, there weren't as many cars in the streets, either. *(To Aunt Ivy)* Did you hear about Marian's little girl? AUNT IVY. Such a shame. And Fred's youngsters down with mumps, and all.

AUNT JANE (to the baby's mother). Can't you manage to get someone to look after you and the baby? Kind of hard on John, having both of you sick. MOTHER. We're not —

AUNT JANE. Women just aren't made the way they used to be — they want to be pampered every minute; now *our* mother raised all of *us,* and raised us right, and she never had a sick day in her life. Until she died. My, that baby's quiet. Is he always as quiet as this? MOTHER. He's asl —

GRANDMA. Do you think we can just tiptoe in and peek at him?

AUNT IVY. We won't wake him.

AUNT HENRIETTA. We promise we won't wake him.

AUNT JANE. Just one little peek?

MOTHER *(as if she had any choice)*. I'll open the door, and maybe you can see him from the doorway. But he took so long getting to sleep this afternoon that I'd hate to —

AUNT JANE *(peering; in a stage whisper)*. I can't see him — where is he?

GRANDMA. He's in the crib. See his little nose? AUNT JANE. Where?

GRANDMA. See? Right over there, in the crib. That's my grandson. AUNT JANE. He's unusually small, isn't he? AUNT IVY. This room's too cold.

AUNT HENRIETTA. He doesn't look the least *bit* like John. MOTHER. Shh.

GRANDMA. Shh.

AUNT IVY. He needs another blanket. This room's like ice. AUNT JANE. Why doesn't he have a pillow? *(To the baby's mother)* Don't you know it can dislocate the bones in their little necks, sleeping without a pillow?

AUNT HENRIETTA. If that blanket slips down over the end of the crib it will cover his face and he'll smother — what does she mean, leaving a blanket so close to his little head? He's going to smother when it slips.

GRANDMA. Where's the shawl I knitted for him? MOTHER. In his carriage.

GRANDMA. Who knitted the shawl over him now? MOTHER. My mother.

GRANDMA. It certainly doesn't look warm enough. AUNT JANE. This room is like ice.

(Baby stirs)

MOTHER. Shh.

AUNT HENRIETTA. Shh.

AUNT JANE. Shh.

AUNT IVY. Shh.

(Baby awakens and cries) GRANDMA. Well, I'm sure *we* didn't wake him. AUNT JANE. Is he usually this cross? AUNT IVY. He's very fretful, isn't he? AUNT HENRIETTA. Could it be teeth, do you think? AUNT JANE. I think he was just too cold.

(Baby cries)

AUNT HENRIETTA. Well, at least we got a chance to peek at him. Now we have to run along.

MOTHER *(holding baby)*. I'm making tea —

AUNT HENRIETTA. Oh, no, dear, we wouldn't *dream* of staying for tea.

You've got your hands so full with Baby, and all. AUNT JANE. We only came for a minute. Just to see the baby.

AUNT IVY. He's a darling baby. You call your doctor about that cold of his.

GRANDMA *(taking baby)*. Well, hello, my darling baby. *(Baby screams)* I can't understand it — he's always so glad to see me. AUNT JANE. You remember how John used to cry when he was held? GRANDMA. He's probably got a pin undone.

AUNT HENRIETTA.... teeth?

AUNT IVY. Well, dear, take care of yourself and of that darling boy. AUNT JANE. We won't try to kiss him, because of his cold. And be sure to let us know what the doctor says. ALL. Good-by, good-by.

AUNT JANE (*leaving, audibly to Grandma)*. She seems terribly uncertain with him, doesn't she? AUNT HENRIETTA. Careless, almost. That blanket — AUNT IVY. She didn't need to wake him just for *us,* you know. AUNT JANE. Poor John.

HOW TO PARLAY A PINK ELEPHANT INTO A PAIR OF WATERPROOF PANTS

THE NICEST THING about most baby gifts is the tissue paper they are wrapped in. Never throw this away. When the baby is a few weeks older and can lie on the bed for a few minutes to have his playtime, crumple the tissue paper into big loose balls and put it under his kicking feet. The agreeable noise will amuse him endlessly.

As far as the gifts themselves are concerned, it was very nice of all those people to send them, wasn't it? Write them polite letters. Say "Dear Aunt Sally, Thank you very much for the organdy dress. It will look darling on Harold when he is a little older." Say "Dear Mrs. Chandler, Thank you very much for the combination baby measuring spoon and safety pin holder. I am sure I will be using it every day." Say "Dear Dora, Thanks to you and to all the girls in the office for the embroidered diapers. We will save them for best."

Write them all polite letters, and then put aside everything that is not absolutely returnable — like the pink beret your grandmother knitted with her own hands — and take everything else back to the store. Most stores gift-wrap baby presents beautifully, and make sure that the store name is included in the wrappings, so you will know where to take it back. And don't worry — they *expect* that the patented gadget for anchoring Baby to his carriage will be returned; any salesclerk will be able to tell you at once exactly what it is worth in undershirts and flannel blankets. It is perfectly possible that these gadgets are put into the stores merely to stimulate trade: the ornamental safety pin is displayed to catch the buyer looking for some useful and original gift and is almost certain to come unerringly back to the store later, bringing the new mother with it.

Some of the baby gifts you get may be useful. These come, almost without exception, from hardbitten mothers who have been there ahead of you, and pass by without a second look the counters of lacy dresses and angora booties to see that you get a half a dozen cotton shirts, or a gross of safety pins. Furthermore, these true friends do not come over expecting to see the baby dressed in the cotton shirts they gave him; they can see the shirts hanging on the clothesline already, while the angora booties are safely on the closet shelf.

There is a certain type of giver to whom the fact of the gift is enough, without any reference to its practicality or desirability. These people know that they are expected to give the baby something, so they give the baby something. If the baby is born in the summer they will give him a winter bathrobe which will be full of moths by the time it is cold enough to wear it. If the baby is born in the winter they give him a pink sunsuit. It usually doesn't matter anyway, though, because everything they send is size 2. It is always very difficult to avoid thanking these people in the spirit in which the gift was sent ("It is more trouble for me to write this letter than it was for you to choose the gift—") and in general the trade-in value on such gifts is hardly worth the trouble of carrying them back to the store. If your baby is a girl, save them for doll clothes. There is a certain kind of doll, called "lifesize," which someone will give her when she is about six years old, which will be able to wear these clothes.

Most acceptable are the presents from relatives and close friends, who come right out and ask you what you would like them to give you. To them you can say, "Well, I have the baby's layette, thank you, but I would like a vacuum cleaner." Or "Baby won't need a single thing, because everyone's given us just loads of sweaters and stuff, but when I come home from the hospital I won’t have a pair of shoes fit to put on.” Or even “How terribly sweet of you to want to give us something! Just money will be lovely, thanks.” One very practical gift, which people seldom think of unless it is pointed out to them, is a smoking hot dinner casserole — preferably chicken — delivered the evening of the day you come home from the hospital. Make sure you suggest this to someone who knows how to do these things right, with plenty of sour cream and mushrooms. Tell her to bring some French bread too.

People who give puppies or kittens as presents for a new baby need not be thanked.

LUCKY GIFTS

JUST IN CASE anyone should ask you what you would like as a gift for your baby, it might be wise to have the following list tacked to the wall over the crib; it is a list of lucky gifts and unlucky gifts.

Lucky gifts a white mouse a tortoise a bird a mirror a crystal bowl a penny with a hole in it a bunch of roses *(never* poppies)

a necklace with an odd number of beads an engraved gold or silver thimble a bunch of grapes a pair of gloves

Unlucky gifts a black pearl a weapon of any kind
an hourglass
a ring with an imitation stone
a nail
an ink pot
any strong perfume
a wooden box
a pair of fire tongs
a pocketbook without a penny in it

WHY DOESN’T GRANDMA STAY HOME ANY MORE?

NO CAGED BIRD, singing its sad sad song of captivity and beating its little wings against the bars, is more poignant than the mother of a new baby, looking out at the vast, unattainable world beyond the nursery windows. Out there, where other people are. She *can* get out, of course, if she wants to. She can bundle baby into robes and bonnets and put him into a carriage and wheel him down to the grocery. Or she can put him into a little basket in the back seat of the car and drive to the shopping center, although that foot on the gas pedal is mighty shaky the first few weeks. She could, presumably, carry him on her back or pull him in a wagon or take him in a taxi, but the one thing she *cannot* do is go out without him. Wherever the mother goes, the baby goes too because, unlike a puppy, a baby cannot just be tied in the yard and left behind. Wherever the mother goes turns into an extension of the nursery, with an extra bottle and a clean diaper tucked into the foot of the carriage or stuffed into the glove compartment of the car, and when it is time for baby’s bath or supper or bedtime she has no choice but to stop whatever she is doing and turn around and go home. It would be unbelievable if this companionship did not, after a time, begin to pall.

The baby-sitter, as a familiar institution, came into existence in response to an agonized demand. Most mothers do not hesitate unduly over leaving a small baby in the care of its grandmother, and do not, at first, call home more than half a dozen times to make sure that baby is all right, but even the most devoted grandmother has her own occupations and activities to take care of, and cannot always be available; furthermore, the big disadvantage, for Grandmother, in baby-sitting is that it is generally of an evening when the baby is asleep and cannot be played with and doted over. What is needed is someone who is responsible enough to take care of the baby's normal needs during an evening, who is capable of handling an emergency, and who at the same time has some occupation, such as homework, which can be done as well wherever she is in the evening, and who, moreover, is doing this for a flat hourly rate and not for love, like Grandma. Most high school girls like to do baby-sitting around their own neighborhoods to earn spending money; it corresponds to the lawn-mowing, paper-route earning their brothers do, and in many communities the available babysitters have banded together into clubs, in order to maintain standard rates and conditions, and to set up a kind of bank of baby-sitters, so that a mother may be sure that the girl she is hiring is competent and experienced. There are also older women, whose evenings are free, and who are willing and anxious to care for children, but in general the monopoly on baby-sitting is held by teen-age girls.

No mother ever believes that anyone else, even Grandma, is capable of taking care of her baby properly, but it is surprising what levelheaded efficiency a good baby-sitter is capable of; she will not put things back into their usual places (it is a little game, the next day, trying to find out where the sitter left the can of baby-powder) but the unbelievable fact is there: in ninety-nine cases out of a hundred the baby will wake up, take his bottle calmly, submit to being burped and changed, and go back to his bed and to sleep without any sign of shocked disbelief at seeing a stranger. It can come as something of a jolt to the nervous mother, who has insisted on leaving the theater before the final curtain and hurrying home because she is *positive* that her baby misses her, to find the baby sweetly asleep and dreaming whatever babies dream, and the sitter placidly doing French irregular verbs at the dining room table; in most cases she will have to go in and wake the baby to make sure he is all right.

Some mothers guard the names of their special baby-sitters with as much jealous care as they devote to the recipe for Great-grandmother’s fruitcake, but most mothers of small children keep a list of names of half a dozen girls they know to be reliable, and will gladly recommend them; it is to the interest of mothers in general, after all, to see that baby-sitters are kept happy and gainfully employed; otherwise — horrible to contemplate — they might give up the baby-sitting business. And if the high school girls of the country gave up the baby-sitting business, it is safe to assume that the drop in attendance at all public functions from bowling alleys to grand opera would be enormous, the cocktail party and evening bridge game would die out, and that quiet dinner for two in a candle-lighted restaurant would be nothing but a lovely memory.

Assume, then, that you are secure enough with your baby and his schedule to feel that you can manage to leave him for an evening. This means that you know reasonably well when he is going to wake up and have a bottle, what he is going to require in the way of changing and being resettled in his bed, and have by now a pretty fair idea of what he usually does during these hours — whether he fidgets for a minute or so before going back to sleep, whether he sleeps more soundly on his stomach than on his back, how a night light should be adjusted to enable the sitter to check on him without disturbing him, and so on. You have gotten in touch with a girl recommended as reliable, and have settled with her in advance whether or not she is to be picked up, or will provide her own transportation (few high school girls have cars, and almost all baby-sitters assume that you will of course see that they get safely home). When she reaches your house, the best policy is to spend fifteen minutes or so with her, partly just sizing up the kind of girl she really is, and partly getting used to the idea that this may be your first baby, but it isn't hers; she probably knows more about the routine of taking care of the baby than you do. Show her around the house (find out if she can tune the television set!), show her the baby and the equipment he will likely require, and *write down* the things she will be expected to do for him; she may not need to attend to him for an hour or so after you leave, and by then should not have to rely on what she *remembers* that you told her. Write down, also, the telephone number where you can be reached, and — if you will be so far away that you cannot get home quickly — the name and telephone number of someone nearby to call if she needs help or reassurance or advice. I once had a baby-sitter who was just putting the children to bed when a fuse blew and all the lights in the house went out. She never even thought of calling me — she called her father; he was an electrician.

Before you leave the sitter, ask her about her rates. Most sitters charge by the hour, with a slight raise in rates if any unusual attendance is required (reading to a three-year-old for two hours before he falls asleep, for instance) and it is a matter of simple courtesy to determine ahead of time how much you are going to pay her; most adolescents are wholly unable to talk about money with strangers, and a sixteen-year-old girl asked at the end of an evening how much she expects to be paid is apt to subside into a paralyzed embarrassment, not knowing whether she is asking too much or too little. Do not try to overpay or tip her — that would be money she has not earned, and consequently, to the sensitive adolescent pride, unbearable patronage. If you use regularly a baby-sitter who is pleasant and reliable, give her a present (clothes or jewelry!) from time to time, but not extra money. Naturally you are not going to figure her time to the absolute minute, and try to pay off in half-cents and fractions of a second, but pay her at her stated hourly rate to the nearest round number; do not expect her to provide change. A high school girl, if pressed, can produce from her coat pocket a nickel, three pennies, and a stick of gum. Remember, too, when it comes to paying, that a girl who does baby-sitting does it as a means of earning money; she regards her evening in your house with your baby as honest work which will take her to so many movies, or go into the bank toward a fur coat or a record player, and, generally speaking, she has done the best she could to earn the money you pay her. She may have slipped up on several things — the missing powder can, for instance, or your magazines left strewed around the living room — but if she has done her basic job, seeing that your baby has been safe and comfortable while you were out of the house, she has done what was required of her.

Along with your baby's foibles may go several of your own that she must watch out for. You will no doubt have very decided opinions about her general behavior while she is in your house, and it is always wise to make these known in advance. Most baby-sitters will ask you ahead of time whether or not you mind if they use the telephone, or have a friend drop in on them for a few minutes; presumably they do not intend to throw a wild party in your living room, or spend the evening making long-distance calls, but it will save you both trouble and mortification if the extent of her use of your home is determined before you leave it. In the last analysis, any girl who has been taught manners at home, and who thinks of herself as earning money by being responsible and reliable, is going to behave at your house as she would in her own, and not abuse what is essentially your hospitality. On the other hand, a friend over to help her do her homework is not an intrusion, and two young people together can pass long evening hours more agreeably than one alone. Make it clear how much freedom you allow with the contents of the refrigerator, such valuable items as record players and television sets; if you have a priceless collection of classical records point them out to her, and ask her to leave them alone. She would probably rather die a slow death than play anything more classical than Frank Sinatra, but it is as well to warn her about anything which is of more than usual value or importance. The nicest mothers leave their baby-sitters a bottle or two of soda in the refrigerator, and access to the cookie jar. It is *too* nice to leave a full dish of candy smack in plain sight in the living room. Most teen-age girls are constantly hearing from their mothers that they are eating too much sweet stuff, and many are conscientiously trying to avoid candy, but it is almost impossibly hard to sit doing geometry examples or trying to memorize fifty lines from *Hamlet* with a full candy dish temptingly nearby. Apples, yes. Candy, no.

Try to develop a state of mind in which you literally leave the baby behind. Tell yourself that once you get half a block from home you are going to put the ties and entanglements of the baby out of your mind completely; try to keep yourself from stopping at every drug store to call home and check. Call back once during the evening, if you must; the baby-sitter will sound slightly surprised and will tell you laconically that sure, it’s all okay — why? Yeah, he took his bottle. Yeah, he’s asleep. No, he didn’t fuss. Why, did you think something was wrong?

You will, further, encounter now the one completely new experience of our time. At a party, where there is a room full of people, the phone rings. None of the men present notice it, but every mother in the room is suddenly silent, waiting for the hostess to answer, say “Hello? Yes, she’s here. Just a minute.” Whose baby-sitter is calling?

You will of course have settled with your sitter the time when she is to expect you home. For one thing, her parents are almost certainly expecting *her* home, and for another thing, past a certain hour her reliability is going to be substantially lessened by the fact that she has fallen asleep on the living room couch. Even if you don't care what time the baby is going to wake you up in the morning, you will have to accept the fact that from now on your hours are going to run fairly close to those of the average high school girl. If she has to be in bed by twelve, so do you, unless you want to come home and sit up reading for an hour or so. If she has to be in school the next day, you have to come home earlier, that's all. And if you are held up or for some reason find you are not going to be home when you promised, by all means let her know as soon as you can; *she* is the one who is going to have to explain to an angry mother when she gets home. (If, by the way, you do manage to get a baby-sitter into trouble at home, try to talk to her mother personally, and explain. It is worth a special telephone call the next day; mothers of teen-age girls can be pretty cynical about the excuses their daughters give for coming home at three in the morning.) And, most important, see that she gets home, even if you have to send her in a taxi.

I never saw a baby-sitter so badly shaken as one local high school girl, whose name was Janey, and who was a nice girl and very sweet; she was going steady and so had largely given up her baby-sitting practice, but one evening she agreed as a particular favor to oblige a couple of parents in our neighborhood, who just couldn't bear to pass up a fancy party. During the evening I went over to borrow a book, not knowing that the parents were out, and as I crossed the front porch I was surprised to hear the baby crying from the baby carriage which was in a far dark corner of the porch. Deeply puzzled, I knocked on the door and when the girl answered it, I said oh, hello, look it wasn't any of my business really but — and I didn't want to meddle and of course she knew what she was doing — but wasn't it really kind of *late* to leave the baby out on the porch? The girl stared at me, turning white, and after a minute she said, faltering, "*What* baby?"

It turned out that her employers had gone blithely off to their party, assuming that she would take full charge of their three children, and had completely forgotten to tell her that in addition to their two small boys, they had had a baby daughter since they saw her last. The mother had put the little girl out on the porch in the carriage for her nap, and figured that of course Janey the reliable baby-sitter would take it from there. I had to take Janey the reliable baby-sitter inside and sit her down for a few minutes till she stopped shaking. She had given the two little boys their supper and put them to bed; they were both young enough to forget about their new baby sister for hours at a time, and so had never said a word about her. Janey said that she had wondered about the baby bottles in the refrigerator, but all the baby's equipment, even her crib, was in the parents' bedroom, which of course Janey had no occasion to enter, and Janey pointed out — with some justice, I thought — that if people wanted her to come and baby-sit, they ought to *tell* her they had a baby, oughtn't they?

Luckily, the baby was a pleasant sort, the night was warm and mild, and between us Janey and I got her fed and changed and tucked away in her crib with no harm done. I don't know whether Janey ever told the parents or not — *I* certainly didn't. But I do know that Janey has never done any baby-sitting since.

So perhaps the first, most vital, rule for baby-sitters might be — tell them there is a baby.

WHAT TO GIVE THE NURSES

DURING YOUR STAY in the hospital you will surely encounter nurses. Try to remember that most of the things they do to you are not things they really want to do. That look of joyful anticipation on the face of the nurse who is jabbing a needle into your arm is because she has dedicated her life to helping the sick and you are one of the sick she has dedicated her life to helping. The nurse who wheels in the enema apparatus has not marked you down as her special prey. The nurse who wakes you at the crack of dawn knows exactly what time it is. There is nothing personal in any of their actions; it is their job to see that you are buffeted around like a volleyball.

Incidentally, most mothers who flee at last from the hospital with their babies tucked under their arms can reflect thankfully that at least they will never see their nurses again; in a small town like ours, one is not so fortunate. I went into the grocery recently and the woman by the meat counter turned around and nodded to me in a friendly fashion. “Don’t you remember me?” she asked. “I was your nurse in the delivery room last fall. I was the one who—” I remembered her face, then, and the delivery room with it; she was the one looking down at me from some incredibly distant bright spot, and she was saying “Now count to a hundred...” I gave her a kind of sick smile, and ran.

It is customary, when leaving the hospital, to make some gesture toward the nurses who have, after all, taken very good care of you. You have probably been the charge of one particular nurse, and your baby has been watched over by the baby nurses. If you are the kind of person who is going to have a lot of money left over after buying the baby back from the hospital, it is nice to remember that nurses are not paid like movie stars, and have to buy stockings and bobby pins like the rest of us. If you are just going to come out even with the girl at the payment desk by emptying out the piggy bank and borrowing ten bucks from Uncle George, try to leave at least a bottle of cologne or a box of bath salts for your nurse. Most nurses are on a diet most of the time, but a box of candy or fruit sent to the baby nurses will get itself finished.

If you had no individual nurse caring for you, or if you believe that she pinched you on purpose every time she made your bed, or if you hated the whole thing and don’t think anyone should be rewarded for what happened to you, there is no law which says you have to leave anything. Naturally, no one is going to ask you.

HOW TO PERFECT MATERNAL FEELINGS OF GUILT

SOONER OR LATER you are going to be left alone with this baby. All alone, just you and Baby and an all-pervading panic. You are reasonably sure by now that you are not going to sit down on him, or put the diaper on over his head, but by golly, that is just about all you *are* sure of. Here is the same old place you have been living in right along. There is the couch, and the table with the ash tray on it that your husband won playing golf in the Salesman's Tournament, and the curtains you made yourself, and the rug you still haven't paid for, and there is the kitchen with the dishes you have washed over and over again (standing by the sink, dreaming idly of what it would be like when Baby came, wondering if it would be a boy or a girl, standing there with the dishcloth in your hand and the soapsuds melting away) and the pots and pans and the little white enamel pan you bought for heating Baby's bottle. There is the bed you half-slept in all these months, longing to turn over and sleep on your stomach, promising yourself that once it was over and you could get a good night's sleep without the aching back, the aching ankles, the weary shoulders... oh, once it was over you would really *sleep* again. There are the clothes you have waited all this time to wear once more (do they fit? No) and the high-heeled shoes you haven't dared to put on yet.

There is the crib you set up so lovingly for Baby, you and his father, telling one another delightedly that Baby would lie here*,* and his little clothes would be put in *there,* and we can hear him if he makes the slightest noise at night, (hear him? Get three blocks away and see if you can hear him make the slightest noise at night) and *here* is where he'll have his bath, and *here*... well, here is Baby.

It's over. You can tie your shoes again. You can bend over to pick up a pin from the floor if you want to. You can sleep on your stomach again, except you've forgotten how to breathe sleeping on your stomach. The same dishes and pots and pans are there waiting to be washed, and waiting and waiting and waiting, while you try to find your way through the maze of the kitchen to get the little white enamel pot to heat up Baby's bottle. Baby is lying there, incredibly real and solid and pink, a real honest to goodness baby, with all his arms and legs and toes and altogether beautiful and wonderful, possessing such breathtaking instinctive knowledges as how to close those small eyes and how to yawn (how does a baby yawn? Is it real?) and carrying somewhere within him the potential ability to grow a tooth, or smile at his daddy, or reach out those small hands to his mother. And what is he doing, this baby, rich in infinite knowledge, full of beauty and wonder and delight, perfect and small and most incredible of all — alive and individual? You know what he is doing.

The little eyes are closed all right, screwed tight shut. The perfect little hands are clenched, the pink little face is red with fury and the little mouth which will so soon grow teeth is wide open. The legs are kicking wildly, muscles which will someday be carrying him down a football field are rigid and tight, and he is making a racket altogether out of proportion to his size and strength. The nurses in the hospital knew what to do when he yelled like that. In the hospital they could *always* do something. He never yelled like this before. There must be something they forgot to tell you, some vital fact they all assumed you would know, some perfectly natural thing to do when Baby cries; perhaps there is something which normal maternal instinct would tell you right off ought to be done and because you are — oh, face it — not a normal mother you don’t know what it is... no one else’s baby cries like this. There is something wrong with you; your baby is crying and you don’t know what to do. Here everyone else knows what to do when a baby cries and there is something lacking in your makeup and you had no right to have children at all and the doctor should have told you instead of letting you go ahead and what will your mother say when she finds out you are some kind of a monster instead of a normal mother and maybe if you called the hospital and asked them nicely they would take him back because if that yelling doesn’t stop for one minute so you can catch your breath and get hold of an aspirin... No, he won’t stop. But go ahead and call your doctor anyway, if you want to. You won’t be able to hear anything over the phone, of course, but you will have the reassuring feeling that there is some other human being in the world besides you and this noise machine.

Don’t bother to call your husband. He will only tell you that gosh, maybe there’s something wrong with the kid, and you better call the doctor. When you say you’ve just *called* the doctor he will say well, maybe you better call the doctor again. After you have talked to your husband you can always call your mother. If she is a sensible grandmother — and grandmothers are almost always eminently sensible in this respect — she will have to hang up because she is laughing her head off. This is no comfort. And if she is as sensible a grandmother as all that she will wait a good twenty-four hours before coming to see you and she will finally come and walk through the front door saying, “Well, did Baby ever stop crying?” Then she will laugh. If she has your mother-in-law with her they will look at each other and laugh.

Meanwhile you will have entered into the O-God-Am-I-Fit-To-Raise-A-Child guilt. This is different from the I-May-Not-Covet-My-Neighbor’s-Curls guilt, but similar to the Perhaps-I-Do-Not-Love-Him-As-I- Ought guilt. Basic to all these guilty feelings, of course, is the secret, and accurate, conviction that this baby is asking more of you than any human being ought to ask of another, and the complementary feeling that a Mother ought to be prepared to Give All for her offspring. These two feelings are complementary, but not reconcilable. The mother who is damned if she is going to give all to her offspring, but wonders all the same if she should, is going to have to take up the slack somehow by kicking herself around a little, and there is absolutely no field which offers such opportunity for guilty self-criticism as bringing up a child.

Guilt about coveting one's neighbor's curls leads naturally to such self-punishing remarks as: "What perfectly magnificent curls little Abercrombie has! I do wish *my* baby had such lovely hair; tell me — have you checked with your doctor about that wicked squint in Abercrombie's left eye?" Or "My husband and I were remarking only yesterday on what lovely curly hair the little fellow has. What a pity he's not a girl!" Abercrombie's mother, ridden by her own doubts, will then thank you politely for your compliments upon the curls, point out that your baby seems so sallow these days — is he getting enough vitamins, do you think? — and you will wheel your carriages in different directions. In five or six years, when your little bruiser hits Abercrombie over the head with a rock, Abercrombie's mother will have more to say about you and your child-raising methods, but by then you will have had more practice in the tigress defending her cubs business, and will have little or no feeling of envy over Abercrombie, that crybaby.

Doubts about being fit to raise a child are best settled before the child is old enough to bring them up himself. Believe me, when he is around fifteen he will have refined this child-torture bit to such an extent that unless you are fully insulated against it you are going to find that you are being made to reproach yourself for not giving in weak-mindedly to such indulgences as movies on school nights or — if your child-psychologist is a girl — wearing high-heeled shoes to school. The truly farsighted baby is the one who learns in his cradle that his mother is going to wonder endlessly about her shortcomings as a parent, and who never allows her to stop wondering for a minute. Prepare your defense: assume from the very first minute that Mother *does* know best, that no week-old child can dictate to *you,* that your own solid common sense and proverbial intelligence are enough to carry you through, that from this very minute on, you are never going to reverse a decision once made, and whatever you say, agreeable or not, is going to be final.

Let me know how you come out. For my part, I find myself saying over and over again, "Tomorrow I will do better. Tomorrow I will be patient, no matter what happens. Tomorrow I will not be cross under any provocation. Tomorrow I will start trying to be a model mother."

I'll let you know how *I* come out. Exactly nowhere, that's how I come out. "Tomorrow," I say, "tomorrow I will lay down the law absolutely. I will be reasonable, I will not raise my voice, but I will make it abundantly clear that movies on school nights are..."

The worst aspect of all the centuries of tradition and sentiment about mother love and the one hand always reaching out to help, the one face always smiling, the one heart that never loses faith... well, the *worst* of it is that it's so easy to think you're falling behind the rest. Certainly you will always leave a light in the window for your wandering boy, but right now someone's got to feed him his strained apricots. You will always be waiting for him, smiling through your tears, glorying in his triumphs, sharing in his defeats, but first you've got to get a dry sheet on his crib. Motherhood is glorious, but it's also one hell of a lot of work, and it's just too easy to get so bogged down in feedings and washings and changings and airings that sometimes days and days go by when you keep forgetting to lift your head and smile proudly through your tears.

There’s one very good way to use up any extra guilt you’ve got left over after being a failure as a mother. Suppose your baby were menaced by a cobra; naturally you would leap in front of the baby and fight off the cobra with your bare hands. Wouldn’t you? *Wouldn’t* you? It is perfectly possible to reduce yourself to a tearful head-beating wreck over that cobra, because — well, *would* you? Do you love your child enough to rescue him from that cobra? Go on and worry about it. It will do to keep you awake the few nights that the baby sleeps through his two o’clock bottle. If your husband wakes up and asks what on earth are you doing sitting over there by the window wringing your hands you be sure and tell him you’re wondering if you would have courage enough to save your baby from a cobra. Yes, you tell him that.

Worry, incidentally, is something else again. Worry is when you sit over there by the window all night wringing your hands and picturing *real* dangers, like the probability that Baby will fall out of his crib the minute you are asleep, or the good chance that he will grow up and marry and you will not get along with his wife, or the ever-present perils of mad dogs and those live cartridges that careless people are always leaving around, or smallpox.

Or, if you’re still not sleepy, you can just sit there thinking what a miserable wretch you are, the way you treated Baby today when you were so cross. The little sweetheart didn’t *mean* to make you unhappy and even though he kicked the cereal bowl out of your hand *he* didn’t know he was doing wrong and even though no mother would ever punish a tiny baby there is no question but what you put him down more abruptly than you would have if you hadn’t been angry. The poor little thing can’t understand when all of a sudden he looks at his mother whom he trusts and adores above all other human beings and she is scowling and snarling at him and calling him a little beast and the little angel is bewildered and insecure and so he cries and then the mother he has learned to love so dearly almost... well, she doesn’t actually *spank* him, and anyway those diapers are very thick. But she is very much annoyed. Poor little baby. And he thought his mother loved him. The shortsighted mother will now go tearfully through the darkness to the side of the crib and kiss Baby while he sleeps so exquisitely, and whisper, “Mommy didn’t mean it, darling, Mommy’s sorry.” This almost always wakes the baby, who cries, and before long Mother has completely forgotten that he doesn’t really *mean* it when he tries to drive her crazy.

BLUES

THERE IS NO really adequate preparation for a first baby. Any prospective mother, of course, can recite almost endless lists of *facts* about the baby she is going to have, she can describe the neat piles of shirts and nightgowns and sweaters and diapers, she can point out the neat crib, made up with sheets and blankets since the seventh month of her pregnancy, she can show off the bottle sterilizer and the little blue dish and the carriage and the bathinette and the cotton and the swabs and the baby towels and washcloths and powder and she can even remark amusedly that if anyone else arrived at her house with this quantity of baggage she would expect them to be planning on a lengthy stay. In spite of all the arranging, however, and the wonderful joy of folding and refolding the little pink sweaters and the wealth of blankets, and the excitement of arranging the baby furniture — so immaculate, so new and fresh — none of it really brings home the fact that when the baby does come, he comes to stay. Twenty-four hours a day. Twenty-four hours a day for years and years and years. From the minute they first hand him to you in the hospital and you finally get a chance to count his arms and legs to make sure they are all there, you are never going to be without him again. When you get into this Mommy racket, you're in it for good.

Mercifully, the realization of this does not come all at once. At first it is enough just to get through one day at a time without bothering about the years to come, and of course the excitement of folding and refolding the little clothes is nothing compared with the excitement of actually putting them on the baby, and nothing is ever as real as the sight of that small creature settling down at last in his very own crib. His crib, mind you. None of these things had any slightest reason for existing until there was going to be a baby; chances are good that you never even heard of some of these things until there was going to be a baby (oleum percomorph? dextro-maltose 1? soakers?) but one thing is certain. Nothing is ever going to be the same again.

Your relationship to the entire world has been hopelessly altered. Life without a baby and life with a baby are simply two different kinds of lives. You will never, for instance, be able to walk down the street again, the way you did before the baby came. For one thing, you will be pushing a baby carriage, and for another, your whole view of things will be different. Instead of noticing what other women are wearing, you will be noticing what their babies are wearing. If you stop to talk to someone you will not chat lightly about what good movies you have seen lately. You will never be able to pass a toy shop without wondering, fleetingly, if that fuzzy bear would enchant Baby. Your grocery order will change its character, leaning more heavily toward strained bananas and away from wild rice and chocolate-covered ants. The weekly laundry, the dishwashing, the house cleaning, all will be different. (The laundry, by the way, never really begins to hurt until Baby gets to be about sixteen and starts sending out his shirts; a sixteen-year-old boy, particularly one who is falling in love for the second or third time, somehow manages to wear as many as nine shirts a week.) The faces of old and dear friends will be subtly changed, even a little dimmer, and see what happens to the close friendship you have cherished since childhood, when your friend remarks critically that she thinks Baby is slow in learning to turn over.

The whole foundation of the world has shifted. The center of the universe is certainly asleep there in the crib and, all unconscious, he has even managed to change the shape of time. Up until now years went along by themselves, moving reasonably in weeks and months, turning up fresh every January. Holidays were pleasant, but minor; even Christmas and wedding anniversaries were one-day affairs, marked by no particular hysteria. That is going to be different. Time now is not going to be reckoned by years, it is going to be in terms of teeth, and sitting up, and going on solid food, and taking a first step. The baby is going to be six weeks old, and four months old, and the new year is not going to begin on January first any more, but on that odd new holiday which has taken what always used to be a perfectly ordinary day and turned it into a permanent occasion for celebration. By the time the child is old enough to know that he has a birthday you are going to have to be able to tell, at any time of the year, exactly how many weeks and months and days will have to pass before the birthday arrives again. Christmas and Valentine's Day and Thanksgiving Day will all take on aspects you never dreamed of before. Mother's Day will stop being the day you remember to send flowers to your mother; someday the little creature in the crib will come home from kindergarten with enormous pride bringing you a grimy tattered drawing of a flower or a bird or a rabbit on which is written in erratic print: I LOVE MOTHER. That's when you find out why it's called Mother's Day.

By then, of course, the year will have somehow been cut down to the period of time between September and June, with the summer months thrown in as one long glorious sunny day with no school. The school year will be neatly divided up into seasons of marbles, sleds, still-warm-enough-to-swim, and cold-enough-to-put-on-a-jacket.

No, nothing is ever going to be the same again. There is a time, somewhere between Baby's second and fourth month usually, when this knowledge comes home acutely, miserably. It is the point when the difficulties of schedule and planning are no longer insurmountable, when life has achieved a kind of daily pattern, things are cooling off a little, and the mother has her first real chance to take a deep breath and stand and look around her a little. The first thing she sees is the future, stretching interminably on and on and on, a limitless space of days in which one obligation to her baby succeeds another, her whole life to come irretrievably committed to her child. Other people are free, people without babies; other people do not have horizons so entirely limited, other people can come and go as they please, can enjoy themselves without their weight of responsibility, other people do not have to slave and drudge at degrading monotonous work. Other people, indeed — what about the father of this child? No one expects *him* to stay home every day and do the same things over and over again. He goes off every morning and stays away all day, he meets other people and talks to them about business and news and anything in the world except babies, he sees the outside world, he has a reason for dressing well and he almost certainly lunches every day with clever, interesting people — those career women who always have a manicure. When Dr. Johnson was asked what he would do if he was shut up in a castle with a newborn baby he said, “Sir, I should not much like my company.” Well, Dr. Johnson knew what he was talking about. It takes a little longer for the baby’s own mother, but the truth is there — after a while, you can simply get *bored* with a little baby.

This state of mind goes on simmering for two or three days, and then one evening the baby’s mother meets her husband at the front door when he comes home. She has made no attempt to hide the fact that she is feeling very sorry for herself. She has probably attempted to set her hair and botched it. The husband, with no inkling of the rebellion breeding on his fireside, asks at once, “What’s wrong? Is the baby all right?”

The wife will almost certainly answer, “Is *that* all that matters to you?” or “Of course he’s all right, but what about *me?*” or “You *used* to say hello to me *first.*”

None of this is going to make things any clearer to her husband, who will make matters worse by saying, “But I *did* say hello to you, I asked was the baby all right?”

The wife’s next remark (and it is very odd to hear yourself saying it) is, inevitably, “You never even *talk* to me any more.”

“Of course I talk to you,” he says, still groping. “I talk to you all the time.”

“And you never take me out any more and you never say anything except ‘How’s the baby’ and ‘Is dinner ready’ and you have lunch in restaurants with all kinds of people and women every day and I sit here all alone with nothing to do but take care of the baby and do you know how long it’s been since I even saw a *movie* and I suppose you think *I* can go just anywhere all day long but how would *you* like having to push a carriage everywhere you go?”

“Well, listen,” the husband says helpfully, “sure I’ll take you to a movie — we can call up your mother and she’ll come over and take care of the baby and we can go to the movies. What picture did you want to see so much?”

This is disastrous, and the husband is extremely lucky if he does not get belted one. The only possible worse thing he could say is “Well, look, honey, you go along to the movies if you want to — you call up one of your girl friends and run along, and I’ll take care of the baby.” (There is actually one *worse* thing he could say, but if he has been married long enough to have a baby he knows enough to let it alone; he *could* say, “I don’t have lunch with women every day.”)

It would be quite fair to say that it is not in the makeup of husbands to understand a state of mind like this, any more than they can understand why a wife will get up out of a sickbed to dust the room before the doctor comes, or exactly what the good-looking woman in the black dress could have said to make her so mad. (It was the *way* she said it; she said it the way those good-looking women in black dresses always manage to say those little slighting things men never understand.) At any rate, this inexplicable temper tantrum in his wife is going to leave the husband bewildered and concerned and he is not going to be any better off a week later, when he suggests timidly and after a good deal of hesitation that they get a baby-sitter and go to the theater and his wife smiles at him happily and tolerantly and says, “Oh, *that?* Don’t be silly — I don’t really want to go anywhere.”

Naturally, while he has been going around all this time trying to figure out what he did that was so terrible, she has been busy altering an unbearable pattern of her days into a more tolerable one; no one knows better than a female creature caught up in a round of house and baby care that a pattern of days must not be allowed to descend into monotony, and even a relatively minor change in the pattern is going to leave her feeling better. Wives are always doing this, anyway; consider the millions of jokes about wives changing the furniture around, buying new hats to cheer themselves up, throwing themselves into an orgy of spring cleaning, switching seemingly at random from one hairdresser or butcher to another. Consequently, once this mother has blown off steam and had her tantrum, she has taken the traditional female method of adjusting her life more satisfactorily, and has probably bought herself a new set of dishes, or dressed the baby in blue jeans, or changed the kitchen curtains, or dyed her hair.

Babies are supposed to be fun, after all, and they might as well start out being fun right from the beginning, because they’re going to stay a long, long time.

DON’T WORRY WHEN BABY...

… CROSSES HIS eyes. His eyes are not fully developed at birth, and for his first few weeks of life are gradually strengthening. Baby’s primary objective in rolling his eyes is growth. Scaring the daylights out of his parents is only his secondary objective.

... does not wake up on time for his feeding. He would rather sleep, which shows good common sense. If he sleeps too late, however, it may be necessary to wake him, so that the day’s planning will not be hopelessly scrambled. After all, he’s waked enough other people in his time.

... regurgitates, spills over, gags when being fed. An elementary physical truth: the container is too small for the thing contained. He cannot handle the amount of food he is getting; it is going down too fast, or he may need a breathing spell. If he is joggled too soon after eating, or burped right way, there may be some food still going down which will spill over. If there is difficulty at every feeding, naturally it is up to the doctor to check the suitability of the formula. By four months there should be little or no trouble in keeping food down, unless you decide to feed him creamed onions or chili con carne.

... refuses to go to sleep. No one has ever solved this problem adequately. A very small baby who cries instead of sleeping is usually crying for some very ordinary reason — hunger, cold, or some small discomfort, although often small babies cry for a few minutes before falling asleep, much in the manner of an older child singing himself to sleep. If a bedtime ritual is early established, it will always be easier to pull off the nightly miracle, but make it clear early that this bedtime ritual is strictly limited as to time, and after it is over room service is closed for the night; otherwise, by the time Baby is old enough to make his wants more clearly known, his mother and father will find that the bedtime ritual extends to *their* bedtime, and even after, with demands for glasses of water and one more good night. Try a little spell of rocking and singing; if baby fusses at one particular bedtime, try to schedule his bath for that time. Sometimes he is just longing for human companionship and bright lights; let him come into a lighted room and visit for a few minutes. If he has short-changed himself on a feeding during the day he may enjoy a little something extra now. There is a Scottish superstition which says that a baby who will not sleep is longing for something his mother wanted before he was born, and will sleep if he can have it.

... twitches in his sleep. No one knows whether or what babies dream, but a baby will wiggle, or stir, or jump, or murmur in his sleep much as an older person will. If he is dreaming, he will never tell.

... refuses to let Daddy hold him. When the baby reaches a stage where he can recognize his mother and associate her with food, warmth, and attention, he is sometimes apt to be resentful of being turned over to some other person who does *not* represent all the joys of life. He will regard all other people as interlopers, intent on keeping him from his mother. Fortunately the baby usually goes on at once into a recognition of his father as the other person around the house, and manages to make friends again before Daddy cuts him off with a shilling.

... will not burp after his feeding. Put him down on his stomach for a few minutes. Many babies are more comfortable if they do half their sleeping on their stomachs, and a baby who has been sleeping restlessly sometimes appreciates being turned over, if there is no pillow to get in his way, and his head is turned to one side or the other. Few babies can sleep comfortably with their faces straight down.

CLEVEREST MAN

PROBABLY THE CLEVEREST man I have ever known was the pediatrician who took care of my oldest child some fifteen years ago. When Laurie was about three months old, and in for his regular checkup, the doctor answered all my silly questions and soothed all my nervous doubts, solved my imaginary fears, and reassured me patiently. Finally he sat Laurie neatly on the examination table, holding him with one hand, and with the other hand he patted the middle of Laurie's small back. "This boy has a fine straight back," the doctor said. "A fine straight back. You've done a *very* good job with him."

It was the most wonderful thing I had ever heard. Glowing, excited, secretly nominating myself for Mother of the Year, I hurried Laurie home in his carriage; I could hardly wait to call my husband at his office and tell him we had built Laurie's back nice and straight. I called my mother and my mother-in-law and told them that Laurie's back was unusually straight, and both of them congratulated me soberly. I told my neighbors what *my* doctor had said about *my* baby and was only prevented by natural reticence from giving out general advice on care and feeding, and particular advice on straight backs. Here I had thought all along that I was doing everything so clumsily and so amateurishly; I would have put myself very low on the maternal scale; I was jealous of the competence my neighbors seemed to show, and yet all the time I had been — instinctively, I admit, but that made it even more gratifying — doing just the right things, and the proof of it was there: Laurie's back was nice and straight.

So is every baby's.

A WISE SUGGESTION

JUST AS SOON as you can — and things don’t have to be running like clockwork, just reasonably well organized — find a nice girl around your neighborhood, preferably one of those high school girls who does baby-sitting regularly, and offer her any kind of astronomical sum to take the baby out for a couple of afternoons a week. Just that. If you want to make a production out of it, you can get the baby ready, in his little hat and jacket and booties and mittens, although any intelligent high school girl could probably get him dressed in one third the time, and put him in his carriage. Then just tell her to take him away.

If she likes, let her spend the two hours hanging on the fence around the park rocking the carriage with one foot and giggling with some high school boy. Let her spend the two hours walking with her dearest girl friend exchanging confidences. Let her take the baby home so *her* mother can play with him. The mothers of high school girls are usually at that point between babies of their own and grandchildren where they love an hour or so with some small pink cuddly character.

A young girl doesn’t hear things the way you do; you can tell that by the amount of giggling she can stand. If the baby cries she mostly doesn’t worry about it; she gossips with him, or she makes faces at him, and he usually stops; it must, as a matter of fact, come as something of a relief to the average baby to be allowed to cry for a few minutes in peace without someone worrying over him. In general, however, babies do not tend to cry when being wheeled around by some high school girl. Perhaps it is some common factor that turns up in the minds of babies and high school girls, or perhaps — here is a disagreeable thought — the baby likes that two-hour vacation, too. At any rate, when you see the baby again you will find him refreshed and vigorous after his little excursion, and agreeably pleased to see his mommy again. He is apt to try to break your heart by clinging weeping to his baby-sitter; this is a trick that all babies know instinctively, and you must disregard it completely with a hollow laugh and an offer to give him outright to the baby-sitter, who will hand him back to you in some haste.

Once you have made absolutely sure that the girl has returned him in as good shape as she got him, and has not been feeding him chewing gum and ice cream sodas (many babies *like* ice cream sodas, incidentally, although few baby-sitters are willing to lay out the money), you can undress him and tell him in no uncertain terms who his mommy really is, and give him his bath and put up with him generally until the next blessed afternoon the girl comes.

What you do with *yourself* during these afternoons is the important thing. Remember that from the very minute you left the hospital the baby has been the one who got waited on and pampered, and now it is *your* turn. The lovely long hot bath you have been wanting to linger in, the shampoo, the manicure, the nap; pretend you are yourself again and not just somebody's mother. Try a box of chocolates (never *mind* about those pre-baby clothes!) and a mystery story and a chaise longue; take down your hair, put on something warm and fuzzy and soft, like a baby blanket, indulge yourself. Use plenty of bubble bath. Have a cup of tea and take your time over it. Just lie there.

If the baby-sitter raises her eyebrows and drops her jaw when she comes back and finds you lying there in a black chiffon negligee and reeking of *Scandale* and eating chocolates, so much the better. Never *mind* what she tells her mother about you. Relax. Tomorrow morning you’ll be back in your housedress boiling formula while she’s in Latin class. Just live till the next day she comes.

Miscellaneous Essays and Sketches

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Autobiographical Musing

I LOATHE WRITING autobiographical material because if it's dull no one should have to read it anyway, and if it's interesting I should be using it for a story. No one whose life is completely dominated by four children should have to recall her own childhood; mine was pleasant and swift and easygoing, and very little of it remains in conscious memory. I regard the shiny new mess kit that my son has just gotten for camp and recall, suddenly, long hot weeks and bluejays and the unmistakable smell of a canvas sleeping bag, but I would not otherwise ever remember that I, too, went to camp. So much is happening right now, and the present goes by so imperceptibly; summers are shorter than they used to be, but it is pleasant to reflect that no one, any longer, is in a position to insist that I learn to swim.

I like to think that my mind is bent on sterner things now. Writing, for instance, used to be a delicious private thing, done in my own room with the door locked, in constant terror of the maternal knock and the summons to bed; now that I am so luckily grown up and independent, there is no one to knock on the door and save me from my excruciating labors. Although I flatly refuse to reveal the plans I had for the future when I was fifteen, I may say that they were realized in only one or two major respects. I would have regarded my present situation in many aspects as frankly incredible. There is, of course, no question in my mind but that I am better off this way.

Since ninety percent of my life went on in my head anyway, I cannot see any point in remembering odd concrete items. I grew up near San Francisco — which means a suburb, and trees, and having to stop playing prisoner's base when the streetlights went on in the evening, and sitting on a fence eating pomegranates with my dearest friend, whom I now remember very imperfectly. I remember going to all kinds of public grammar schools, and two different high schools, one in the West and one in the East, which brings back to me the sick inadequate feeling of standing in a hallway holding a notebook and wondering without hope if I would ever find the right room.

I recall how the entire chemistry class halted one afternoon while everyone went to the window to show me my first snowfall, and the increasingly rare letters to my dearest friends back home, and the high-heeled shoes. I went to college, and I remember the mail coming in the mornings, and my first fur coat, and the frightful embarrassment of seeing a story of mine in the college magazine — worse, I believe, than the first day in a gym suit — and when my son asks me, after all of this, what it is like in camp, or whether people really ever get homesick, I remember my first night in the college dormitory, and a girl named Laura something, and I can only tell him no, everything is always all right, somehow.

A Garland of Garlands

MY HUSBAND REVIEWS books for a living, and I would like to enter a protest. I know things are pretty hard these days, with the girls hanging around snatching the eligible males right out of the high school graduating classes, but I don't think I deserved a book reviewer. My mother raised me better, that's all.

I realize now, thinking back over the events of the last few years, that people marry book reviewers with the expectation that it is a temporary thing, that sooner or later the poor dear is going to find himself a better niche in life, such as selling vacuum cleaners. Book reviewing is just nothing for a healthy young woman to be married to. In the first place, a girl gets to reading. And then of course, there's everything else— "Reviewer's Complaint," "The Earmarked Pen," "The Development of the Theory of Universality in Art," and all the rest.

In case there are any eager young women hanging on my every word, and even in case there are not, I'd better go right ahead and bore all you people who have heard this before many times, and give out with the warnings. Let me, for instance, give you a rough idea what we are up against, we reviewer wives.

Take "Reviewer's Complaint," for instance. It starts from the theory that no book over five hundred pages long is worth more than three lines from any man's typewriter, and works from that into the theory that no book ever written is worth any number of lines at all, and eventually you find the reviewer turning the pages of the new bestseller rapidly, memorizing the names and the characters and the chapter headings, and then turning to see what Thompson in the *Times* had to say about it, and if there's anything worth disagreeing with him about. If there's nothing worth disagreeing with Thompson about, the reviewer is going to toss the book casually to his wife, and say, "Just read through this quickly tonight, will you, dear? Like to get another person's opinion before I commit myself on paper."

After the wife has plowed through nine hundred pages of the new historical novel, she is going to come out with some such comment as this: "I like it all right, I guess, but it does seem sort of dull for nine hundred pages."

Then her reviewing man will say, consulting his notes, "What do you think of this character…ah…Rosita?"

The wife thinks deeply, and answers: "Well, I don't know why she had to go and marry Cedric, I liked the other one much better."

"Oh, did she *marry* Cedric?" the reviewer will say, writing it down. "When, about the middle of the book?"

"No, toward the beginning, and then she kept on going back to him and leaving him and going back to him and leaving him, and I don't see why the other one wasn't much nicer. After all, he had all the money, and did keep sending her those plans for the new railroad to approve, didn't he?"

"What railroad?" the reviewer will say. "I don't seem to remember much about that…" And so it will go on.

A few weeks later the doting wife will pick up a copy of the very literary weekly her husband is reviewing for and find his name attached to a review that begins: "Although this book is fundamentally good structurally, it has grave faults, and one might almost go so far as to classify it as dull. Take, for instance, the character of Rosita, the heroine of the book, very ably drawn, whose marriage early on to Cedric, her husband, strikes a false note and does much to weaken the artistic integrity, or wholeness, of the author's intention to bring out the history of the development of the railroad in this country, always a good and interesting subject to this reviewer, although unfortunately overshadowed in the present volume by the author's disagreeable weakness of character portrayal, which, in Rosita, the ably drawn heroine of the book, appears to be…"

And then the wife has to sit across the dinner table from her husband and say: "It's all so *true,* what you said in the review. I wish I had the brains to review books."

Or consider "The Earmarked Pen." This is something that any writer whose works appear with some regularity in any one periodical is apt to fall prey to, but I think that it is most insidious in the case of the book reviewer, who has, at best, a limited number of words at his disposal, and is prejudiced against more than half of those from the start. (Who, for instance, ever heard of someone calling a book just "good"? If a book is good, it is "eminently readable.") Most reviewers, in fact, eventually find themselves with one or two, or at most three, personal words firmly established, like helpful relatives, in the book review as they write it; these are impossible to get rid of, and any attempt at substitution leaves the review uneasy and inclined to turn back on itself and bite.

Take, as an example, the word "heartrending." My own reviewer is particularly attached to this word, along with "delectable" and, to a lesser extent, "invidious" (which he cannot distinguish from "insidious") and "bailiwick." I can recognize one of my husband's reviews at fifty yards because somewhere in it there is going to be a paragraph beginning: "One of the most heartrending factors in this work derives from the lapse on the part of the hero, Cedric, into an invidious cad, a type of man most unsuitable for a book emphasizing the delectable character of Rosita. Removed from his own bailiwick, that of wealth and luxury, Cedric gradually deteriorates into a heartrending wreck of a man, driving Rosita into madness with his invidious insinuations….” That is “The Earmarked Pen.” I have never seen a book reviewer (or a movie reviewer or a music reviewer or an art critic) who didn’t catch it, once his first signed review brought in a check for two cents a word. There is no cure that I know of. I once gave my husband a dictionary of synonyms and a game of anagrams for his birthday, hoping they would help some. “Delectable,” he said, putting them back into the boxes, “positively heartrending.”

“The Development of the Theory of Universality in Art” comes right along with “The Development of the Theory of Style”; in other words, once he gets the idea it’s his, he’s got to pretty it up. Sooner or later your two-cents-a-word reviewer is going to turn around to his wife some evening, when she is sitting there quietly with *The Unpleasantness at the Bellona Club* tucked inside the nine-hundred-page historical novel, and he is going to say: “Listen, I don’t see any reason why all these guys should get so much money for these books they write; it seems to me that any one-page criticism is as good as any long novel ever written, and from now on I’m an artist too, see?” I call this “The Development of the Theory of Universality in Art,” because it starts from the assumption in the reviewer’s mind that he is a writer too, only better, since reviewing can favor or condemn other artists. From that time on, the reviewer begins to think of himself as a stylist, and as a poet, too, if he can manage it.

And his reviews begin to sound like this: “When, in the course of pursuing his own heartrending and thankless brand of livelihood, the reviewer finds himself confronted with such an isolated, invidious, even incredibly desolate, comparison of his lot with that of such a delectably constructed piece of degradation as Cedric, it is not enough for one man occasionally to envy another: He must also be at some pains to suggest to himself the wicked, unhappily invidious bailiwick in which both are placed, that is to say, the *sine qua non* without which no book, and no reviewer, who necessarily builds from a book a new, finer, higher, and, in some cases, beautiful and lasting, form, can survive." This is style. The poet-reviewer still gets his two cents a word, and the poet-published still gets his substantial royalties. This leads to some bitterness and eventual bad feeling, and finally review-articles beginning: "The fundamental ecological principle of art is this: No work of art, no matter how lofty, vast, or highly poetical, no matter how successful financially, can possibly expect ever to exist without the diligent application of the critic's heartrending assistance…."

All this time I haven't said anything about the *books.* That's the reviewer's wife's big problem, the books. Whether she sells them or whether she sends them to the library or whether she gives them to her kid sister, they pile up in the bookcases, in packing boxes, in the corners of the living room, all incredibly pathetic in their bright shiny dust jackets, all called "The Novel of the Year" or "The New Sinclair Lewis" or "The Finest Piece of Work This Young Author Has Yet Done." And after a certain number of books beginning:

Rosita entered the room softly and closed the door carefully behind her. Was Cedric's presence here? Could he be? She breathed his name softly…"Cedric!"…and immediately, wonderfully, he answered! How achingly lovely, how ecstatic, it was, Rosita thought suddenly, blissfully. "Cedric," she murmured again, "Cedric!" The heavy fragrance of roses filled the air, seeming to carry her words to him where he waited…there.

Or:

Rosie slammed the door behind her and walked over to the bed. Her high heels made a sharp clacking sound as she moved.

Ricky was asleep.

Bringing up her foot, she caught him heavily on the back of the head with her heel.

“Listen, ya punk,” she snarled, “I’ve taken enough from you, hear me? Sleep, sleep, sleep, all day long, and I’m working my fingers to the bone walking the filthy streets so you can have money to buy canned heat. Huh!”

Rosie laughed cruelly into Ricky’s wide-eyed face.

“Huh!” she said.

As I say, after so much reading starting off like this, the reviewer’s wife begins to wonder about it all. Maybe two cents a word isn’t a living wage. Maybe vacuum cleaners aren’t selling so well these days, but they’re honest. Maybe she ought to have married Cedric. Maybe she’d better call the whole heartrending thing an invidious flop.

Hex Me, Daddy, Eight to the Bar

EVER SINCE I met one of my grandmother's old cronies — the one with the evil eye — down on Sullivan Street the other day, I have had an uneasy feeling that I am being followed by something supernatural and malignant. Twice since then I have narrowly escaped destruction by fire, and in addition I have developed a particularly severe case of hives — out of season, I might add. In order to combat the superstitious fear that is beginning to prey on my mind, I stopped the other day in a secondhand bookstore and asked the young man on the high stool what would be good for Visitations. After some misunderstanding, the thought of which still makes me hot and cold all over, I procured a copy of a slim paperbound volume called *Pow-Wows: Art and Remedies for Man and Beast.*

This is by way of testimonial for John George Hohman, who compiled the book. Since I first picked up your little collection, brother, I haven't needed another thing to keep me well and happy. From the very first remedy for mother-fits, right straight through to the punch line, the cure for wind-broken horses, it holds me. I tell you honestly that I couldn't stir out of my chair until I had finished it. Every page is packed full of thrills. Take, for instance, page 74, with its stirring recipe for destroying spring-tails or ground-fleas. Or page 62, which explains how to "Retain the Right in Court and Council." Let me pass *that* one on to all you poor devils who fear the law as I used to. It must only be employed, I might point out, when the judge is not favorably disposed toward you. You must stand in court, courageous and unabashed, and say slowly: "I appear before the house of the Judge. Three dead men look out of the window; one having no tongue, the other having no lungs, and the third being sick, blind, and dumb." O brethren, what a cure this has worked in me! No longer do I fear the light; the haunts of the underworld see me no more, lurking in the shadows and the hidden places. No indeedy!

Sometimes Mr. Hohman is pretty short with us neophytes, all things considered. For instance, on page 30 — a particular pet of mine, since it also tells me how to make cattle return home and how to cause fish to collect — we have the plaintive request: "To Prevent Cherries from Maturing Before Martinmas." To which Mr. Hohman replies smartly: "Engraft the twigs on a mulberry tree, and your desire is accomplished." That's Hohman for you. No patience for the trivial.

Or take what we call "A Very Good Plaster," on page 26. Mr. Hohman points out that he doubts "very much whether any physician in the United States can make a plaster equal to this." Now it may bring the American Medical Association down on me in a fight to the finish, but I doubt also whether any physician could. You take two quarts of cider, a pound of beeswax, a pound of sheep tallow, and a pound of tobacco, and you boil it and dissolve it and strain it. The recipe doesn't say whether you wallow in it after that, or whether you use it in your fountain pen, or whether you take one jigger of it to a glass of plain water and lots of ice please, but I tried it with a pound of oleomargarine because the grocery was fresh out of sheep tallow and it didn't cure a thing.

Right now Hohman and I are having a lot of traffic with epileptics, always hanging around waiting for a good, quick cure. Hohman has several, provided the patient has never fallen into fire or water. Of course if the subject *has* ever fallen into fire or water he can take comfort from "A Safe and Approved Means to Be Applied in Cases of Fire and Pestilence" or "A Very Good Cure for Weakness of the Limbs, for the Purification of the

Blood, for the Invigoration of the Head and Heart, and to Remove Giddiness, etc." Or, as a last resort, he can desert the field completely and go in for dropsy, for which we have no fewer than eight cures. Finally, as a precaution against *every*thing troublesome, carry the right eye of a wolf with you at all times, hidden in your right sleeve. This last charm interests me particularly, but inasmuch as I wear loose sleeves most of the time, I can't get the right eye of anything to stay up them unless I have someone sew it in for me, and even then it would probably spoil the whole line of the shoulder.

And right near there, on page 78, there's a system for compelling thieves to return stolen goods that doesn't seem likely to fail: "Walk out early in the morning before sunrise to a juniper tree, and bend it with the left hand toward the rising sun, while you are saying: 'Juniper tree, I shall bend and squeeze thee, until the thief has returned the stolen goods to the place from which he took them.' Then you must take a stone and put it on the bush, and under the bush and the stone you must put the skull of a malefactor." I'm going to get back all the books I ever lost, if I can find enough skulls.

Who can tell what better world lies ahead, with John George Hohman leading the way — a world free from thieves, maledictions, lawsuits, and dropsy! A world where the cherries bloom on mulberry trees, and the good old-fashioned mother-fit has stolen off into the darkness! And in this clean new world, Hohman offers me, temptingly, the power "To Dye a Madder Red." I entertain visions of the giddier whirl, the more achingly poignant delight, the superlative, the madder red; or, possibly, the drab little madder, so quietly enduring its colorless web of days, suddenly transformed into a creature of glamour, vitality. I have dreamt of contacting herpetologist Dr. Ditmars, and bargaining with him for a few dozen (pecks? gallons?

pounds?) of madders, in return for which I would dye his vampire bats or his ant colonies red, the madder red.

In the minor matters, Hohman and I can string along fine together, curing a wind-broken horse here, destroying a spring-tail there, but it all ends ultimately in disillusionment and mutual bitterness. Sand, Mr. Hohman, that's what you've built on, sand. It's page 22 that showed me — page 22, with its remedy for mortification and all. Here there is a charm to "Prevent Wicked or Malicious Persons from Doing You an Injury — Against Whom It Is of Great Power." This remedy is simply the phrases "Dullix, ix, us; Yea, you can't come over Pontio; Pontio is above Pilato," to be repeated over and over until they do something. Now, I had occasion to use this charm recently, and even though it may sore disappoint John George Hohman, I feel that I ought to report my findings on it.

There is a certain Mrs. Quilter, who, besides being one of the least pleasant persons I know, has had the additional bad taste to move into a house next to mine. Not long ago she left a note in my mailbox saying that unless things got quieter fast around here she was going to complain to the police (perhaps this was due in part to a cat of mine that used to go out my back window and into hers — a long and perilous journey for a cat). Since I very rightly took no notice of her letter, a few days later I found another note from her saying that she was good and sick of the whole thing, and that it was more than human nature should be asked to stand, and that if she heard one more sound out of me (or, I suppose, my cat) she was going to Take Steps. Referring to Mr. Hohman, I wrote out the magic formula, "Dullix, ix, us; Yea, you can't come over Pontio; Pontio is above Pilato," and dropped it into *her* mailbox. I thought that would be the end of it, but she came to the door last night, in curl papers, and said, Was this infernal racket actually going to keep on? "Dullix," I said to her quietly, "ix, us; Yea, you can't come over Pontio; Pontio is above Pilato," and I closed the door. This morning, the doorbell rang, and when I answered it, there was a policeman. "Well," he remarked ominously, "what's this I hear about *you*?" "Dullix—" I said. "I hear you been annoying the neighbors again," he said. "Well, well, well."

Frequently, however — and this is the main reason I think Hohman and I perhaps weren't made for each other — I am made aware that maybe Hohman and his charms exist on a different level of culture from my own. And nowhere is this distressing fact borne home to me more tragically than in this recipe:

"You must go upon another person's land and repeat the following words: 'I go before another court — I tie up my 77-fold fits.' Then cut three small twigs off any tree on the land; in each twig you must make a knot. This must be done on a Friday morning before sunrise, in the decrease of the moon unbeshrewedly."

Now, leaving out the "unbeshrewedly," which I don't pretend to understand, I think I have a pretty good idea of what would happen if I gave this charm a good try. Suppose I were subject to fits — 77-fold ones — and I wanted a good, quick cure. The only person I know with land and a tree with twigs on it is a gentleman some six houses down the block who has a good-size window box with a rosebush. Say some Friday morning I feel a fit coming on, so I take my little book under my arm and head down the street. Clambering ungracefully into the window box, I begin: "I go before another court—"

At this point the gentleman owning the window box, whose name, as I recall from the tag on the rosebush, is Pelargonium Capitatum, will open the window noisily and peer out at me nearsightedly. "What the hell do you think you are doing in that window box?" he will say. "Oh, just trying to cure a fit," I might toss off casually. Or perhaps I might say: "Well, I have this book by this guy and it says…"

In any case, if Mr. Capitatum is an impetuous man, he will by this time have left the window to go after a phone. Or, if he has the staying power, he will be saying: "What did you just say you were trying to do?" By this time I will have reached the part in my charm where I cut three small twigs off the tree, and when he lets this go by, I have him. Then I tie a knot in each twig, and if he is the man I vaguely remember him as being, he will tell me: "Say, I used to have a sister had a little boy had fits. Tried everything, but they never cured him that way. Doctor said—"

Any long story about someone's sister's little boy's fits is not best listened to in a window box; at this point I would feel constrained to slither down and say, "Well, I guess I'll go gargle a couple of aspirin in a glass of water," and saunter off, leaving Mr. Capitatum with his story poised in midair, his rosebush fearfully knotted, and himself with what I should diagnose, from here, as a severe — or 77-fold — convulsion.

In case anyone is interested in joining us in our work (there is still much to be done; we haven't even touched on radioactive elements yet, or phobophobia, or the harmful substances contained in inhaled cigarette smoke), come right on over. I will be in the backyard, curing wind-broken horses and dyeing madders a madder red. And all my old superstitious fears will have been jauntily and unbeshrewedly laid to rest.

Clowns

“What’s so special about clowns?” I’d been wondering to myself. “What makes them so funny?” (Let me say here that I intend someday to ask a clown — for instance, Emmett Kelly, that mighty creature — about people. “What’s so special about people?” I shall ask him.) Wandering around asking idiotic questions is not usually the best way to learn anything, I’d have thought, but with clowns it seems to be not how you introduce the subject but, once introduced, how you dismiss it.

“The one in the circus,” said my son with whom I began it. “The one who sweeps up the spotlight.”

“Grock,” said our friend who is a musician. “The greatest clown who ever lived, and the *most* unfortunate fellow.” He began to laugh reminiscently. “Let me show you,” he said; he stood up and gestured widely. “Grock used to come onto the stage, walking like *this.* In his bag he found first a clarinet, which he played, singing the low notes the clarinet would *not sing.* Then, he finds a violin, and he wishes to play *that,* but it is a small violin, a toy. And Grock is wearing those great gloves of the clown, so he plays the violin anyway. Like *this.* The small violin, and the large gloves. And he tosses the bow into the air, but cannot catch it.” The musician stopped for breath. Then, while he was tossing an imaginary violin bow into the air and pointedly not catching it, the writer interrupted.

“Remember the Marx Brothers? And the dancing scene in front of the mirror? Or Groucho’s walk? Or Harpo swinging on the opera house scenery? Or—”

“Grock, then,” the musician said, his voice rising. “He *will* play the piano, although it displeases him, and it plays badly, so he dismembers it. So he thinks he will play the accordion, and for a while it plays beautifully, but then he cannot make it squeeze back together again, and it grows longer and longer, until poor Grock is wound around and around. The most *unfortunate* fellow.”

“Remember Emmett Kelly slouching along chewing on that loaf of bread?” demanded our neighbor who owns the coal business. “He walks — I can’t describe it — like *this,* look.”

“There was a little circus used to come around summers,” my grocer told me. “Had a clown, funniest man I ever saw. He threw tomatoes. Didn’t do anything else — just threw tomatoes.” He made an easy throwing gesture. “Just threw tomatoes,” he said.

“Watch *me,*” my son said. He ran around in little circles, shouting, “I’m sweeping up the light, look! I’m sweeping up the light!”

“Grock?” said the lady whose business is cosmetics. “Yes, I remember Grock; he was a great man. He was the only clown I ever saw who wore almost no makeup. His face was natural, if you know what I mean, but like a clown’s without paint.”

It was like that right along. First the familiar, faraway look in the eyes, then the reminiscent smile. Then the urgent need to imitate, rather than describe — to be, for one minute, the clown himself. In the conversation of all the people I listened to, there was also an intensely *personal* remembrance of some clown whose gestures and actions were indelibly marked on their minds. The musician remembered Grock, the unfortunate, with his toy violin and his unwinding accordion, and yet kept insisting while he spoke: “He was a truly great musician, that Grock, a superlative musician. All the musicians used to attend Grock every night, and he made them cry.” The lady who made cosmetics had no wistful smile for Grock’s music, but recalled perfectly that he wore almost no makeup. That a writer should remember a mimic dance before a mirror is hardly surprising; that a grocer should remember a clown who threw tomatoes is an interesting sidelight on what must be one great repressed longing of grocers toward their customers. And — this, I believe, was the saddest of all — the child remembers how uproariously helpless Emmett Kelly was, sweeping up the spotlight into an enormous circle, so that he had constantly to start over.

Hearing all this, our friend who teaches sociology remarked, “Did you know that the Pueblo Indians have a special ‘ceremonial clown’ who joins in the dances and songs of the religious ceremonies, simply making fun of them? And while the ceremony is going on, the ceremonial clown wanders around among the performers, making faces behind their backs, or throwing things at the audience, or mimicking the dancers.”

And, even in the sociologist, the nostalgic smile.

I think — although there are many people I should hesitate to ask about it — that almost everyone remembers, with that same longing, a moment when a conclusion of superlative importance emerged from the actions of the pathetic little man who was so funny. Is it because the clown seems so overwhelmed by the infinite pathos of life, so outlawed by complexity and confusion, that what overpowers us with laughter is the expression of our own futility or the sight of our own precious little concerns reduced to a proportionate stature? The businessman laughs over Emmett Kelly gnawing on the loaf of bread; the Indians, with a sound eye for the practical, encourage a mockery of their sacred performances, as though to remind the audience and the participants that they are only human and, consequently, silly.

Most of my friends were furiously indignant when I suggested that there could be women clowns. The idea was preposterous: The clown was a man and might, if he chose, dress as a woman, but only briefly, and to make a point. Perhaps the clown should be a man because, although he is allowed to retain a vast human dignity, he must be deprived of all human rights so that he is a valiant small figure at the very broadest part of universal experience, with an emotional aspect so unselfconscious that it can become personal to every member of his audience. His emotion *must* be impersonal — and impersonality is not a feminine characteristic.

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If I had wondered whether any man might be a clown, a second glance at my clown-loving friends — one trying to show how funny it was that a man in enormous gloves should try to play a toy violin, another futilely trying to reproduce an irresistibly funny walk, a third explaining, in a voice shrill with giggling, the mechanics of a droll face or a funny turn of the head — would have convinced me that the gift of real humor is a rare thing, to be administered judiciously and guarded carefully against imitation. “Some people *have* to take life seriously,” our neighbor with the coal business told me earnestly. “If they didn’t, then there wouldn’t need to be clowns at all.”

What belongs to a clown, then? What, aside from the fact that he is born a clown and can never be anything else, are the essential things he must have to set up in business? A man can’t just start out, apparently, with a funny face and a conviction that he is the local lowest common denominator and expect to make people laugh and cry; there are certain unchangeable factors on which any informed audience insists.

First of all, your clown must *look* like a clown. He must wear a distinctive dress. It may be the traditional clown costume, or some variation of it, or even, like Charlie Chaplin, a completely individual dress of his own. But it must be two things — constant and functional. Charlie Chaplin's shoes are a familiar example of the costume that looks always, and still is, an essential part of the act; they are distinctive, peculiarly adapted to him from the traditional clown costume, and they are the irresistible factor in his walk — without the shoes, there could not possibly be the Chaplin walk. Similarly, Grock's lack of makeup was an identifying characteristic, since it was unusual for that type of clown at that time to be without a heavy coat of whitewash, but Grock's singularly expressive face was, without makeup, one of his most eloquent assets.

Another thing that seems to be very important for all clowns, not even excepting the Indian ceremonial clown, is that he must be acting extemporaneously, or at least *seem* to be acting extemporaneously. No one will follow a clown who shows plainly that he has spent laborious hours perfecting some slight knack, or indicates by attaching any importance to it that the tiny trick of the hand is a product of endless practice. The clown, reacting universally to overwhelming provocation, must react immediately, impulsively, inevitably, as any of us might; he must not have a carefully prepared plan of action, since any one of us can have that.

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Moreover, let him keep quiet, please. He may fall, climb, roll, dance, grimace, smash furniture, or do any number of idiotic and completely satisfying things, but he must, above all, do them without chattering at us. Perhaps this is our deep-seated mistrust of the spoken word coming out again; if the clown talks, he is vulnerable, like the rest of us, to reasoning, to argument, to correction, to the endless verbal tidal wave that has engulfed us. Also, if the clown is properly personal enough to his audience, his actions and his gestures are meaningful, more than any words can be. The breathlessness in a movie audience when it seems that perhaps Harpo Marx is going to speak at last is as much fear as it is expectation; it is the terror lest the clown weaken for the one moment that would lose him his invulnerability. Charlie Chaplin, speaking, has become a comedian, which is another thing altogether from a clown.

Everyone, by the way, who mentioned Grock to me added one important fact, which stayed with them past all meaning in the word "clown" itself; it was so important that it set Grock as the spirit of invulnerability on a very pinnacle of greatness. "He never came to America," they said dreamily. "He was asked to come many times, but he never came. He said he had enough money, and he didn't want any more."

There was a clown, that Grock, with an unbelievable depth of human sympathy; the man who had enough money, and didn't want any more.

I wonder, then, what a clown might say about people. "They wear a distinctive dress," he might say, "usually copied from other people. They seem to be futilely resisting a complexity of life far too great for them, they never *seem* to have any rational motive for their behavior. And they're so pathetic they make you cry, but above all" — and here, if he were a true clown, there would be an exaggerated gesture of despair— "they're unbelievably, irresistibly funny."

A Vroom for Dr. Seuss

THE SUBJECT OF children’s reading, like taxes and hay fever and the fate of the New York Mets, is a matter upon which anyone, informed or not, feels the right to hold a positive opinion. I do not imagine that anyone really intends to come right out and propose that children *not* be taught to read, television and comic books being what they are, but how children read, and what, and when, are subjects of interest to all of us.

Many grade-school children can hardly read at all, or hate it if they can; many more can read words but not for sense. Reading for its own sake, for pure enjoyment, seems to be set aside as a waste of time in favor of reading as a vehicle for acquiring information, and for children today this knowledge is apparently supposed to extend from moral precepts (puppies who disobey their mothers get caught by the dog catcher) for the very young, to popular science and anthropology for the more sophisticated.

As the mother of four children who have somehow learned to read, I think back with no nostalgia at all to the seemingly endless parade of “good” current children’s books that came into our house, were absorbed, passed on to the next child, read, torn, scribbled on, and that finally found their way, carton by carton, to the children’s room of our local library. I remember the adventures of numerous bluebirds, airplanes, toy engines, clowns, rabbits, and walking-talking dolls, all of whom got into trouble by not obeying, or not conforming, or not going to bed on time. I read and listened to touching tributes to doctors and school-bus drivers and little boys and girls who live in far-off lands, and jolly old Dan the grocery store man. I could tell you how to build a treehouse, I could give you the latest word on how we might live in a pioneer village, or how far away the sun is, or the chemical composition of table salt. The major part of our children's reading was devoted, for more years than I care to remember, to an antiseptic and wholly misleading interpretation of the world we live in; I was heartily glad to see each carton of books leave the house.

Not all the books went, of course, but the only ones that stayed were the ones people wanted. These turned out to be almost exactly what might have been predicted: The real books remained, the ones that packed a sense of excitement and enchantment, that were *read* rather than skimmed, the books that led young minds into worlds of imagination and delight. These are still around, and they are still being read.

I recently was asked to write a children's beginning-reading book. All right, I thought; for years I have been deploring the quality of the kids' books we are forced to buy, hating the practical, everyday moral stories; now I could write my own. I thought to write a little fairy tale, simple and short, the kind of story I would have liked to have my own children sound out as beginning readers. I was given a word list, made out by "a group of educators," and asked to confine myself to this list, which included perhaps five hundred words of a basic vocabulary that was felt to be desirable for beginners. "Getting" and "spending" were on the list, but not "wishing"; "cost" and "buy" and "nickel" and "dime" were all on the list, but not "magic"; "post office" and "supermarket" were on the list, but not "Fairyland." I felt that the children for whom I was supposed to write were being robbed, persuaded to accept nickels and dimes instead of magic wishes. This is a very small quarrel; there are many groups of educators who feel that Fairyland is an unhealthy environment for growing minds, but in a choice between television ("television" was on the list) and Fairyland, I know where I would rather have my own children growing up.

In all the morass of children's books, Dr. Seuss stands out as a particularly welcome friend. He could not have worked from my basic word list ("snacks"? "bellies"? "slunk"?), but then, Dr. Seuss makes his own rules, and has managed somehow to cover every step of reading growth from beginning to almost-sophisticated with a rich deposit of nonsense.

Not all the nonsense is his own, of course. On the back of *Hop on Pop,* an "educator" is quoted as saying: "The rhythmic pattern of words and ideas will provide excellent 'sound-ear' basic training for the use of phonics," and another "educator" chimes in, saying: "With *Hop on Pop,* children not only get a chance to enjoy fine literature, but also have an opportunity to learn a number of phonic elements, painlessly and joyfully." Fine literature ("We like to hop on top of Pop." "STOP. You must not hop on Pop.") it may or may not be, but no reader, slowly mesmerized by rhythmic patterns, can avoid being caught by its charming silliness, which is, after all, far more of a recommendation for reading a book than any number of phonic elements.

I am mortally afraid of offending Dr. Seuss. If I did, a Grinch might steal my Christmas, or a Thnadner might turn up in my morning coffee, or I might find myself being pursued by a Sneetch or a Vroom or a Collapsible Frink. I've lost count of how many books Dr. Seuss has written, but I do know that his books are some of the rare bright spots in children's literature today. It is an honest pleasure to turn from a story about a dear little black-and-white kittycat who wants to make friends with a buttercup to *The Cat in the Hat,* with his effrontery and his casual joy in making a mess.

Dr. Seuss's A B C, the author's newest book, is the very beginning of beginner's reading ("BIG C, little c. What begins with C? Camel on the ceiling — C…c…C"), although I do not find "begins," "camel," or "ceiling" on my basic word list for beginners. And — after long ago dismissing "zebra" as the logical end of the alphabet — Dr. Seuss has found a substitute, “Zizzer-Zazzer-Zuzz,” which makes Z far more persuasive than “zebra” ever did. *Dr. Seuss’s A B C,* along with *Hop on Pop,* will give young readers a head start on reading for the sheer joy of it, which is no small accomplishment.

If there are faults to be found with Dr. Seuss — remember that Collapsible Frink — they are certainly very small ones. There is a certain appearance of haste that creeps into the later books; I am sure that Dr. Seuss writes, as he says he does, for fun and not for accumulated output, but perhaps he is too anxious to get the books finished and into the children’s hands. The animals are beginning to look alike, for one thing, with less crazy invention; it is a sad comment on the state of things today when a Jo Redd-Zoff looks a lot like a south-going Zax, and both of them strongly resemble a High Gargel-orum. Also, I do quarrel with such lines as those in which Sneetches had “bellies with stars” and others had “none upon thars.”

Nevertheless, why a mind that finds one alphabet inadequate for its needs should be expected to confine itself to standard grammar and spelling is a question I could not try to answer.

Perhaps this quibbling is only because it is a temptation to wish that anyone who has given us such a wealth of zoological misfits and thoroughly satisfying nonsense should go on forever without a slip. Dr. Seuss’s slips are small and rare, and as for going on forever, I think he probably will.

Notes on an Unfashionable Novelist

(Samuel Richardson, 1689–1761)

It is difficult today to suggest seriously that any thinking, responsible person sit down and read a book; the glorified comic magazine we call the modern “novel” has taken too firm a hold on our racing, bewildered minds. It is too easy to read a thin volume where everything is said only once, and seven or eight words suffice for a sentence, just as seven or eight pat phrases suffice for an idea; why read anything “long” or, worse still, “old”? Why, for instance, read a stuffy old character like Samuel Richardson, who looms only very vaguely back there beyond Henry James and past Thackeray and is more than obscured by Jane Austen; why read Richardson, who was certainly very moral and extremely long and, not to put too fine a point on it, dull?

I can think of, offhand, three reasons. I can find in someone like Richardson three attributes somehow lost today and intensely, humanly, valuable: peace, principle, kindness — three qualities as emphatically stuffy and old-fashioned as your grandmother’s wedding gown, and as emphatically lost from general circulation.

Peace would come first today, I should think. Out of a time when things moved slowly, and conversation was formal and, if you like, stilted, and when a man could, if he chose, write a book a million words long and expect people to have time for it, Richardson made three books. They move along like molasses; no small action is consummated in less than ten pages. They line up, volume after volume full of solid, meaningful words, and they are leisurely, relaxed, and gracious. Richardson was a fat little man who ran a fine printing business and worked hard at it; he sat daily at tea with groups of admiring ladies; he liked his cat and he liked his garden and he liked gossip about high life, and he had plenty of time. With all his interests and all his busy concerns — and he stayed plump; he liked his food — he wrote three novels, *Pamela; or, Virtue Rewarded; Clarissa; or, The History of a Young Lady;* and *The History of Sir Charles Grandison,* which, placed side by side, would fill up two mystery-story shelves in a modern library.

Page after page, volume after volume of intimate letters go into these novels, letters back and forth from one character to another, describing events, commenting on the descriptions, reflecting on the moral implications of several courses of action, requesting more comments, all taking plenty of time, with nobody hurrying. In any dramatic crisis, the heroine has time for a polysyllabic remonstrance, which she reports faithfully in her letters; the villain has time for a lengthy insincere apology, which *he* reports faithfully in *his* letters; and both explain their actions minutely, and ask for comments from their correspondents, which they get, along with recapitulations of what *might* have been done under the circumstances, and comments on *that.* And in all of it, there is a vast sense of leisure to reflect, to choose, to be graceful. Peace provides the opportunity to have time to think.

Principle is a great inspiration, too. Sir Charles Grandison (who may be the perfect man) cannot marry the woman he loves, or even let her suspect that he loves her, because he feels himself responsible to another woman who is devoted to him. Clarissa Harlowe is abducted and seduced, but she cannot marry Lovelace, her repentant seducer, although offered riches, a title, the forgiveness of her family, and perfect respect from all her friends, because her conception of herself as honorable has been destroyed. Pamela is kidnapped, besieged, commanded, bribed, tormented, and deceived, but cannot bring herself to yield to the irrepressible Mr. B. until she is offered a genuine wedding ring. It all sounds like the most outrageous nonsense, and yet what is it but Richardson's exaggerated notion of honor? And is it possible that honor, however exaggerated, can really be ridiculous? Pride of self, dignity, respect: these still exist today, one hopes, and although Pamela and Clarissa and dear Sir Charles keep their values in an area once removed from the area in which our values lie today, are they so foolish? Is a sinful man the less sinful because his crimes are against a standard more rarified than ours? Lovelace, who ruined Clarissa, is not perhaps as bad a man as

Faulkner’s Popeye, but Lovelace is certainly as real a sinner in his sphere; moreover, he has more time to be bad and to be subtle about it than Popeye.

The goodness of Richardson’s good characters — and all his characters are very sharply divided, half being devils, half angels — is in the same terms as the badness: That is, they are good in a sense that, translated into terms we understand fully, comes out as qualities we like and admire and would like to own ourselves.

Kindness, the third attribute, is an outlandish word to use about a writer, or about writing, or about anything except people and the way they feel. And yet kindness is a strong quality felt in Richardson’s writing, the sort of kindness that evokes the tremendous tenderness the man himself must have felt, and tossed about embarrassingly on everyone who came his way. His characters, for instance, are nice to one another. One of them may abhor another; some of them — again, like Lovelace — outrage every precious tenet of a rigid morality and bring this outrage to bear on others; frequently these precise, lazy people are cross with one another, and stirred to anger. Harriet Byron was completely out of patience by about volume eight, when Sir Charles was sedately making absolutely *sure* that no conceivable shred of formality had been inadvertently overlooked. Nevertheless, implicit in every word, in every comment upon a comment, is the deep conviction of sympathy: not “We are all from the same mind: Richardson’s,” but “We are all from the same people: the mortals.” That is a valuable thing to record, and perhaps it takes ten volumes to put it across.

There is very little humor in Richardson, and, to be honest, some of the books are pretty heavy going — Pamela’s reflections on the education of her children, or some of the long stretches in *Grandison* where everyone takes a breather from the burning question (is it honorable or is it not?) and they just sit back and write long letters scrutinizing themselves — but without every word of it you couldn’t really be satisfied that Sir Charles ought to propose or that Pamela deserves her husband. The richness of it is in those long muddy sections, the dark background of the bright tapestry. After Pamela’s prolonged musings on children, we are disrespectfully delighted to see Mr. B. contemplate an elopement with a designing widow.

It takes a long time to read Richardson, and even so, he is only that stuffy little man a long way back — down the length of years to the eighteenth century, standing beyond even Thackeray and just behind Fielding — but peace, principle, and kindness are qualities that may even survive our own distempered time.

Private Showing

WHEN THE PRIVATE showing of the movie *Lizzie,* made from my novel *The Bird's Nest,* was scheduled in New York, I could not see it because my small son Barry had chickenpox. I had put the bottle of calamine lotion down on the telephone table to pick up the phone and said, no, I could not come to New York because I had chickenpox — and, I could have added, because there was a button off my blue coat, and my only decent dress, the brown one, had a large spot on the front, and the living room had to be vacuumed, and I had so many letters to write, and anyway, the first meeting with my Lizzie was something I had been trembling over for nearly a year, and I honestly lacked the courage to make the first move. When I finally put down the phone I tried to pick up the bottle of calamine lotion and could not close my fingers around it; the stain is still there on the hall floor, but — I have met Lizzie.

Out of consideration for the chickenpox, the magicians in charge of such things arranged to send Lizzie to me, and so I met her face-to-face at last on my home field, as it were, in our small local movie theater here in Vermont. Out of my many conflicting reactions, the only one I can isolate clearly is excitement; nothing so surprising has ever happened to me.

As long as I can remember, the act of writing has been a private one. A book is a comfortable stack of pages of yellow copy paper, with typed words on them, a familiar and fitted country in which I am perfectly at home, able to find a paragraph or a line without difficulty, able to recognize from the look of a page just where it belongs. A book translated into galley proofs is no longer mine — the pages are different, the paper is not yellow, the words are printed and look smaller; the whole country has been tidied and set in order. When the book is bound, there is the unfamiliar jacket and the sudden odd weight of it, and other people — strangers! — are holding it in their hands. I can read my own books in print the way I read and reread old books from my childhood, and the difference between *The Bird's Nest* and, say, *Northanger Abbey* is one of literary skill, not degree of familiarity; I can remember more passages from *Jane Eyre* than I can from any of my own books.

I have never, in all the years I have been writing, heard my own words read or spoken aloud, except by myself, unwillingly, and under pressure. *That* translation is too much for me; I cannot imagine how these words will sound; on the yellow page they *look* as though they will sound all right, and since they are going to be read, I trust, in silence, it seems to me most important that they look as though they will sound all right. I once heard a tape of myself reading one of my own stories and it sounded silly. The voice, of course, was not mine, and the words had been subtly changed; they were not on yellow paper at all, they were *strange* on that infernal tape.

All this, of course, changed, because of my unnerving encounter with my own words spoken out loud, and my own people walking around, in the movie *Lizzie*. It was something like being hit on the head with a rock: Everything was very bright for a second, and then it got kind of wavy. I sat there watching *Lizzie* with my mouth half-open, thinking — and there is really no other sensation like it — Why, there is Doctor Wright; he is taller than I remembered. It was suddenly clear that through some gap in time *these* were the real people, and I had stolen them for my book. Elizabeth talked and looked just exactly as I remembered her (remembered her from where? from the movie, from the book?) and Aunt Morgen and Doctor

Wright were there, and it was like a family reunion, although I kept wondering if *they* recognized *me.*

It was exciting, too, because — as in any family reunion — I knew pretty well how everyone was going to behave, but still I could not tell when the explosions were coming. At one point I wanted to tell Morgen to look out — if she kept on talking to Elizabeth like that there would be trouble, even though I *knew* that Morgen always talked like that. It isn't fair, I kept on thinking, the way Morgen keeps picking on that poor child, when everyone knows Elizabeth isn't well, and then I had to shake my head and tell myself not to worry, it's only a movie; everything will come out all right.

I took my four children to see what they were unashamedly calling "Mommy's movie," after explaining with some care that there would be no serial, no cartoon, no popcorn stand open, no candy, but that at least they could sit wherever they liked, because there would also be no audience. It was Barry's second movie — the other one having been *Cinderella* — and he approved wholeheartedly of the MGM lion at the beginning; he felt that I had achieved a kind of masterstroke by arranging to have my movie begin with that lion roaring. For the rest of it, he pointed out that it was not very much different from *Cinderella,* after all.

Sally broke into enthusiastic cheering at the sight of my name on the screen and had to be violently hushed by her horribly embarrassed father and brother, one on each side holding a hand over her mouth. The movie itself enchanted her; she screamed once when Lizzie threw a bottle at Aunt Morgen, and clapped wildly when Doctor Lone Ranger Wright came riding to the rescue.

Jannie, whose standards are noticeably more mature than her younger sister's, found the movie experience deeply disturbing. She sat through the entire show in silence, refused to join in the later discussion at the dinner table, and had nightmares all night. Under other circumstances, I had realized by then, it would not be the kind of movie we would take Jannie to at all; I could measure the extent of its disturbance to her by my own reactions.

Laurie, on the other hand, thoroughly enjoyed it; he is fourteen, and has spent perhaps an accumulated four or five years at Saturday matinees, regarding beasts from Planet X and alien minds plotting to take over Earth. He had no difficulty whatsoever in identifying the Mad Scientist, and a Monstrous Intelligence (though human, not movie prop construction) that disguises itself behind a smiling face, and a pretty good, even cool, piano. Our conversation at the dinner table that evening took the form of "Well, I think the best thing in Mommy's movie was the part where…"

Later, I went upstairs to investigate a suspicious silence in the playroom, and found Barry lying back in a chair with his eyes closed while Sally made mystic passes before his eyes. They explained that they were playing doctor.

Good Old House

When we came to occupy our present house, we were not at first accepted, although the neighbors welcomed us and took us in with the deep New England courtesy that is half tolerance and half humor. We shortly accustomed ourselves to trading at certain stores, and we bought our coal locally, and we found a doctor and a dentist and a dog, and we went to the local movie theater and enrolled Laurie in the local nursery school — still, the old house had grave reservations about us and would allow us to feel only provisionally at home. Twice, the first week we were there, I awoke with nightmares of the old house shaking over me, malevolent and cruel, and after that, during our first few months, I frequently found myself awake after having walked in my sleep toward the front door, and once I found myself out between the pillars, as if running away.

Our cats, who had lived with us for years in New York, could find no resting place in this house; all the hallowed places for cats to sleep — the spot behind the stove, the wooden rocker — would not countenance city cats, and turned them away, and our New York furniture had somehow become different, so that the armchair in which young Shax had always slept before was off in a cold corner and had no sun in the afternoons. Laurie went off pleasantly from the house to nursery school, he played happily in the yard and through the attics, but there was a corner of the hall where a wolf lived, and he would not go near it alone.

We had been there only about three weeks when I found an ad in the local paper for a woman who wanted to do housework, and such things being fairly rare in our town, I telephoned her immediately and asked if she could come to work for us. She was pleased to have an answer to her ad so quickly, and terms were quickly and easily settled between us. I agreed to her charges, she approved of the children, we reached an honorable agreement about laundry, and then she asked, her voice trim and clean over the phone, “I clean forgot to ask you, Missus, where do you live?”

“In the old Ogilvie house,” I said readily. “The one with the pill—”

“Where?” she asked. “The old Ogilvie house, did you say? The Fielding place?”

“That’s right,” I said. “The one with—”

“I’m sorry, Missus,” she said, and her voice sounded really regretful. “I guess I can’t come work for you after all.”

“Why not?”

“Well…” she said. “It’s too far,” she said.

“I’ll take care of your transportation.”

“Well…” she said. “I guess I better not.”

“But *why*?” I asked, but she had hung up.

No one liked to come into the house. We discovered much later that the painters and plumbers and carpenters Mr. Fielding had hired before we came had demanded extravagantly high pay, and Mr. Fielding had agreed to stay with them all the time they worked in the house. My grocer, who was very helpful about delivering orders, could never find a delivery boy who would leave my groceries any closer to the house than the end of the lawn. Our neighbors would stand and talk interminably at the front door or the back door, but they would never come inside, and the attempts I made to invite them in for tea met with faint, but polite, incredulity.

Toward the end of our first month, the painter arrived to do the outside of the house. As always, we were not consulted. The house had always been white with green trim, as were all the other houses on the block, and I suppose all the other houses in New England, and the painter did not for a minute imagine that anything else would be required of him; indeed, I doubt if he owned any other colors of paint. The first day he worked I went out to talk to him, and took him out a cup of coffee; he was on a ladder painting the pillars.

"Nice to see the old house cleaned up," he said, after we had spoken about the weather and had taken care of such other conversational preliminaries as the rent we paid for the house, my husband's income, and our opinion of the town.

"I can't believe it's the same house we saw last year," I said. I turned, as I frequently did, to look through the glass panes of the front door into our pleasant light hall, with the dining room showing beyond and the bright curtains and the pretty rugs and the lines of plants against the windows. "I'm so happy here," I said, realizing as I said it that I was.

"You know," the painter said, applying himself industriously to the pillar, "it don't seem to matter much what folks get to thinking about a house; when you get people living there, it all changes."

"This house has seen a lot of people going in and out."

"It's a good old house," he said. "Spite of what they say, it's a good solid house; not many like it nowadays." He turned and waved the paintbrush at me. "Kids wouldn't go past it at night," he said.

"I didn't know that," I said. "Do they feel any different now?"

"Well, no," the painter said. He seemed afraid that he might have hurt my feelings, because he added quickly, "It's a good old house, though."

There was another strange quality to the house; it had an odd effect on the things in it — never the old things, of course; they seemed to belong and to understand — but only our newer things, such as the living room clock, which had been a wedding present and had worked perfectly well until we moved into this old house. It stopped every day at five minutes to five. For a little while I thought it was an eccentricity of my own, that perhaps I did not wind it enough, or perhaps I had noticed that once or twice it had stopped near five o’clock and so fell to believing that it stopped every day. I made a point of winding it carefully, and then I got so that I was checking it regularly, and I would glance at it every time I passed the living room, and finally I came to accept as natural the fact that it would stop every day at five minutes to five, and when the five o’clock whistles blew at the lumberyard I went in and restarted the clock. It became an almost habitual small gesture, like checking to see if the children were covered at night, and I timed myself by it, knowing that when I had to restart the clock it was time to start making the children’s supper.

The window in the back bedroom was another thing. It was ordinary glass; I knew that because I had had a glazier in to change it once. But no matter when you looked out of it, and no matter what the weather was like outside, it was opaque, as though a cloth were over the outside of it. When the glazier was working on it and had taken out the glass, he had held the new glass outside the window and looked through it. I could see his face clearly, as though through an ordinary window, and then he set the new pane of glass into the frame and dusted his hands and closed the window, and we looked through it together, and it was opaque. When we opened the window and looked out again we saw the maple trees outside and the sky; the glazier, who was a local man, smiled and shrugged and refused his pay, and touched one of the pillars gently as he went down the steps.

Still another troubling thing was the way small articles disappeared. I realized that in a large house with small children, things are always disappearing anyway, but this was different; it was as though there were pockets of time in the house into which things dropped for a little while and then came back. Small things disappeared, such as scissors and pencils and spoons, all things you might expect to lose but of course do not expect to find again back in their accustomed places. Sometimes it was larger things that stepped out, such as kitchen utensils. I remember one evening I went into the pantry to get a strainer off the shelf, groping absentmindedly the way you do when a thing is always kept in the same place and you reach for it without looking, and it was not there. I spent the next two days taking the pantry apart to find the strainer, and I looked as far afield as the playroom and the tool chest, and at the end of the two days I went into the pantry absentmindedly and put up my hand to take down the strainer and it was there.

Once, a little round rug disappeared for almost a week from the study, as though it had been absorbed into the floor, and reappeared after a while looking the same as ever, and so natural that for a while we forgot to be surprised that it was there. Several times I left groceries on the kitchen table and found them later neatly put away in the pantry; one reason I am sure I do not do this myself in a sort of trance is that the refrigerator is never used — butter and milk and such are set on the pantry windowsill, where it is cool. Once, buttons appeared, newly sewn onto my son's jacket, and another time my daughter's stuffed lamb had a blue ribbon removed and a pink one substituted. A day or so later the blue ribbon was back, washed and ironed.

None of these things bothered us excessively; we have always been a family that carries bewilderment like a banner, and odd new confusions do not actually seem to be any more bewildering than the ones we invent for ourselves; moreover, in each of these cases it was easier to believe that nothing had happened, or that it was of no importance anyway. We spoke affectionately of poltergeists and pixies, and affected to believe that each single instance was of course some unconscious behavior on our own parts. Laurie, who believed in any case in good and bad fairies, adjusted quickly and easily to the oddities, and was completely unaffected after a while, although my husband and I received a little jolt when, on Christmas morning, Laurie found a second stocking hung up against the mantel, as though it had been feared that *we* might forget. And there was the time when he lost a tooth, forgot to tell us, and found, in the morning, two dimes under his pillow. However, after a while the house seemed to gain a certain amount of confidence in us, and only Laurie ever experienced this pleasing duplication, although Joanne's clothes are still mended occasionally, that being a field in which the house can have no legitimate confidence in me.

It is not hard, after all, to live with such things, and after a while they do not seem much more unnatural than that water should change its form when heat is applied, or that trees should change color in the fall; I recall that the first week with our first television set shocked us much more deeply. I have grown used to the tricks of the house as I have grown used to the dip in the kitchen floor beside the windows, or the stair that creaks, or the study window that will not open at all. My husband, who does not come into as intimate contact with the house as I do, is consequently less troubled, although he was quite surprised when a nearly empty bottle of whiskey disappeared and was lost to him for a day, then returned full. And once his muffler disappeared from the hall closet and returned some time later to its own hook, where we had both looked several times.

I think perhaps a great reason for our relaxing into this mild acceptance was the complete ease with which these small things were accomplished, frequently so unobtrusively that it was not until afterward that we realized something had happened. When Joanne's good silver spoon vanished, it disappeared from my hand in the dish towel: That is, I was drying it, as I do every night, and as I reached forward to slip it into the drawer along with the other silverware it was gone. I had seen it the moment before and then did not see it the moment after. I looked for it, of course, but without much enthusiasm, knowing without admitting it that I need not bother. A day or so later, after Joanne had become reconciled to using another spoon, I was drying silverware, and as I was slipping it into the drawer, Joanne's spoon fell into its place. I knew the spoon had been gone and that I had been looking for it, but it was returned so naturally that I closed the drawer, then thought, then opened the drawer and saw that the spoon was really there.

Perhaps it was exactly because we took this cheerful teasing so well that one day, near the end of our first year in the house, the doorbell rang at about eleven o'clock in the morning. Laurie was in school, Joanne was in her playpen in the children's room, and I was making dough for gingerbread men, which we would cut out in the afternoon. I remember that when I went to answer the door I thought idly that probably my mixing bowl and spoon, my cups and rolling pin, would all be washed and returned to their places by the time I came back. There was an old lady at the door, neatly dressed in black and smiling.

"I'm so *very* sorry to trouble you," she said as soon as I opened the door. "I hope I'm not disturbing you."

"Not at all," I said. "Won't you come in?" I added, because she was obviously intending to come in anyway.

"Thank you," she said, and stepped daintily inside. She looked around the hall curiously, then smiled. "I used to visit here very often," she said. "I was passing by, and I thought how wonderful it is to see the old house occupied again." She waved her hand apologetically. "I *couldn't* go on without stopping in for one more look at the old house."

"I'm very glad you did," I said. "Won't you come in and look around?"

She followed me into the living room, stopping once to touch the shining wood of the old stair rail, and in the living room she went directly to the old wooden rocker and sat down, turning her head to look around.

"It's not really very much changed," she said.

"It's a lovely old house," I said.

"Do you think so?" She turned quickly to look at me. "Do you really think it's a lovely old house?"

"We're very happy here."

"I'm glad." She folded her hands and smiled again, as though to herself. "It's always been such a *good* house," she said. "The old doctor always used to say it was a *good* house."

"The old doctor?"

"Doctor Ogilvie." She smiled at me again.

"Doctor *Ogilvie*?"

"I see they kept the pillars, after all," she said, nodding. "We always thought they gave the house character."

"There was a hornet's nest in one," I said inadequately. Doctor Ogilvie had built the house in 1816.

"Which one?"

"The one on the right end."

She nodded again. "There always was," she said.

"What was it like when you visited here?" I asked.

"Oh, my dear," she said, and smiled on me as from a long way off. "It was very gay then, you know. There were no other houses for miles around, you know, and we all came in carriages—"

"But the Fieldings built the other houses in—" I began, and she interrupted me, her soft cheeks faintly pink.

"No other houses we *visited,* of course."

I was silent, a little anxious, and then Shax came into the room, without footsteps, but making his presence known the way a cat does. The old lady turned and looked at him for a minute and then said, “Fine fellow.” She put down one black-gloved hand and Shax went to her, touched her glove with his nose, and poured himself into her lap. She stroked him comfortably while she said to me, “They’ve taken away the old wallpaper, and I suppose the front bedroom isn’t blue anymore?”

“It’s blue,” I said, wondering. “Someone chose a very pretty blue paper for that room.”

“I’m glad the Fieldings kept it up,” she said. “So often you can’t tell, when a young family buys into a home. Sometimes they change the old things.”

“We’ve been trying to keep it comfortable,” I said.

“I remember,” she said, “I remember when the Fieldings first offered to buy it, we sat upstairs in the blue front room, Sally Cortland and I, and we tried to think what the Fieldings might do to the house. The Cortlands hadn’t really been here *long,* of course; the Ogilvies built it. We brought the pillars from Boston.”

I could think of nothing to say, and after a minute she put Shax down and said, “May I look at the rest of the house? Are you busy?”

She liked the way the bedrooms were still the same colors, and the children’s room pleased her. “What a pretty child you are, indeed,” she said to Joanne in the playpen, and Joanne looked up, considered, and smiled. “It *needs* children, this house,” the old lady said, touching me on the arm as we went out the door. “It was the sorrow of Anne Ogilvie’s life.”

When we moved at last to the kitchen and she saw my half-finished gingerbread, she was amused, and picked up the bowl to examine the dough. “You’ll get it good and short,” she said. “It won’t bake even, if you don’t get it good and short. And put in a little coffee.”

“The children are going to cut out the gingerbread men this afternoon.”

“With raisin eyes,” she added, and sighed. Then she laughed softly. “Still the same old house,” she said.

I went with her to the door, and she stood for a minute looking back into the house, as I often do. Then she smiled at me once more, affectionately, and thanked me, and I watched her go off down the walk.

When I closed the door, I leaned one hand against the door frame, and it seemed to me that for the first time the old house responded, turning in toward me protectively. When I went back into the living room, Shax was asleep on the wooden rocker, and that afternoon one of my neighbors dropped in for a cup of coffee, coming through the back door so naturally that neither of us thought of her never having come in before.

Small things still disappear, of course, and for a while Joanne spoke occasionally of a faraway voice that sang to her at night. Once I went into the kitchen and found a still-warm pumpkin pie on the table, covered with a clean cloth; we had it for dinner and praised it in voices that we hoped would carry throughout the old house.

The Play's the Thing

I CAME TO my desk one bright Monday morning recently, planning to get right to work, and looked at the various things I had been working on, any one of which I could spend my Monday doing. There were four manuscripts, in different stages of progress, on my desk.

One was a novel, a story about a haunted house and what happens to the people who live in it; it emphasizes the idea that ghosts, like dreams and hallucinations, are figments of the human intelligence.

The second manuscript was a long story about a girl who runs away from home and tries so successfully to eradicate any aspect of her old personality that when she wants to go home again she can't get in; they don't know her.

The other two were, in a sense, nonprofessional pleasure work. One manuscript was a birthday present for my husband, the script for a ferocious dialogue to be tape-recorded by several of his bridge-playing friends. My husband is a most meticulous bridge player, and dislikes any form of clumsiness or carelessness about the game, so I wrote an account of a game in which every possible rule is broken, and all kinds of confusion goes on during the play of a hand. This was to be acted out by his friends, and recorded, and — just to make him feel happy — the fourth hand would be left out in the recording; a space of time was left for him to bid and play. We all called it "Play-Along Bridge" (and I may say that in a sense it has served its purpose; he has announced that he will never play bridge with any of us again).

The fourth manuscript on my desk was a one-act play for children, which I had not written voluntarily. My children and some of their friends had thought they would give a play, and they'd gone about it in the eminently practical fashion that children use for these things: First they'd chosen their costumes, then they'd decided where they would give their play and how much they would charge and who could be in it and who could not be in it, and then they'd started looking for a play to give. They'd asked me where you went to find a nice play with big parts for everybody, and I'd sent them down to the library, where I was sure they would find half a dozen volumes of plays for children. My older daughter came back to me, disconsolate. "Listen to this," she said, and read to me: " 'I fear me, good husband, that our wretched hut will not again withstand the rigors of the winter wind.'"

"What's that?" I said.

She said, "It means their house is going to blow down, but that's the way I have to say it if we do that play."

"Well, why not do another play instead?" I asked.

"Do you like this better?" she asked. " 'I am Lafayette, a French man of noble birth, and I have come to this new country to aid General Washington in his battle for freedom.' You know," she continued, "I'd be downright ashamed to get up on a stage and talk junk like that, and the other plays are just as bad. No one could remember the lines because they don't sound right, and you have to stand still and say them so you look silly on the stage because there's no way to act or sound natural."

"Why don't you make up your own play?" I asked her.

"We can't," she said, "but *you*'re a writer…"

Well, with half a dozen of them urging me on, I sat down that evening to sketch out a one-act play. I decided that it would be most suitable for the group who were going to act it if I used a familiar fairy story, rewriting it in language they could understand, with action that would appeal to them. I thought of Hansel and Gretel, which is a fairy story that has always annoyed me because I strongly resent that Hansel and Gretel eat the Witch's house and never get punished for it. I thought I might please myself by seeing that Hansel and Gretel got what was coming to them.

So I made the Witch into a fine crazy character, full of progressive ideas about the improvement of witchcraft. I put in an Enchanter, to accommodate an older boy in our cast, and made the Enchanter a lazy old creature who lets the Witch do all the work, and I made Hansel and Gretel into the two most objectionable children I could, whining and quarreling and insolent and greedy. Then I made the Mother and Father into a pair of bewildered, helpless parents who want their children to be well mannered and nice but find out that nothing seems to help: They have joined the PTA and the Little League, and bought Girl Scout cookies, and given the children bicycles for Christmas, and gone to the class play, and *still* their children are impolite and bad.

So the Witch does not want to capture the children at all, but has to shut them in her house to keep them from eating all of it, and when she tries to give the children back, the parents will not take them. The Witch begs and threatens, but the parents point out that the children are so unpleasant, they would *prefer* to have the Witch keep them.

I had a wonderful time writing it, though I had half an idea that I'd better keep my play away from the children, as it outraged all the tenets of fairy tales. Every time I thought of things my children do that I can't stand — and there are a lot of them — I put them in for Hansel and Gretel. As I went along I thought of a little song that Hansel and Gretel could sing, a kind of echo song, in which one of them says, "You're mean," and the other answers, "*You're* mean," and it goes on "You're bad," "*You're* bad," "You're a pig, I won't play with you," "*You're* a pig, I won't play with *you*." I wrote the lyrics in, and when I'd finished the first half of my play I thought it over and decided that I would show it to the children after all and see what they thought.

Well, to my surprise, they loved it. There was an immediate wild demand to be allowed to play the parts of Hansel and Gretel, and the children took up my little song and chanted it to a tune adapted from a nursery rhyme, adding verses freely and shouting it from one end of the house to the other. They began quoting lines back and forth, and then I discovered a very odd thing: I had thought of the Mother and Father characters as sympathetic, but kind of mixed up and tired — the way I see mothers and fathers. However, once the children got hold of the play, the Mother and Father changed: They became slightly silly, and as the children discussed the parts, it became clear that the Mother and Father were going to become the comedic roles. When their lines were read in a slightly exaggerated fashion, they sounded self-pitying and foolish.

The Witch and the Enchanter became the powerful figures. From the Enchanter's first appearance, it is perfectly obvious that he is the kind of person who would drop dead before he would umpire a Little League game, and the Witch's main desire is to go on a television quiz program and make a lot of money, and spend it on fancy clothes and good things to eat. They are, in a word, not at all proper parent figures, and the children loved them.

We ran almost at once into further complications: The children were singing the echo song and thought they would like more music, particularly a song for the Witch to sing — that was my older daughter, who fancied herself onstage belting out a solo number — and another song to close the play. My son offered to write the music, and I wrote a couple of songs with simple jingling words, but then it turned out that although the echo song was all right in its simple form, like a nursery rhyme, no one wanted the older characters to have to sing "junk like that."

So it was unanimously decided that the song the Enchanter sings must be a real low-down blues, to be called "The Mean Old Wizard Blues" and to begin "I want a rich witch, baby; no others need apply." While I sat there with my jaw hanging, the blues got itself composed and firmly embedded in the family culture. I got in a couple of fast patter songs for the Witch and the parents, with a lot of rhymes that could be from Noël Coward, and then I found that what my children wanted to close the show was a good fast number, very rhythmic, with hand clapping and a chorus, in the manner of a fast spiritual such as "Ain't Gonna Study War No More."

I got that song written, then proposed that since the big moment in the play is the one in which the Witch and the Enchanter do a magic incantation and dance around the pot in which the magic is cooking, there might be a little musical number for that scene, too. Thereupon, my son composed "The Incantation Rock-and-Roll," which he said was a "good wailing rock song with a boogie bass and a crazy backbeat."

I was a little bit worried. Something had gone terribly wrong with my idea of making a silly little play for the kids to put on. Then I realized what it was: I had written it from my own viewpoint, hinting ironically that children ought to behave better, thinking I had a sound little moral lesson there that would really do the children good, hearing how unpleasant Hansel and Gretel sounded on the stage and how they distressed their parents. But when the children got hold of it, it turned into a general statement by the children themselves about the world. They wanted the fun of pretending to be bad children, the deep satisfaction of making fun of the parents and the laziness and self-indulgence of the Witch and the Enchanter, and the excitement and spirit of the modern kind of music, which, even in the blues, expresses a kind of young joy it is very hard for grown-ups to comprehend.

Overall, I had thought that the sardonic humor of the play was mine, but it turned out to be the children's.

I did make one attempt to rescue my play: I rewrote the ending, so that by means of magic Hansel and Gretel are transformed into sweet, dear, good, kind little kiddies, but the children threw it right out. Hansel and Gretel stay horrible to the end.

Above everything else, I was desperately afraid that they would try to perform the play in public. I was quite sure that we would be everlastingly disgraced if that souped-up, cynical fairy tale ever reached a real stage, and the thought of being discovered as a fellow conspirator had me in terror. I managed to have any production of it put off until the fall school term, on the grounds that it was much too late in the year for any serious preparation, and I thought privately that the children had really had all the fun they wanted by just putting it together, and that by fall they would be interested in something else.

Unfortunately, they took the songs to school, then began repeating lines from the play, and inevitably, finally, I found that copies were being mimeographed and passed around the seventh grade. I wanted to take a firm stand, but before I could make up my mind what to say I received requests from two local high schools for permission to put on the play. While I was still reeling, the principal of a private school thirty miles away called me to say she had heard about this play, and was there *any* chance of their performing it?

I tried to tell everyone that it was a rather callous parody, cynical and full of slang, but all the teachers said the same thing: What a wonderful idea! The children will be really interested, and will actually *enjoy* a play that speaks their language.

Well, it certainly does speak their language — much more so than the play about the fisherman's wife who fears that her wretched hut will not withstand the rigors of the winter — and now that it exists I can't seem to get rid of it. It is a defiant statement by a pack of children about their world and their acceptance of it. I finally gave in as gracefully as I could — I had the play copyrighted, including the lyrics and music, and gave it to the children. It belongs to them, as it should. I am going to stick to ghosts and bridge games and haunted houses, where I belong.

The Ghosts of Loiret

I LOVE HOUSES. I love to look at them the way they just stand there, and I most particularly love old and big and fancy houses. My grandfather was an architect, and his father, and *his* father; one of them built houses only for millionaires in California, and that was where the family wealth came from, and one of them was certain that houses could be made to stand on the sand dunes of San Francisco, and that was where the family wealth went. I don't have any feeling, myself, about *building* houses; I don't need to own them or live in them or even go inside; I just like to *look* at houses.

I have an Egyptian scarab and I have a Japanese netsuke of a skeleton reading a book of poetry, and I have a crystal ball and a deck of tarot cards and a lot of tikis and eleven Siamese gambling house tokens and a book by Ludovico Sinistrari listing all the demons by name and incantation, and an Australian throwing knife and an incunabulum and a copy of Villon with shocking illustrations, and a small book by Currer Bell and an African boat harp and a skull from the Collyer mansion, and a wishing ring and three magic talismans — one for Thursdays only — and a necklace from the Congo made of tiny carved wooden skulls, and five black cats and an electric frying pan and four children, but I have had no good pictures of houses to look at.

This year, when I realized this, my husband had already ordered my birthday present, which was to have been a Japanese scroll on rice paper in eleven panels showing the gradual decomposition of a dead body, but he canceled it and wrote instead to a British bookseller and ordered a collection of picture postcards of houses. These had been put up for sale by the heirs of one of those intrepid British travelers; I think of the man himself as a fellow house lover, gentle, observant, with a lap robe and a notebook with a silver pencil on a chain, always ready to toss an urchin a coin or bow to a lady on a bridge. This distinguished old person had wandered far, gathering postcards, and his heirs must have been most surprised when an urgent offer arrived from my husband in Vermont. I do not think that I was so excited even when the assegai came. Like all the presents my husband gives me, the postcards were even lovelier than I had imagined.

With his hip bath and his bowler, my dogged friend had traveled extensively through England, France, and the United States, and had feasted those good British eyes on a vast range of great, old, and storied houses and taken their images home. The French houses were lovely slim châteaux rising above their little lakes, with magic names such as Annecy and Gruyères and Pontchardon, and the English houses were solid and straightforward, properly surrounded by lawns, and the American houses were lavishly decorated with gargoyles and classical pillars and gothic turrets. I dwelt lovingly on the Château de Menthon, on Beaumesnil and Nîmes; I gazed for a moment on the T. D. Stimson residence in Los Angeles, dreamed over Strawberry Hill, and looked into grottoes and Roman baths and summer palaces.

Every time my husband gives me a present, I have to go and look something up in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica;* this time, I had to know about the ornamental writing across the front of Villesavin, what it said and what it was called and why it was there at all, but the encyclopaedia did not know, any more than it had known why my thunderbird necklace was made out of old phonograph records or how to get the strings back on the zither.

Then, at a cocktail party, I met a French scholar, a charming native Vermonter who spends his holidays in France teasing the French people into thinking he has lived all his life in Paris. When I said to him "Can you tell me what it says, the writing on the front of the Château de Villesavin?" he stared at me, as, standing on the broad steps of Villesavin, overlooking the sweet gardens, he might have stared at a stranger approaching and saying "Can you tell me about the Elks' Hall in the country of Vermont in the U. S. of A.?" The poor exile — his world *did* exist, then? — brightened and smiled. "You know the country?" he asked at once.

"I have only pictures."

"Only pictures? But you must *go* there. To visit France…"

"Alas." I sighed. "I have an Egyptian scarab, but I have never seen a pyramid."

"A pyramid? In the south of France?"

"Can you tell me what it says on the front of Villesavin?" (What do they read in the land of the Lilliputians; what is the news in Islandia, Megapolis, Utopia?) "What does it really look like?" I asked inadequately.

He gestured at Vermont beyond the window. "Not like this," he said.

"Tell me about the houses."

"There is one place," he said. "That one is haunted, haunted by—"

"Well, old *fellow,*" said someone who wore a plaid jacket and carried whiskey in a glass, "when did *you* get back? Paris just about the same?"

I finished my drink, and my husband took me home; they were singing "Auprès de ma blonde" in the corner. At home, looking my houses over again, I came to the château at Loiret and stopped, surprised. "Look," I said to my husband. "Here are two people on the balcony at Loiret."

"Why not?" my husband said. "They probably live there."

"But there weren't people in the picture before."

"M. R. James," my husband said wisely. "You've been reading that mezzotint thing."

"I haven't. And anyway *his* house was only a fine old English mansion. This is the Château du Loiret!"

"They're probably *all* haunted," my husband said.

"No," I said. "Not *my* houses. Not my lovely Menthon. Not Villesavin. Not Beaumesnil or the James Flood residence in Menlo Park."

"Well, perhaps not Menlo Park."

"There simply should not *be* people on the balcony at Loiret. The windows are all closed and shuttered and the house is clearly empty, and those people have no business whatsoever to be standing there on the balcony."

"Go to bed," my husband said unsympathetically.

The next night I looked again, and there were no people standing on the balcony at Loiret.

When I had just finished my latest book, *The Sundial,* my husband and I were on our way to New York to spend three or four days talking to my publishers and such. It had been a long time since I'd last been to New York, and an even longer time since I'd been anywhere at all without my troops of children tagging along, and I was excited and a little bit nervous. When the train stopped at 125th Street, I glanced out the window to get my first sight of the big city and found myself looking squarely at the most hideous building I have ever seen. It was altogether disgusting, and I have no idea why that particular word came into my mind. It was a tall tenement building, standing alone, and staring at it out the train window all I could think of was that I wanted to turn around and go back to Vermont; I didn't want to spend another minute in a city with that building in it. I pointed the building out to my husband, but he couldn't see it; there were a number of other buildings around and he could not pick out this one before the train started, so he told me to calm down and try not to be so excited; we would be in the hotel in half an hour. As long as I could, I looked back at that unspeakable building, just wishing I would never have to see it or think of it again as long as I lived. I cannot really describe it. No one else, I expect, has ever seen it the way I did that afternoon. It was horrifying.

I thought I had forgotten about it, in the confusion of arriving in the city and getting to the hotel, but that night I woke up from a nightmare about the building, one of those bad nightmares that get you out of bed to turn on the lights and make sure it was only a dream. All I could remember was that I had been dreaming dreadfully about that awful building, and from that time on I spent my entire time in New York dreading the moment when we would take the train home and pass the building again. It was so bad, finally, that we had to change our plans and take a night train, so that we would pass 125th Street in the dark and I wouldn't see the building. It troubled me still after we were home, and finally I decided I had to find out about it, so I wrote to a friend of ours who teaches at Columbia University and described the building, asking him to locate it and find out if there was any reason why it should give me such an impression of horror.

Finally, he wrote me that he had had trouble finding the building because it existed only from one particular point of view from the 125th Street station; from any other angle it was not recognizable as a building. Some seven months before, it had been almost entirely burned in a disastrous fire that killed nine people. What was left of the building was a shell. The children in the neighborhood said it was haunted.

Then a postcard of one of the California houses began to bother me. It was an ugly house, all angles and all wrong. It was sick, diseased, and the photograph of it on the postcard made it look yellow and flabby. “I don’t like this house at all,” I said, showing it to my husband.

“Very nice,” he said, reading. I should perhaps say that after having gotten me a crystal ball, he wouldn’t let me look in it while he was around, and, when the Sinistrari book came, he was unkind enough to refuse to translate the parts left in Latin, although he could have done it perfectly well; neither has he permitted me to put the Thursday talisman into his pocket on Thursday, which is his poker night, although every Friday morning he is forced to admit that he could have used it.

“I don’t like this house at *all,*” I said again. “I wish it would go away, and not stay with my other houses.”

“Throw it away.”

“But I can’t, of course. That nice old man gathered it for a reason. He liked houses, and what would he think of me if I took his houses and started throwing them away? He might want them back.”

“Very nice,” said my husband, reading.

“And the encyclopaedia isn’t any help, because this house is in California, and when *that* encyclopaedia was written there wasn’t any such *thing* as California, and if only you didn’t insist on having just the eleventh edition—”

“Amateurs,” my husband said. “Nothing *after* the eleventh can properly be called an encyclopaedia.”

“But suppose I want to find out about this house in California—”

“California?” said my husband, suddenly alert. “Are your mother and father coming again?”

“No,” I said, “but of course you are right. I shall write my mother tonight about this house. If it exists in California, she may know of it. Thank you, my dear, for the splendid suggestion.”

“Very nice,” said my husband, reading.

I had not much time to look at my postcards for the next few days, after writing to my mother in California, because my husband gave me a book called *Some Haunted Houses of England & Wales* and I got involved in solving the mystery of Glamis Castle. As a matter of fact, I had almost forgotten writing her at all, and when her letter came I was pleased, because I thought she was sending me the recipe for my grandmother’s nut cake, but she only wrote that yes, she remembered that horrid house in California very well, although she was surprised to know that there were any pictures of it still around. My great-grandfather had built it. She remembered when the people of the town got together one night and burned it down.

The next day, my husband and our older son, Laurie, came home from a walk and brought me a hickory leaf to use as a bookmark in *Some Haunted Houses of England & Wales.* There was no one on the balcony at Loiret.

I found out about a haunted house in England where they had an heirloom skull kept in a box on the mantelpiece, and I told my husband about it. “Whenever they try to get rid of it,” I told him, “there are thunderstorms and the roof blows off and all the cows are barren until either they go and get it back again or it rolls back by itself and gets into its box.”

“You have a skull from the Collyer mansion,” my husband pointed out.

It sounded right. “We could get Laurie to put it in a bag or something and take it over and throw it in Lake Paran,” I said. “Then we would have thunderstorms and the roof would blow off and I guess all the cats would be barren.”

“That’s good,” my husband said jovially. “That part about the cats being barren. You call Laurie while I get the stepladder.”

The skull sits on the top shelf of a bookcase, on top of a volume of Dr. Dee’s *Actions with Spirits.* I called Laurie, and when he came his father said, “Help me with this ladder; we’re going to take Mother’s skull and put it in a bag and throw it into Lake Paran so there will be thunderstorms.”

“All right,” Laurie said. “Except we’re going to look kind of silly throwing Mother’s skull into Lake Paran. People *fish* in Lake Paran.”

But it would not come down. Neither would John Dee. My husband pulled and tugged and tried to shake it loose, and then Laurie got up on the stepladder and hit it with a broom, but it would not come down.

“Well,” my husband said at last, “I guess we’ll just have to put up with the kittens.”

“We’re better off anyway,” Laurie said. “If anyone had seen us going around throwing skulls into Lake Paran, they might not have liked it. People swim in there, too, you know.”

“Let me show you the letter I got from my mother,” I said. “She forgot about my grandmother’s nut cake again. Laurie can throw something else into Lake Paran.”

“Kittens,” my husband said.

“Certainly not. Laurie, look and see if there are any people on the balcony at Loiret.”

Laurie looked. “Yeah, there’s a couple of people,” he said. I raced to his side, and, indeed, the same two people were standing on the balcony.

I began to wish that my English colleague had chosen his postcards a little more carefully. For a long time I watched for the people to return to the balcony at Loiret, but no one appeared. A nun kept looking out the window of Ballechin House, and that crazy buttress on The Priory, where Charlie Bravo died, came loose at one end and was just hanging there, and when I used a magnifying glass I could see Mrs. Cox looking out from the upper window, and once she waved; I didn’t like having Mrs. Cox wave at me. For one thing, the last person I seem to remember Mrs. Cox waving at was murder victim Charlie Bravo in 1876.

I had a postcard of Borley Rectory and another picture of Borley Rectory in *Some Haunted Houses of England & Wales,* and the picture in the book was all right, but on the postcard a dining room window kept coming open and all the careful bricking-over they had done was wasted, because I could see clearly into the dining room, and what they must have thought in there, with me looking into the dining room through a magnifying glass, I can't imagine. There was something gibbering on one of the battlements of Menthon, and over at Château de Kergrist the stones from that round tower at the end kept falling and falling.

"I wish that skull would come down," my husband said several times. "I don't like having it stuck up there."

"That skull was the first present you ever gave me that didn't have bookworms," I said.

"I just wish it would come unstuck," he said.

I was afraid that with the postcards going on the way they were, and the skull stuck up on top of John Dee, we might have some kind of trouble, even a poltergeist manifestation, but all that happened at first was that Laurie's goldfish died, and that could have been because there was too much chlorine in the water. I have never liked the theory that poltergeists only come into houses where there are children, because I think it is simply too much for any one house to have poltergeists *and* children, so one morning when everyone was out, and the cellar door began to bang itself open and shut regularly, I was so angry that I looked up an incantation for the demon Vapula, who appears in the form of a lion with griffin's wings and drives away evil spirits, and I typed up the incantation, the one beginning *"Cara, cherna, sito, cirna,"* and stuck it onto the cellar door with a piece of Scotch tape, and then I nailed the door shut and it stopped banging back and forth.

I had to get out another incantation, the one for the demon Andrealphus, when the sugar bowl got itself hurling back and forth across the kitchen, and I typed that one up and taped it to the sugar bowl, and then later another one on the toaster, which kept popping by itself, and when the children came home from school for lunch that day they went around the kitchen reading the incantations out loud and giggling. During lunch, a crashing started upstairs, and I sent Laurie up to see if we needed another incantation, but it was only my cat Kuili trying to get into the back copies of *The New Statesman and Nation,* which she likes to tear up and eat; she was pounding with her head against the screen I use to cover them.

My husband had a present for me when he came home, one that had come in the mail from Sotheby's; it was a two-handed Japanese ceremonial sword. One of the dogs came home with a bone he had dug up somewhere, and when I looked at the bone closely I saw that it had teeth.

"I am going to put my houses away," I said to my husband. "I can't get my housework done."

"They were not a particularly good present, were they," he said. "I'll try to get you something else instead."

"They were perfectly lovely," I told him. "I have been extremely happy with them; it's only that I kind of have to let everything else go because of them. And those people at Loiret never come back outside anymore."

"They were probably never there in the first place," he said unkindly.

"I wonder what they could have been looking for. The movie camera is broken, by the way."

"I thought it must be, from the things it was taking pictures of. I think you should put your postcards away, and I'll try to think of another present for you.”

I put the postcards into a box with camphor and a copper coin, and my husband gave me a silver pomander, and in the encyclopaedia it said to take my pomander to an apothecary and get him to put civet into it, but Mr. Carter down at the drugstore said no. I have a reading copy of John Dee, so we left the skull where it was.

Well, that was not my last cocktail party, by a long way. You know the kind of party where some damnfool woman goes around cornering people and asking them questions like “What do you *really* think of the struggle between good and evil for the soul of man?” or “Do you know what I was reading the other day about the things they do to horses?” Well, these days it’s me. “Do you believe in ghosts?” I ask them. “Let me tell you about a very strange experience I had with the Château du Loiret; these people…”

“Well?”

“Well?” asked Stanley finally.

“I think that’s the end,” I said doubtfully.

“Aren’t you sure?”

“Ye-es.”

“Have you anything more to say?” Stanley inquired.

“No.”

“Have your characters anything more to say?”

“Only,” I giggled, “that they’re very glad they met you.”

Stanley shook his head. At last: “Well, it had a plot,” he said.

“Stanley!”

“Yes?”

“I wonder which of us really wrote this.”

“I refuse to take the blame,” said Stanley.

“Well, it’s yours, anyway. You *practically* wrote it.”

“I might have written it.”

“I’ll give it to you.”

“Don’t want it,” said Stanley nastily.

“ ‘Love, with this tawny marigold…’ “ I began. Stanley stared at me.

“I’ll dedicate it to you,” I added.

We both laughed.

Here I Am, Washing Dishes Again

HERE I AM, washing dishes again. If I were any sort of a proper housewife at all I'd start my dishwashing at a specific hour in the morning, duly aproned, trim and competent, instead of heaping the dishpan high while my neighbors and no doubt the rest of the world are off on some blissful pursuit — frying doughnuts, perhaps, or flying kites with their children. Three times a day, seven days a week, how on earth many weeks a year? What sort of look do I have on my face? The subway rider's, probably, sort of resigned and do–all–the–glasses–before–Times Square.

I don't really hate these brass faucets and the complete perfect circle of the dishpan, though; I love the things, I own them, they are so essential a part of me that I like to be near them, and when I am away from home, next to the children the thing I miss most is the sight of my own dear sink. When I wash dishes, I stare into the dishpan and at my own hands, which are the only alien things in the dishwater, the only things that don't rattle.

The green glasses from the five-and-ten love their bath; they roll luxuriously in the soapy water and seem almost to stretch. They're trying to forget their humble ten-cent origin, and they sort of hope that everyone else will forget it too. I watch them sitting on the table, holding themselves proudly; they expect that guests — they don't expect much, anymore, from members of the family — will comment on them and hold them up appreciatively. "Where did you get these lovely glasses?" someone may ask, and all along the table the glasses stiffen, not daring to glance at one another, tense until I answer, "I bought them at an auction. I expect they're quite valuable, really." Then along the table the green glasses will preen themselves, relaxing, and nod condescendingly at me. They have grown quite fond of me because of that little lie, and make a definite effort not to break when I drop them. I have noticed, too, half a dozen times, that if I forget, and confess that they did come from the five-and-ten, then inside twenty-four hours one or another of the glasses, no longer able to stand the disgrace, will plunge nobly to its death on the floor. I have only six of these glasses left, and the five-and-ten no longer carries them. My great hope is that someday I *shall* find some at an auction.

I really spend a lot more time in the kitchen than I ought, although it doesn't surprise anything in the kitchen to find me there, considering what a busybody I am, always meddling in things that are clearly none of my business. Take the forks, for instance; I'm sure I've done nothing to clear up *that* unhappy situation. I have two kitchen forks, one with four prongs and one with two prongs, and the four-pronged fork is of course my favorite because of its amiability; it is a far sweeter and more malleable character than the two-pronged fork, which was originally the fork to an inexpensive carving set, and regards this fact as an automatic entrée into the dining room.

My two forks are insanely jealous of each other, and I find that I must take a path of great caution with them, something I would not do for many of my friends. I try to keep out of their quarrels — who wouldn't be afraid of an angry fork? — but I am always fumbling the delicate balance of power that is all that keeps them from each other's throats. For instance, four-prongs is traditionally the fork for scrambling eggs, but two-prongs takes precedence in the dishwater. Four-prongs prides himself on the fact that no two-pronged fork knows how to scramble eggs adequately. There is, however, some hair-thin line between scrambling eggs and beating eggs; past that certain line the job rightly belongs to an eggbeater. If I try to force four-prongs beyond his notions of right and fitting duty, he turns limp and useless in my hands.

Then, of course, as though my life were not enough complicated, when I finally give up on four-prongs and take out the eggbeater, *that* surly character is offended in turn, and twists himself into a rigid, disobedient confusion of metal when I try to turn the handle. I get a lot of unnecessary sarcasm from that eggbeater, too. I have let cake batter stand, half-mixed, for half an hour while the eggbeater and the fork calmed down, and at least twice I have had to set them on opposite sides of the kitchen table to keep them from tangling themselves into a snarling battle. All this, while two-prongs sits sedately watching, observing that any vulgar fork with four prongs is bound to get himself into low trouble, particularly if he consorts with eggbeaters.

Two-prongs is the kitchen carving-and-roast fork, and I shall never forget the taut moment in the kitchen when I inadvertently tried to lift a roast out of the pan with four-prongs. I was in a hurry, company was waiting, the gravy was not made, and four-prongs was the nearest fork. There was a moment of absolute resistance, then the incredulous turn of four-prongs in my hand, the sudden furious clatter of two-prongs from the stove where he had been waiting, the slippery tipping of the roasting pan; even the potholder hesitated. There was nothing I could say, of course. I was at fault, so I picked the roast up off the floor, kicked the interfering roasting pan into a corner, set four-prongs pointedly in the sink, and went to work with two-prongs, who was mollified, but sullen for several days.

I do not mean to say that I am under the thumb of my forks, any more than I am honestly afraid of the meat grinder’s threats, or the bullying of the coffeepot. It is simply that one cannot live a day in the middle of so many personalities without occasionally treading on some fork’s toes, or sideswiping the fundamental makeup of a dishtowel. A dishtowel is, I think, the most easily cowed of all kitchen implements, excepting only the steel wool, which hides a heart of gold under its gruff exterior. My striped dishtowels take a vulgar, unholy joy in getting into the living room to clean up spilled juice. There is one dishtowel that adores my three-year-old daughter, I think because she once carried it off to her doll carriage to serve as a blanket, which is a pleasure usually beyond the reach of dishtowels. My daughter's friend is pleased to serve her now in any menial capacity, and has occasionally done service as a bib, at which it is well meaning but inefficient, as it prefers to lie back and admire her rather than catch the little bits of bacon and butter she is apt to let fall from her mouth.

When I turn my back on the sink to take up the dishtowel, the kitchen brightens and beams at me reassuringly. It rather resents being polished up, and there was quite a scene recently about the new curtains. I explained that I had made them myself, and was a little proud of them, and wanted to take the old ones down, but a great loyal voice was raised for the old curtains, and when they went into the hamper regardless, to be washed and turned into dust cloths, a vast silent resentment confronted me and my new curtains. The new curtains were edged awry, until I was persuaded I had sewn them wrong; the rods slipped down persistently. The color of the new curtains, by morning light, was made so vivid, so glaring, by the subdued martyrdom of the rest of the kitchen, that I was almost convinced that they were a mistake. But I give my kitchen time; it is primarily easygoing and friendly, and it will adapt to anything. I brought the old curtains back, in their new role as dust cloths, and left them on the table for a while, so that they might reassure their friends that they were happy and well treated. I gave the floor a wash — it hates washing, like a puppy, but, like a puppy, always feels better afterward — and promised the pantry new shelf paper, and things calmed down. There was only one morning, all things considered, when it was really *impossible* to serve breakfast in the kitchen.

My husband and son, who are gadget-happy, set up for me to use in my kitchen a magnetic metal bar, about four inches long, that takes, and keeps, a violent hold on any metal objects near it, so that I have had to pry my can openers away from it and occasionally, working too near, have had fear for the fillings in my teeth, or my wedding ring, or the tips of my shoelaces. When I moved the kitchen table over to the opposite wall, things were a little better, but I still felt, using my two forks or the can opener, the strong steady pull of the magnet against me, so that if I let go of the fork for a minute it would fly across the room to lodge securely against the magnet.

For a while I wondered about this, the advisability of having one spot in a kitchen to which all utensils would naturally gravitate, but now it reassures me. At least I can always be sure of finding my two warring forks there, nestling snugly in the broad magnetic arms of their common refuge, their maniac suspicions of each other lulled by the fact that it is big enough for both. Furthermore, I can feel through my wall magnet, even from the worktable across the room, the sure haunting echo of one magnet after another throughout the house: From the toy closet, my son's collection of magnets and small metal toys joins its siren voice to the master one in the kitchen. From beyond it, the magnets in all the various toys in the upstairs playroom call shrilly to my forks. From far above comes the thin sweet voice of the magnet in the new lock to the attic workshop. My forks tremble, look at me imploringly, and resign themselves to their work.

Sometimes, wandering as I do around my kitchen, I feel the magnetic pull myself, the urge to flatten myself against the wall and, until I am taken down for some practical purpose, lie there quiet, stilled, at rest.

Perhaps it’s the magnet that holds me to my kitchen. Perhaps it’s the fact that I keep my fountain pen and notebook on the shelf near the clock, so that I always have to go into the kitchen to sign letters, as well as to see what time it is, or, as a last resort, to wash dishes.

Perhaps I’ll wait and dry these tomorrow after breakfast.

In Praise of Dinner Table Silence

A LONG TIME ago, back in those unbelievable days when I used to buy half a pound of hamburger or four pork chops for dinner, and the living room furniture was new and I still had eight cups and eight dinner plates that matched — back in those days, if they ever did exist, my husband and I used to sit at the dinner table every night and talk to each other. I can't remember what we talked about, but I do know we could *hear* each other.

That was back in the time, too, when we had all sorts of ideas about bringing up children. We supposed that *our* children were not going to be messy all the time like other children we saw, and if we had a daughter, we assured each other, she was going to learn to like housework and sewing and cooking instead of being a drone around the house. And *our* children, we told each other happily, were going to have an intelligent share in family activities, such as sitting at the dinner table and joining in the conversation. We had a lot of these ideas.

I still can't figure out what happened. It was going to be so wonderful, all of us sitting there, lingering over coffee and hot chocolate, discussing the ballet and the good books we all had been reading. Perhaps occasionally something would come up in school that the children would care to examine a little bit more searchingly; perhaps an incident from the day would provoke a thoughtful argument. If the phone should ring (I don't know why we assumed that the chances of the phone's ringing during dinner were remote; perhaps it was because none of the people *we* knew called at that hour), a child would excuse himself gracefully and tell whoever was calling that we were dining. Compliments would be made on the food; an indulgent smile might pass between the parents at some childish quip.

As I say, I still can't figure out what happened. All I know is that somehow things haven't turned out quite the way we expected. Take that notion about lingering over hot chocolate: What we didn't know then was that the older the child, the less time spent at the dinner table.

A very small child, dawdling and playing and telling endless, giggling stories, can string out one French-fried potato until he is permitted — with some shrillness and a certain involuntary clenching of fists — to be excused from the rest of his dinner. A fifteen-year-old boy, however, can put away two lamb chops, a baked potato, a lettuce-and-tomato salad, three slices of bread and butter, and a quart of milk before his father has quite finished asking for the salt, please. Before the rest of the family has had time to compliment the cook ("String beans *again*?"), the fifteen-year-old is well on his way to the front door, jacket over one shoulder and a slab of blueberry pie in hand. If called back, he will perch unhappily on the edge of his chair, make a few perfunctory stabs at conversation, such as asking his younger sister kindly to be quiet for just one minute so other people can get a word in edgewise. He will also ask repeatedly if he can please be excused *now,* because he is really in a terrible hurry, and will answer all questions with "What?" He is in such a hurry, of course, because he has to get down to the soda shop and idle for two hours over a Coke.

The only good book that seems to be discussed at our dinner table is the checkbook, usually introduced in some such literary phrase as "I gotta have a new…" Conversation, which is rarely initiated by the parents, is incessant, opinionated, and personal. It is the obligation of the parents to recognize, without hesitation, the Jerrys and the Lindas, the Davises and the Old Lady Winchesters, whose names wander so freely through the social conversation. A maternal question such as “Who is Tommy? Is he that sloppy little boy who borrowed all your records?” is regarded as out-of-bounds, partly because the parent is supposed to know who Tommy is and partly because Tommy is the rage of the seventh grade and looks that way on purpose. Equally, Old Lady Winchester has been teaching the fourth grade for forty-three years, and any parent who cannot recognize her by now is hopelessly out of it.

Scientific discussions, seized upon by the father of the family in the hope of getting into the general conversation, can cause considerable chaos, with the father demonstrating the force of gravity with his butter knife or explaining what makes airplanes go, while on either side low-voiced conversations continue on topics such as whether Jimmie Smith is really the biggest drip in town or what is playing at the movies or who gets first rights at the television set at 8:30. Incidentally, a father, leaving the table to get an atlas to show someone where Alaska is, can count on losing his audience before he gets back. If the father has devoted considerable effort to telling how a camera takes pictures or how we get water out of a faucet and a child remarks that that was not at all the way Mr. Williams told it in science class, the father would be advised to get out of the conversation at once — and stay out.

As for the small daily incidents that spur conversation, there are certainly plenty of them. Opening gambits on these may vary from such provocative questions as “Guess why Jerry got kicked out of study hall again today” to “You know that three-legged dog the Johnsons got? Well, he’s got four legs now.” (He never was three-legged. This was a canard, spread by Harry Johnson. All that happened was the dog got one leg cut chasing the Martins’ cat up a tree. So he used to limp. Now he doesn’t.) A parental attempt to introduce some small daily incident (“Who left the marbles lying on the stairs?”) is usually sensibly disregarded.

The phone always rings during dinner.

Conversation about the food, although, of course, not on a gourmet level, is constant. There is surprise expressed at a new dish (“You mean I gotta *eat* this?”), personal preference indicated (“I haaaaaate liver. I hate it, I hate it, I hate it!”), and suggestions registered for improvement (“There’s too much salt in this soup, and I got a black speck on my lettuce”). Occasionally a dish will provoke universal enthusiasm (“Say, this isn’t bad at all”) or comparison with other cooks (“Mrs. Nash doesn’t make stew like this, but *she’s* a real good cook”). The mother of the family naturally receives these comments graciously (“Then why don’t you go eat at the Smiths’ if the food’s so good?”) and takes preferences into consideration in her menu planning, as in telling the father after dinner that he’s going to go right on getting hamburger once a week unless something is done about the housekeeping budget.

No, I can’t really remember what it used to be like when we sat at the table and just talked. As I say, all I can really remember about it is that we could *hear* each other.

Questions I Wish I'd Never Asked

ALL I WANTED to know was who had left the garden hose out in the snow to freeze.

"Who," I said to my older son, Laurie, "left the garden hose out in the snow to freeze?"

"Not me," he said at once. "I didn't do it."

"Well," I said (flank attack), "when did you last use the hose?"

"I haven't used it since last summer," he assured me. "I don't think I've even *seen* the garden hose since last summer. Or maybe even the summer before."

"What did you use to wash the car?"

"What? Oh." He thought. "Oh, *that.* You mean *that* garden hose? And *anyway* I put it back."

"Then why is it out in the snow to freeze?"

"I'll tell you," he said. "I *remember* I put it back, because I was curling it up in the garage, and I gave Joanne the frying pan—"

"The frying pan?"

"Well, yes. To wash the car."

"Why did you need a frying pan to wash the car?"

"For the soap," he said, sighing.

"I suppose," I said carefully, "it was the omelet pan?"

"We figured you didn't use that one as much as the others." He was quiet for a minute and then went on quickly, "So I gave Joanne the frying pan and the sewing scissors to take in, and I curled—"

"The sewing scissors? Mine?"

"She was cutting off the frayed edges."

"Of what? Of what?"

"There was a kind of a little hole in the upholstery."

"Of the car?"

"Well, the *dog* did that," he said desperately. "We put the car robe over it, anyway. So I was curling up the garden hose in the garage and Joanne…"

—

"Joanne," I said, "did you wash the omelet pan?"

"What?"

"Did you wash the omelet pan after you used it to wash the car?"

"Well, there was already soap *in* it. I just rinsed it out and put it back. Why?"

"Where are my sewing scissors?"

"*I* don't know. You want to cut something?"

"I am trying to find out who left the garden hose out in the snow to freeze."

"You mean when Laurie washed the car? Did the omelet taste funny?"

"Where are my sewing scissors?"

"Oh. Well, I brought them in. And Barry was doing a plane model in the kitchen. And he asked could he borrow the scissors for a minute. And I said he should put them back in your sewing table when he was through. Why," she asked, struck with an idea. "Can't you find them?"

"No. I cannot find them."

"Why don't you ask Laurie? He was washing the car."

"Did he leave the garden hose out in the snow to freeze?"

"No, that was Sally."

"Sally?"

"She had it because she was trying to ice skate."

“What?”

“On the lawn. She was going to put water on the lawn so it would freeze, but it wouldn’t stretch.”

“Then did Sally—”

“All I know is, it wasn’t *me.*”

—

“Barry,” I said, “where are my sewing scissors?”

“What?”

“The day Laurie washed the car you were doing a plane model in the kitchen and Joanne came in with my sewing scissors and you asked to borrow them and they have not been returned.”

“Oh. I don’t know. Maybe Laurie took them.”

“Laurie was curling up the hose.”

“Then maybe Joanne took them.”

“Joanne was rinsing out the omelet pan.”

“Then what about Sally? Or Dad?”

“What did you do with my sewing scissors when you were through with your model plane?”

“What? Oh. Oh. Your *sewing* scissors.”

“My sewing scissors.”

“Oh. Well, I guess they got *in* the plane.”

“In the plane? My scissors?”

“Well, I got it glued, and — I remember now — I couldn’t find the scissors and then when I shook the plane it rattled but I couldn’t unglue it so I guess they’re still in there.”

“Where is the plane now? We’ll unglue it together.”

“I took it to school. Dad *said* I could.”

—

“Listen,” I said to my husband. “Did you tell Barry he could take my sewing scissors to school?”

“Did I what?”

“Who left the garden hose out in the snow to freeze?”

“Well, I didn’t. Why don’t you ask the children? Why would I leave the garden hose—” He put down his paper abruptly. “Sewing scissors?” he demanded. “Are they making those little boys take home economics now?”

“No,” I said. “They’re learning safecracking.”

“Progressive education,” he was shouting when I closed the study door. “Good honest arithmetic was all *we*…”

—

“Sally,” I said, “who left the garden hose out in the snow?”

“What?”

“Who left the garden hose out in the snow?”

“Well, I put it away.”

“When?”

“I was going to ice skate because you know what Jeannie has? She has a big patch of ice right on her own lawn and she goes skating there every day and can I get new skates?”

“No. You took out the garden hose?”

“Jeannie’s mother *lets* her put water on the lawn to ice skate. Jeannie can use *her* garden hose whenever she wants.”

“Does she put it away afterward?”

“Put what away?”

“The garden hose.”

“Can I? Get new skates?”

“Look,” I said. “Did you or did you not leave the garden hose out in the snow?”

“Because if I get figure skates I can go backward.”

—

As a matter of fact, the other day, when I was washing the dog, it occurred to me who had left the hose out in the snow. I did, the last time I washed him. Not that the question is of the slightest importance, anyway. What’s important is to get it thawed out and put away. Let the dead past bury its dead, I firmly believe.

Mother, Honestly!

MOTHERS ARE HARRIED creatures, haunted by all sorts of terrors: rusty nails, the rising cost of sneakers, rain on Class Picnic Day. Take, for instance, the mother of the sixteen-year-old boy who is learning to drive. Or the mother of the lead in the school play, for whom she must create a pioneer-era costume by Monday. Or the mother of the free-swinging third grader, who always says the other kid started it. Most mothers are called upon, from time to time, to endure periods of such unnerving strain that only a heroine could meet them.

Above and beyond all those, there is another mother, who may be met almost anywhere. Sometimes she is just sitting by herself over a cup of coffee, staring straight ahead. Or trying to exchange a pair of size-16 subteen Bermuda shorts for a size-14 preteen. Or wearing gloves at a party because the bottle of polish remover has been long and mysteriously missing. Her new white blouse has been out to the laundry three times, and she hasn't worn it yet. She cringes when the phone rings. She cannot endure the sight or sound of a guitar. Any statement beginning "Everyone *else* does" sends her into a white-faced and speechless fury. Don't get in this woman's way. She has enough to put up with at home. She is the mother of a twelve-year-old girl.

Those mothers who have lasted till a child has reached twelve have themselves pretty well in hand. They keep telling themselves that at any rate the worst is over — except for distant headaches such as paying college bills and giving the kids wedding presents and taking a firm stand on babysitting when they are grandmothers. It might have been pretty rough the first few years, they tell themselves, what with things like chickenpox and television and stilts, but now that the girl is twelve she is practically grown up and can take care of herself and begin to be responsible.

I know mothers who keep telling themselves and telling themselves things like that, in voices getting more and more shrill, wringing their hands and grinding their teeth. Now the girl is twelve, they say, she's practically grown up. She is. She is. She *is.*

That's me.

Last year I sent my daughter, an agreeable child who liked to play baseball and thought boys were silly, off to camp. I got back — and it took only two months — a creature who slept with curlers in her hair, wore perfume from the five-and-ten, and addressed me as nothing but "Mother, *honestly!*"

By now she also calls me "Honestly, *Mother*" and "Mother, *really*" and sometimes just plain *"Mother."* She worries constantly about her figure — usually with one hand in the refrigerator. She thinks any beardless adolescent who sings through his nose is "cute." She has perceived that in addition to being slightly behind the times in my dress and manner, I am hopelessly dated in my grasp of teenagers — especially of what "everyone else" is allowed to do. This, incidentally, is a phrase I can't even write without feeling a little chill down my back. My daughter says it without difficulty. I tell her, "I don't care what everyone else does…" and "No daughter of mine is going to…" and "When I was your age, I had to…" Neither of us listens to the other. She no longer thinks boys are silly.

She has compromised, oddly, with her past as a child. She no longer plays cops and robbers in and out of the treehouse; she climbs into the treehouse to read. She will spend hours riding a bike with her little brother, so long as it is understood that she is teaching him how, and not riding purely for pleasure. She has learned from her Home Ec teacher and her Scout leader how to manage perfectly well in a kitchen, but if her mother is around she drops cups of flour and burns eggs and steps on the cat. She can shut herself in the bathroom combing her hair until her mother beats feverishly and hysterically on the door, yet she is never late for school because that is where the boys are.

Punishment for a twelve-year-old may be of the “Very well, you can just go right on to the Scout meeting in a uniform that has been left lying on the floor” variety, and it is wholly ineffectual, of course. She won’t go to the Scouts in the wrinkled uniform, naturally; either she’ll show up at the last possible minute in the one decent dress she has left or she won’t go at all; either way, it’s her mother’s fault, and she’s going to tell the Scout leader so.

On the other hand, a mother is definitely an asset to a twelve-year-old girl. For one thing, a mother will agree to a larger clothes allowance than a father will, and she’s usually a valuable ally when it comes to asking for extras, such as a new winter coat. No matter how old the female, she has an instinct that lets her know when men will be fussy about money.

A mother’s no good when it comes to cooking and sewing lessons — these are properly taken care of by the Home Ec teacher, in a style diametrically opposite to anything ever seen at home. But a mother might remember enough of her college French to lend a hand with the homework, and somewhere there’s always a lipstick she’s forgotten to hide. She is also assumed to have a certain fund of practical knowledge (“Hello, Mom? Is this Mom? Listen, the baby’s turned over on his stomach and Mrs. Banks didn’t tell me whether he was supposed to or not and do you think I’d better turn him back over or can he sleep on his face?”). A mother can likewise be counted on to have errands to do in town while six giggling girls go shopping — thereby reducing the manager of the five-and-ten to near hysteria.

I must be more tolerant, I keep telling myself and telling myself. She's growing up. Pretty soon now she'll start being responsible and neat and sensible. I must be more tolerant. And there I go into her room, tripping over a Coke bottle and averting my eyes from the pictures of singers on the wall, and say through the steady beat of guitars from the record player, twisting my hands together and trying to get my voice down, "Is that my bottle of shampoo on your desk? Can't you pick up some of your magazines? It seems to me anyone would be *ashamed* to entertain her friends in a room like this. Can't you ever make your bed?" And she looks up through the tangle of drying socks and says, "Mother, *honestly!*" And then I have to go downstairs and sit by myself in the living room until I am steady again and can start telling myself to be more tolerant.

One thing really bothers me. I recently met a mother whose daughter is sixteen. When I remarked casually that I would be happy when my daughter outgrew her present stage and became more sensible and responsible, she just looked at me for one long minute and then began to laugh. She laughed and laughed and laughed. As I say, that bothers me a little.

How to Enjoy a Family Quarrel

THERE ARE GROUNDS for deep suspicion, I think, in the idea of a family group that does not occasionally dissolve itself into a mass of screaming squabblers. I know of families where no word of dissent is ever permitted before — or from — the children, and these tend to be families where no word of tenderness either is ever permitted before — or from — the children. Not to put too fine a point on it, if two or three or four or five or six people live together in one house, sooner or later something is going to come up about which they do not see eye to eye and are prepared to say so. The children are displeased with their parents, perhaps, or displeased with one another or some outside element; it is even possible that the parents are displeased with their children. It would surely be unsafe to imagine that the average family could keep these emotions safely unspoken without some damage to the psyche, particularly the parents'.

In our family we are six — two parents and four children — and we are given to what I might call unceasing differences of opinion, more or less passionate. Almost any subject, from politics to small variations in daily dress, can find us lined up in formation on two bitterly opposed sides. Such a subject as "*Resolved,* That all allowances be trebled because of general charm and amiability" can keep us going for quite a while. This one is still current, my husband and I taking the negative.

We learned very early that it was safest to hold a united front on all major issues in front of the children. Since four of the members of our family are children, we also have learned never, never, *never* to put *anything* to a democratic vote. Time after time we found ourselves outvoted

4–2 and involved in things like going on a picnic tomorrow no matter whether it rains or not, and inviting those nice people with all the children to come for a weekend. Also we found out very early — when our older son was about six weeks old, in fact — that no parents ever got anywhere by calling in outsiders, particularly grandparents, for an impartial judgment.

Family arguments tend to be of two sorts, although one is not necessarily more peaceful than the other: the personal, or no-discussion-before-company type, and what for want of a better word might be called the impersonal — philosophical, political, or moral questions from the world at large. (The situation in the Middle East, for instance, or the probable baseball standings next fall, or whether it is fair to keep children out of certain movies, or the age at which it is proper for a girl to start wearing lipstick.)

On all general subjects, naturally, the children hold violently partisan opinions, dictated by what they saw on television, what the teacher said, or how Kathy's daddy voted. My husband and I hold opinions that are the result of reasoned, mature thought. Of course, the ending to *our* discussions often comes late at night, after the children are in bed, when my husband and I are still patiently explaining to each other in level voices the complete justice of our own views. (My husband, for instance, favors a weak answering no-trump, although I have time and again explained to him that it is a fallacious bid.)

The family argument usually takes place around the dinner table, somewhere halfway through the main course, when dessert seems impossibly remote beyond the mounds of spinach, and the novelty of eating again has largely worn off. Anyone, of course, may commence the fray, but once it's begun, certain immutable ground rules apply and may not be broken.

The ground rules may be stated as:

- The battle must be joined in a spirit of high moral indignation and a correspondingly high voice. In case of an argument on the impersonal level, some intelligent cause for an instance in the subject should be adduced, as "My old teacher made us learn all the parts of the alimentary canal." Or "What *good* is geography, anyway?"
- It is not necessary — is, in fact, reckless — to give anyone else's side of the question.
- The more vivid the detail, the more forceful the complaint. "He hit me and scratched me and pulled my hair and bit me" is clearly a finer many-angled trench to fight from than merely "He hit me."
- Once the arguable premise has been determined, counterattack may consist of flat denial ("I never did"), counteraccusation ("Well, you hit me first!"), or personal insult ("Anyway, you're nothing but a big baby"). In case of parental involvement, case histories may be admitted into evidence ("Since you are so consistently rude to members of your own family, I can see no reason why we should believe that you are civil to your sister's friends"), and dire prediction may be used as a pseudo threat ("The main part of growing up is the acceptance of responsibility, so a little girl who is going to wear lipstick and fancy shoes will naturally want to be more capable around the house and can therefore plan to wash *and* dry the dishes every night").
- If the father of the family speaks, whether in anger or not, absolute silence must be maintained, although it is not necessary to pay any particular attention to what he is saying.
- If the mother of the family speaks, by heaven everybody had better look alive.

- Any remark such as “But gosh, that was way back years ago when you were young” is regarded as dirty tactics.
- The father determines who shall have the floor by shouting “Quiet!” and half rising from his chair.
- Outside evidence (what Ernie saw, what Kathy said, the probable opinion of old Mrs. Atkins next door) is not allowed as legitimate matter of record, but there is no rule against bringing it up anyway.
- Only the father is permitted to say, “Do as I say, not as I do.”
- Any apology fairly earned must be delivered as grudgingly as possible (“Yeah, so I *said* I’m sorry”), the mother and father excepted; their apologies must be graceful and complete, to teach the children manners.
- In impersonal arguments, reference books are referred to (“So go and look it up if you don’t believe me”) but never referred to.
- Any pronouncement by the mother or the father beginning “From this moment on, every single one of you children will…” can be ignored.
- Everyone must choose a side at once, as soon as the issue is brought forward, although it is not necessary to stay on the side you choose if things seem to be going the other way.

In addition to these formal ground rules, certain house rules apply in every family, differing, of course, according to the number of combatants, their several ages, and the varying vulnerabilities of the parents. In our family the basic house rules are:

- The father, who is not a man wholly without prejudice, will not suffer disorder. In his presence, pictures are to be straightened, books lined evenly on the shelves, silverware correctly placed. It is to be understood that no child of any age will tangle with Daddy on this subject. (The day when Jannie, in a fine white rage, deliberately disarranged all the objects on her father’s desk is a day none of us will soon forget.)

• The mother is to be regarded as entirely unreasonable and beyond the reach of logic on such subjects as adequate clothing, riding bicycles in the street, table manners in general, and writing Christmas thank-you letters. She is not expected to make any sense with regard to underprotection rather than overprotection.

• The fourteen-year-old son will not permit his privacy to be invaded. Tidy he is not, nor clean, but no one may touch anything that belongs to him.

• The friends of the eleven-year-old daughter may not be criticized. They are her friends; she herself cannot *stand* that nasty Linda, she is never *never* going to walk home with Janet again, Millie's behavior is just simply *horrible;* but they are her friends and no one else may cast the second stone.

• The eight-year-old daughter is not to be crossed. She does things in a particular Sally way, and that way is right. Anyone who disagrees is either insane or, at best, hopelessly ignorant. In all of this she strongly resembles her father.

• The five-year-old son is adamant on personal dignity. He will listen, reason, and even consent to stop banging that gun against the wall if he is asked nicely, but at your peril lift him, set him aside, or use force against him because he is small.

• In case the teacher says one thing and the parents another, there is no question in anyone's mind who is right.

Once the ground rules are clearly established (house rules are absorbed by trial and error), the family argument should move quickly and effortlessly. Consider, for example, our family skirmish on the question of our television room, a general sore point anyway.

We have our television set in a small room furnished with a couch, two straight chairs, and three walls of bookcases full of books. In front of the couch is a small round table with two ashtrays on it and, in theory, nothing else. The television setup also includes a radio, a phonograph, and the attachments for the tape recorder. All four children watch television at some time or other during the usual day, and the couch is convenient for a parental nap after dinner. The room is, in fact, what in a less die-hard family might be called a recreation room, or even a music room, or — stretching a point — a library.

One late afternoon recently, my husband retired to lie down on the couch and watch the last quarter of the football game before dinner. He came storming out at once announcing that no one, no one, *no one* was ever going to watch television in this house again, or at least only over his dead body. The books had been knocked crooked in all the bookshelves because Barry and Sally had been roughhousing during the commercials. Jannie had left her sewing box and a book borrowed from Linda on one of the chairs. Laurie had been doing his homework in there and the ashtrays were full of torn scraps on which Latin phrases were scrawled, and the floor was covered with little pieces of thread and pencil sharpenings. I myself had left a sweater over the back of the other chair.

As I was clearly one of the sinning parties, I had no choice but to sneak my sweater out fast and attempt to modify the course of justice, at the same time making it clear to the children that Daddy and I were of one mind on everything. I chose to take the unassailable stand that I had told the children and *told* the children to pick up their things, and losing television was no more than they deserved for being so messy; but at the same time, unless something was devised to occupy all four of them during the time I was making dinner, it would very likely be impossible for me to get onto the table any of the small refinements — like deep-dish apple pie — of which my husband is very fond.

My husband said that none of that mattered at all; he would not have the television room left in disorder. Suppose, he demanded fiercely, suppose someone had dropped in to borrow a book? Would we like to have this literate stranger find the books crooked? The ashtrays full of paper? Sweaters lying around everywhere?

No, Laurie said, that was not fairly argued. In the first place, Dad never lent books to anyone, because it left spaces in the bookshelves. And Jannie had borrowed the book that caused all the disorder from Kate, and he bet that Kate's bookshelves looked even worse.

Jannie said they certainly did *not;* what did Laurie know about Kate's bookshelves, anyway, always thinking he was so smart?

I said that the sweater was mine and I had taken it off because I was going to vacuum the Venetian blinds in the television room; would my husband, I asked hotly, want his literate book borrower to find the Venetian blinds dusty?

Sally said she had not been roughhousing. Barry had pushed her and she had given him a kind of little small kick.

Barry said she had kicked him *hard,* right *here,* and anyway it was Sally who had fallen off the couch onto the bookcase.

Laurie said if he couldn't do his homework in the television room, where *could* he do it? Because how could he work in his room with Jannie playing rock-and-roll on her phonograph all day long?

My husband said now wait a minute, Jannie had every right in the world to play her own phonograph, and in any case rock-and-roll was a legitimate twelve-bar fast blues form.

Laurie said that anyone who could call that junk legitimate didn't know a tenor sax from a clarinet.

His father said that perhaps Laurie with all his education could not count as high as twelve? Because the twelve-bar blues form was exact and only an idiot could ignore it.

Laurie said he could play records that would make Jannie’s records sound like a steel mill going full blast.

Sally and Barry began to fidget over their apple pie, and their father told them absently to run along and watch television, and he said to Laurie, all right, he would take Laurie’s records and Jannie’s records and show Laurie what was meant by a twelve-bar blues, and in Latin too, if Laurie preferred.

While they were getting out the records, I excused myself from the table and went in and straightened up the television room.

Some subjects on which we line up even are never going to be settled. Jan, Sally, and I think that I should cut my hair. My husband and Laurie say categorically that I may not, and Barry says that all haircuts are dangerous. My husband, Laurie, and Jannie think that an enormous new cabinet is necessary to hold the coin collection. Barry, Sally, and I would rather get a deep freeze, and there would be room in it for the coins, too, as well as the infinity of Popsicles that Sally and Barry believe would be kept there. I hold the most extreme position here; I think that we have too many coins anyway.

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There is one argument in our family that is going to be settled out of hand. Five of us think we should get a new car; there is one holdout who says that we cannot afford it. Four of us think that the new car should be a station wagon; Laurie thinks it should be a convertible, because they are making convertibles now that will hold six, and convertibles are the most, man! Three of us think the new station wagon should have four doors instead of two; Barry believes that if there were doors in the back he would fall out. Two of us think the new four-door station wagon should be pink, but Jannie says that that miserable Cheryl has a pink car and it's just *ugly.* One of us thinks that the new pink four-door station wagon is going to have white upholstery and chrome trimmings, and by golly that is just the kind of car we are going to get, as soon as I can talk my husband into it.

The Pleasures and Perils of Dining Out with Children

I have four children, and I do not believe that parents who take children to dine in restaurants are necessarily insane. I can think of several adequate reasons for taking our children out for dinner. Perhaps the house has burned down and there are no neighbors charitable enough to take us in. Or our helicopter has crashed on the outskirts of town and the mechanic says, after the manner of mechanics, that no replacement parts can possibly be procured any nearer than Schenectady. Or dragons have invaded our kitchen and eaten everything in the refrigerator. Or I have announced, slamming the breakfast dishes around in the sink, that I am good and sick and tired of cooking meals and washing dishes and tonight I am going to have my dinner in a restaurant — although what I actually have in mind at that moment does not, of course, include the children.

I am thinking of a gracious dinner in a charming restaurant where the lights and music are soft, where if someone drops a fork the waiter brings another, where the used dishes are never seen again by me. I am beautifully gowned (nothing I have now will do, certainly), and I am going to have a crabmeat cocktail to start. Conversation is sparkling — about books, the better movies, the theater, the ballet. No mention is made of the current occupations of grade three of the local school. There is no lively banter about who was waiting around for Jimmie Brannan at recess. The names of the members of the high school football squad do not come up. All voices are quiet; there are no loud guffaws and no Dear Dollies or Precious Teddy

Bears to dine with us. We will linger luxuriously at the table over coffee and brandy. I will come home from my lovely dinner, starry-eyed and in high-heeled shoes, to find the children's dinner dishes waiting in the sink. The babysitter will cost more than the restaurant. The kitchen floor will need an immediate washing, because of a butter-throwing episode that took place while the babysitter was turning out the kitchen cabinets trying to find the mustard, which I had left in plain sight on the table. The baby will not yet be in bed, the television set will have broken down, and a state of high-tension cold war will be prevailing in the living room. One of the younger children will have accepted a long-distance phone call from Grandma in California, but will be unable to remember anything Grandma said except how come we went out and left the children alone? There will be a note on the telephone pad reading "Mrs. Gbdryl called. Please call her right back." This mystery will not be solved until two days later, when Marian Williams runs into me in the supermarket and says in an icy kind of way that she is *sorry* I was too *busy* to call her but of course it wasn't the *least* bit important. It will of course have been extremely important, and if I try to explain that we went out for dinner she will say only that it certainly must be *wonderful* to be able to get out like that whenever we like. Sometime later in the week I will give up racking my brains and I will call the babysitter and ask her where she put the children's clothes when she undressed them. It will be a good long time before I make another attempt to live graciously.

However, sooner or later I am going to run again into one of those barren spells when I cannot think of anything to serve for dinner except meat loaf or tuna fish salad. Sooner or later I am going to announce that I am sick and tired of cooking meals and washing dishes and tonight I am going to have dinner in a restaurant and Daddy can take us all over to The Lake House for dinner.

The children are delighted. By five-thirty they are starving; washed and dressed in their neatest clothes, they are combed, smiling, alert. Because of this we will arrive at the restaurant somewhat earlier than most of the other diners and will, in fact, find only one waiter who is prepared to serve customers.

After a brief skirmish over seating arrangements ("Sally, if you would like to go wait in the car while the rest of us have dinner…"), we settle ourselves at a table that turns out to be right on the main highway from the kitchen to the bar, so that my husband and I will have to squeeze closer and closer to the table as the restaurant fills up and traffic gets heavier.

There is never any question about what the children will order. Barry would like a "peanut butter samwich." Sally wants "sperghetti." Jannie wants a well-done hamburger with lots and lots of relish. Laurie, who is fourteen, has no qualms about being in a restaurant; he has been brought here to eat and that is what he is going to do, without any foolishness of talking or playing or the small niceties of table manners. Laurie scowls ferociously at his younger brother and sisters, asks his father why we had to bring the little kids along anyway, and tells the waiter to wait a minute, he has not made up his mind yet. He concentrates sternly on the menu, pausing to ask the waiter whether the filet mignon at four dollars and seventy-five cents is bigger than the sirloin steak for four dollars and fifty cents, trying to cram the maximum amount of food into the limits of one reasonable dinner. He assures himself that he will be brought salad. He asks the waiter to be sure to remember his French-fried potatoes. He checks the desserts in advance, and while he is waiting for his steak to arrive he keeps a sharp eye on other tables to make certain that he will not be taken in by a small portion of lemon pie when the strawberry shortcake is large and lavishly whip-creamed.

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It is a hard compromise between the eating habits of children and the serving habits of restaurants. When the idea of dinner is presented to a small child, he wants to see his dinner at once, all on one plate, with one spoon and one fork to eat it with. He has no patience with the fruit cups and chicken soup that precede his peanut butter sandwich. I have tried ordering Barry's peanut butter sandwich and Sally's spaghetti to be served them at once, but this only means that before I am quite through with my crabmeat cocktail, Barry and Sally will be demanding ice cream. At one end of the meal or the other, Sally and Barry are going to be without occupation while the rest of us dine. They will spend this time profitably. They may deal with the table setting, with the result that all the silverware is collected in front of me on the table, to be doled out piece by piece; napkins are trailing festively from the backs of chairs; and the vase of flowers, the salt and pepper shakers, the ashtray, and the sugar bowl all have been removed by their father to a safer table nearby.

When the attractions of the table setting are lessened ("Sally, if you would like to go and wait in the car while the rest of us have dinner…"), they discover that they can ease themselves from their chairs by sliding gradually under the tablecloth and popping out on the other side of the table between Laurie and Jannie, who are carrying on a conversation very loudly.

"Yeah?" Laurie is saying. "And who told *you* you were so smart, I wonder?"

"You know everything, I guess," Jannie says. "I guess you know everything, I don't *think.*"

Barry and Sally locate a nice lady over there who looks as though she would be interested in hearing about the dead pigeon the dogs brought home. It is not impossible that there are other small children in the restaurant who would like to play tag in and out between the tables. At the very least they can go from one table to another examining what other people eat and asking if it tastes good. When they are brought back to the table by force (“Sally, if you would like…”), they settle down to various drummings, tappings, and kickings, until their father says “QUIET!” in a voice that stills the entire restaurant and, red-faced, he adds in a whisper that the next child who stirs will never see the inside of a restaurant again. He hastens to pay the check before I have quite finished my coffee. The children regard the occasion as a complete success and their behavior as exemplary. They keep referring afterward to “that time when we were so good in the restaurant.”

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Since we do have four children, and since there is an absolute limit to the amount of tuna fish salad my husband can regard with tolerance, and since our helicopter does break down frequently, we have finally, as a family, worked out a few simple solutions to the problem of dining out together. One of these we discovered accidentally: We went to a restaurant where the table mats were printed with a variety of jokes and puzzles. Happily, Laurie and Jannie did crossword puzzles, Sally made follow-the-dot pictures, Barry colored in all the little squares marked with an X, and my husband and I chatted about the new books and the ballet. The only disadvantage was the difficulty in getting the children to eat because they would not permit the waitress to put any plates down on the table mats.

My husband and I have also tried putting the four children at a table of their own and pretending that they have come in by themselves. This, although it requires almost supernatural acting ability, will delight the children endlessly, since they can peek around at Mommy and Daddy and giggle. Sooner or later, though, Laurie will call across the restaurant, “Hey, Dad, is Jannie allowed to have two desserts?” and the secret is out.

By far the easiest solution is to visit the restaurant of the children’s choice. This will be a curb-service hamburger stand, the Elite Café on Depot Street, or one of those roadside places that give away free balloons and lollipops and cardboard toys along with cold fried potatoes and unattractive foot-long hot dogs. The children will dine hugely, using large quantities of catsup from the fascinating plastic container, put uncounted numbers of nickels into the jukebox, visit freely a kitchen I would shudder to contemplate, and swing round and round on the stools at the counter. The coffee is usually pretty good at these places, and my husband and I can have a sandwich when we get home.

No cynicism can encompass, however, the infinite duplicity of children. Recently, because of dragons in the refrigerator, my husband and I found ourselves, with children, spending a totally unexpected weekend in an elaborate country inn. Because of a series of circumstances we found ourselves at table with an Anglican priest, a famous poet, and two jazz musicians, all of them absolute strangers. When we are dining with anyone outside the family, I always try to gather the children around me so that I can control them to some extent and conversation at the rest of the table can go on without too much competition. On this occasion I was not successful. Across the table, Jannie, looking incredibly small in her best yellow dress, sat between the priest and one of the jazz musicians, the trumpeter. Laurie, whose interest in jazz is absolute, had contrived to sit between the two musicians. Sally sat between the drummer and the poet. Barry sat between his father and the priest. I sat between the poet and my husband, with no child in reach, forced to rely upon an extemporaneous and elaborate system of signals and constant vigilance. A long, hard stare at each child in turn, moving meaningfully from child to napkin to child, finally got the napkins in the laps. My sign for put-that-water-glass-down-before-it-spills turned out to be a kind of flapping movement accompanied by a gasp. Eat-every-one-of-those-green-peas-with-a-*fork* was a baleful scowl that turned into a hasty false smile when the poet addressed me unexpectedly.

I never got much dinner, and I believe that the poet, whose good opinion I would have prized, came away with the idea that I was a kind of zany afflicted with some nervous disorder that, fortunately, had not been inherited by my children, since every child was, during the entire dinner, docile, demure, and courtly. The drummer cut Sally's roast beef (Sally dislikes meat and does not usually touch it with even the tip of her fork), and they discussed little girls while Sally ate her roast beef. The drummer said he had a little girl just Sally's age, and I distinctly heard Sally telling him that it was difficult for daddies to understand little girls, because they had invariably been little boys themselves. Laurie and the trumpet player dwelt lovingly upon the probable personnel of a band that seemed to be called Jelly Roll Morton and His Red Hot Peppers. Jannie, who was eating her salad as though she liked it, was conducting a spirited conversation with the priest over the sugary morality found in nineteenth-century children's books, a subject in which I had not suspected she was so learned, although I myself had given her *Elsie Dinsmore* to read. Barry watched wide-eyed, answered civilly when anyone asked him how old he was, finished his milk without being told, and volunteered to the table at large a brief but enthralling account of what his nursery school teacher had said about little boys who put modeling clay into the hair of little girls. My husband and the poet talked across me about baseball. Every now and then through the general conversation I could hear one of my children saying “please” or “thank you.” When the children excused themselves and left the grown-ups to coffee, the priest remarked that they were far and away the best-behaved children he had ever seen. I thanked him and avoided looking at my husband.

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The next night they were at home again, around their own table. Sally left her dinner in tears because she was told to eat her meat loaf or do without dessert. Jannie spilled her milk, Barry slipped all his mashed potatoes to the dog under the table, Laurie told Jannie she was a perfect absolute idiot and ought to be kept shut in her room, and Jannie said she guessed he just thought he was pretty smart but people who had such good opinions of themselves were pretty often mistaken. Barry knocked his chair over trying to get under the table to recover his napkin, Sally wailed from upstairs that she just simply *hated* meat loaf, and Laurie left the table abruptly, remarking with his mouth full that he was going out to play catch with Rob.

I was never so relieved in my life.

Out of the Mouths of Babes

I RECENTLY MET a woman who told me, in the tone of voice these women always seem to use, that she thought of her kiddies as ambassadors of goodwill. “Goodwill,” she said clearly. “Ambassadors of goodwill. In everything they say and do, I want them to show just what kind of a little family we are,” she said.

Most of what I wanted to say I sensibly left unsaid. For one thing, it was difficult for me to control my voice. Also, it is remotely possible that her children *are* different from mine and all others I know, and that they really might be ambassadors of goodwill, who show in everything they say and do what kind of a little family they’re part of.

My children, of course, show in everything they say and do what kind of a little family *we* are. But the words that leap to mind in describing them are neither “ambassadors” nor “goodwill.” “Blabbermouths” defines more exactly the term that occurs to me. As a matter of fact, they sometimes seem to me to be a mixed bag of gossip columnists, press agents, scandalmongers, and agents provocateur. Not to put too fine a point on it, they simply cannot keep their little rosebud mouths shut.

The more personal the item, the better. And they are unerring. They *know* that the neighbors and the kids at school are not the least bit interested in the serious questions we all were discussing at dinner last night. What the world *really* wants to hear is what Daddy said when he spilled coffee on his good pants. Nor is there any way to head them off. If my husband mentions incautiously that his name was misspelled on his income tax blank and I cut in hastily to say, “Let’s not discuss this in front of the children,” the next day everyone in town knows there is something wrong with Daddy's income tax, but it is a secret.

Some of the gabble is, of course, purely high-spirited, a genuine attempt to let the whole world in on the gay doings at our house ("You should have heard what Mommy said when the car wouldn't start"), and some of it is purely informative ("I told the teacher Daddy said she was wrong"). Occasionally the intent of the remark — this almost always to grandparents — is clearly to make trouble ("Barry broke the airplane you gave him"). It usually succeeds.

Sometimes the honor of the family is involved. Then it is the obvious duty of the children to rally round and man the barricades ("Mrs. Brown said we were certainly getting a lot of new clothes, weren't we, and I told her it was all right because you charged everything"). Sometimes the children — together and unafraid — feel compelled to defend their mother ("The kids in school didn't believe what Daddy says about being able to feed an army on what you spend").

I do not really believe that it is going to do any great harm for the neighbors to know that for Christmas, Daddy got pajamas with pictures of dancing ladies on them. As a matter of fact, if some emergency arose and he had to run into the street in the middle of the night, it would probably be just as well that the neighbors had been forewarned.

I am learning, too, to count to ten before I speak. I admit I was unwise in what I said at breakfast about Mrs. Smith and her infernal dog. But I insist that I did not say it exactly the way it was quoted to Mrs. Smith, and if she ever speaks to me again, I will tell her so.

Unraveling a knot of juvenile gossip is like getting out of an underground maze at night without a flashlight. A child comes home from school at lunchtime, quivering and furious. "I am never going to speak to my sister, Sally, ever again," she says, "or to anyone in this *whole family,* because you all said Linda looked like a chorus girl."

"Well, she does. That hair — Anyway, I never said anything of the sort."

"You did too. And Sally told Susan and Susan told *Linda* and Linda told her mother and now Linda can't invite me to her party."

"I may have said her hair was unbecomingly arranged."

"Linda told *me* her mother said I looked just as bad."

"That's ridiculous — although I do wish you'd comb back those bangs."

This does not make the aggrieved one feel any better. "And now Linda is telling everyone I'm not getting a new formal for the dance just to get *even,*" she announces.

"And how does Linda know *that*?"

"Well, remember when you and Daddy were talking in the study the other night? And I couldn't sleep because you were talking so loud? And Daddy was talking about the bills?"

"And you told Linda about that, I suppose?"

"Well, she's my best *friend.*"

"Susan says," Sally observes primly, "that Linda told *her* that her mother thinks it's too bad we girls dress so badly. Linda says her mother says your taste is in your feet."

"Says that about me? When her daughter goes out dressed like something from a rummage sale?"

There is a little mollified giggle. "Wait till I tell Linda *that,*" Sally says.

"Now wait — wait a minute. I didn't mean it, really."

There is a remote possibility that someday Linda's mother and I may find ourselves sitting together over a friendly cup of tea, sighing over the problems of teenage daughters. But somehow I am beginning to wonder. It has come to my attention that she recently remarked that our neighbors might rather have had us put the money we spent on a new car into painting that house of ours. I have since told my daughter that she may not invite Linda to *her* party.

Anyway, I am much more interested right now in something Barry brought home from school this morning. It seems that little Jerry Allen told him that *his* mommy and daddy had a terrible argument last night, and Jerry and his sister are going to stay with their grandmother for a while. I knew Mr. Allen had business troubles, because his little girl told Sally she was going to drop out of dancing school. But I can’t wait till the kids get home this afternoon to find out the rest.

The Real Me

I AM TIRED of writing dainty little biographical things that pretend that I am a trim little housewife in a Mother Hubbard stirring up appetizing messes over a wood stove.

I live in a dank old place with a ghost that stomps around in the attic room we've never gone into (I *think* it's walled up), and the first thing I did when we moved in was to make charms in black crayon on all the door sills and window ledges to keep out demons, and was successful in the main. There are mushrooms growing in the cellar, and a number of marble mantels that have an unexplained habit of falling down onto the heads of the neighbors' children.

At the full of the moon I can be seen out in the backyard digging for mandrakes, of which we have a little patch, along with our rhubarb and blackberries. I do not usually care for those herbal or bat wing recipes, because you can never be sure how they will turn out. I rely almost entirely on image and number magic. My most interesting experience was with a young woman who offended me and who subsequently fell down an elevator shaft and broke all the bones in her body except one, and I didn't know that one was there.

On Girls of Thirteen

SOMEWHERE IN OUR town there is a young lady I am very eager to meet. I don't know her name or where she lives, but I know just about everything else about her. She is thirteen years old. She is allowed to cut her own hair. She is also allowed to wear lipstick all the time; she uses bright red nail polish and heavily scented bath salts, and stays up as late at night as she pleases. She wears a clean blouse to school every day and she must have a great many pairs of shoes, because she does not wear overshoes or boots in any weather. Her phone calls are not restricted, and no one ever tries to make her stop giggling. She goes to all the dances at the school and she may stay out as late as she likes afterward; she may even stop off for a banana split, although this is not surprising, since she may have all the candy and sweets and toasted cheese sandwiches she wants.

She goes to the movies on school nights. If a young man invites her to walk down to the library with him in the evening and stop off for a Coke, she doesn't have to introduce him to her parents first. She wears quantities of cheap jewelry, her brother is *never* allowed to tease her, and if there is something she wants to see on television that comes on at eleven at night, or is full of shooting and screaming, she stays right up and sees it. Her mother picks up her room for her and she doesn't have to make her bed. She has a pair of high-heeled shoes; as a matter of fact, she seems to get more new clothes every day. She goes to all the basketball games, whether she has homework or not. If a book is unsuitable for her, she has read it.

As I say, I don't know her name or where she lives, but I'd like to get my hands on her. Just for about five minutes. She is the lowest common denominator, the altogether anonymous "everyone else" who rules the lives of thirteen-year-old girls and their miserable mothers. I hear more about her every day; if I point out that hot fudge sundaes are not the best thing for the digestion or the complexion of a young lady, or that there will be no ice skating until the top layer of junk is cleared out of that room, I hear, with a wail, that everyone *else* gets hot fudge sundaes, and everyone *else* gets to go ice skating without picking up their old rooms, and why does everyone *else* get all the fun instead of having cruel people around saying "work work work" all the time and she never gets a minute's peace and it just isn't *fair.* If everyone else is wearing white wool ankle socks these days, it doesn't make any difference that white woolen ankle socks get dirty fast and are wretched to wash and dry — everyone else has handed down the word and we conform, or we are *different,* which is a fate roughly equivalent to being pilloried in the public square.

My older son once remarked in a fury of exasperation that if the word "he" were dropped from the English language, his sister would be speechless. This is true as far as it goes, but in order to leave her *literally* without a thing to say, "we" would have to be dropped, too. I heard her once trying to explain this to her younger sister, who is still in the outsider stage. "*We* have a *crowd,*" she said. "That means we all do the same things and don't decide things by ourselves; we all do just what the others do."

Regrettable as this sentiment may be in young people who ought by rights to be carrying around faces and minds of their own, there is no doubt about its truth. A bevy of thirteen-year-olds has only one mind, and it is the mind of everyone else. Naturally, when the mothers of thirteen-year-olds run into one another at the store, or meet at a dinner party, some of the problems can be ironed out; a simple agreement among half a dozen mothers that long black tights are not suitable for school wear can do wonders toward straightening out everyone else, and there is always the old, sometimes effective gambit “I don’t care if Carole wears red nail polish right up to her elbows, no daughter of *mine*...” In general, however, we mothers are trapped by the oldest con game of all — I am persuaded to give in about the movies because Linda’s mother has given in because I have given in because…

In some few areas this conformity of thought, this group identity, is valuable and fine. The group as a whole thinks college is an important objective, and so it is necessary to keep the group’s school grade average on a high level. The group has firm opinions (secondhand, of course, and not infrequently handed down by some teenage idol) on such momentous subjects as drinking and smoking (bad), learning to drive (good), showing off in public (bad, particularly if there are boys around), acting on a stage (very good indeed), and going steady (all right if everyone else is doing it and if someone asks you).

These opinions are determined by a kind of mutual idea sharing, which means everyone talking at once and telephoning people who are not around to tell *them.* Sometimes such a group can be moved to action far beyond the normal capacity of any individual within it, as when they go all together to clean the house for the new Girl Scout leader, or organize and run a booth at the street fair. They are tireless, except at home. There are only two ways of getting any one of them to do anything like, say, rake the leaves off the lawn. One is to nag her ceaselessly for days until she goes sullenly and gets out the rake; the other is to say, with an air of inspiration, “Why don’t we have a leaf raking party?”

Fads are not a large part of the problem. By now the teenage fad has become almost as commercial as Mother’s Day, and almost any cheap novelty comes with a label attached reading “Latest Teenage Sensation.”

Odd gadgets of dress and language and decoration are being foisted off on the kids by people who think adolescents are a ready, quick market, but in my experience no self-respecting adolescent would be caught dead with most of this junk, hula hoops and sick jokes to the contrary. Hula hoops lasted here about two days, because they were simply not as much fun as building rafts on the lake, and sick jokes have been banned by unanimous parental decree. Or at least that is what we parents believe.

No, it is the participation in group thought that is the pattern of the thirteen-year-old life, not the group thought of manufacturers of charm bracelets, or even the makers of 45-rpm records, but the group thinking of her own crew, the Lindas and the Caroles and the Cheryls and the Barbaras, who decide by a kind of spontaneous flare that one disc jockey is preferable to another, or one television program is, as of this moment, dull and another exciting. From the time my daughter gets up in the morning to brush her hair the same number of times that Carole up the street is brushing *her* hair to the time she turns off her radio at night after listening to the same program that Cheryl three blocks away is listening to, her life is controlled, possessed, by a shifting set of laws that make your garden-variety savage initiation rite look like milk time in the nursery school. The side of the street she walks on, the shoes she wears to walk on it, the socks, the skirt, the pocketbook (and that pocketbook is a sore point; I fought against it wildly, because it was ugly, and cheap, and impractical, but Linda had one, and Cheryl, and Patty), even the jacket and the haircut are rigidly prescribed by everyone else.

I cannot remember acting this way (well, maybe; there was one terrible argument with my father that I remember, because he wanted to hear Al Smith’s speech accepting the presidential nomination just at the time when my particular favorite weekly radio program was on), but then I like to think, vainly perhaps, that my life is no longer managed by the lives of my friends. What my life is really managed by is the lives of my *daughter's* friends.

Perhaps my main quarrel with this anonymous "everyone else" is her poor taste, based as it is on the lowest common denominator, the least possible thing that will suit everyone. I know by now that I am an old-fashioned, conservative, tone-deaf old fogey who doesn't know one guitar from another, and that I am heartless and a constant embarrassment to my daughter, but I cannot condone the garish, the pat, or the slovenly. I have been known to howl furiously at her to turn off that racket when all she was doing was listening to a recording of an eighteen-year-old lad singing about how he is old enough to recognize true love when he sees it. I have shuddered visibly, in public, when I have met her walking with her friends, all of them wearing dirty sneakers and swinging those hideous pocketbooks.

I snarl at the dinner table when she rattles off for the hundredth time the current popular phrase. I hunch myself over the wheel of the car, teeth clenched, when I am driving a pack of them to town so Patty can buy herself a blouse (it takes six of them to buy Patty a blouse, six giggling girls and three hours of shopping) and I hear the conversation going on behind me. I know by now that if I am putting six girls into my car the front seat beside me will always be left empty, but I can still hear them. What Ricky did, and what the teacher said, and oh, it was so *fun*ny, and does anyone remember what Johnny said to Cheryl when she dropped her pencil and oh, it was so *fun*ny, and one thing about Sandy, even though she's terribly pretty, and all the boys go for her, it's that fellow in college she really likes, even if he is almost eighteen, and Cheryl knows for a fact they're going steady. Linda heard this from Carole and Carole heard it from her big sister and her big sister says Sandy's not the one he *really* likes, and when Patty came right out and said so to her face, oh, it was so *fun*ny. And then Carole said that Cheryl liked Tommy, and oh, it was so…

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It is all a kind of safety device, of course, and understandable even when most infuriating. They are making a firm bridge between being children and being grown-ups, so that they may cross together, holding hands, without terror. Nothing is ever as frightening as that first clear look at the world beyond thirteen years old, with its responsibilities and decisions and individuality, and sooner or later there is going to come a moment when what everyone else does is no protection or excuse. Her personality, evolved somehow out of what Carole said, and experiments with lipstick, and gaudy pocketbooks, and sick jokes, is going to have to stand up by itself, facing (oh, heavens!) perhaps marriage and children of her own. I hope she remembers. I only hope she remembers.

What I Want to Know Is, What Do Other People Cook With?

I have an electric mixer and an electric blender and a timer on the oven and an electric skillet and an electric can opener, but what I really *cook* with is a fork. It is about five inches long, four-tined, with a black wooden handle, and my mother gave it to me when I was married. (My mother has a knack for gifts like that: when Laurie was born, everyone else showed up with pretty baby blankets and little sweaters wrapped in blue tissue paper; my mother gave me a vacuum cleaner.) I use my little fork to scramble eggs and to turn meat and to get muffins out of the toaster (I know that's wrong, but show me a better way, really better) and to poke at potatoes to see if they're done and to turn corn fritters in the pan and to hook doughnuts out of the fryer and to weasel waffles out of the waffle iron and to prick the tops of pies and to stir rice. I could really not begin to start making a meal without my fork.

It began to wear out at last. The screws that held the handle on had been replaced by my husband and my son Laurie and eventually my son Barry so many times that the holes were enormous and the handle kind of swiveled when I picked it up. And the tines were worn down on one side — I always cook right-handed — until the tip was triangular. I had better get myself a new fork, I thought reluctantly, caught for a minute in a recollection of the thousands of eggs that fork had scrambled and the pork chops it had turned and turned and turned; I had better go around to the hardware store the next time I am in town and pick up a new cooking fork.

“I would like a cooking fork, please,” I said to the man in the hardware store the next time I was in town. “A fork for cooking.”

“Certainly,” he said, and led me to a great rack of forks.

Some of them were eight feet long and some of them were twelve inches long and they all had only two tines and the cheapest one cost four dollars. “This one is for outdoor cooking,” the man said to me. “This one has an attachment that turns it into a roast baster. This one has a genuine plastic bone handle.”

“No,” I said, feeling silly. “I want a cooking fork with four tines and it ought to cost about a quarter and it’s not for any special thing, just cooking.”

“A quarter?” he said. “We don’t have any forks that cost a quarter.”

He didn’t have any forks about five inches long, either, or any with black wooden handles and four tines. “Look,” I said, holding my hands apart, wishing I had brought my little fork along with me, “about this long, four tines, and maybe it costs more these days, maybe as much as fifty cents.”

“There is no such thing,” he said with enormous dignity.

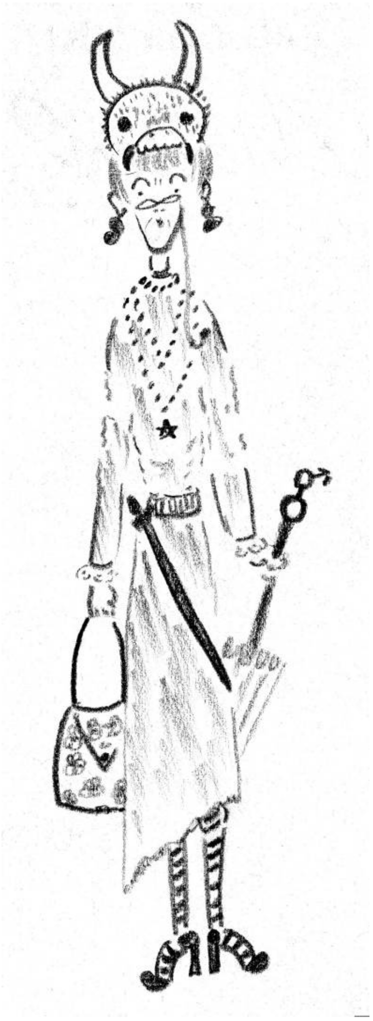
Well, I went to the five-and-ten and I went to the other hardware store and I looked in catalogues and I wrote to all the department stores I could think of and he was right: There *was* no such thing. I wrote to my mother and she wrote back that oh, yes, now I mentioned it she *did* remember the little black-handled kind of fork she used to cook with, but she had no idea where to get one. What did I want it for? I started asking my friends, and several of them remembered that *their* mothers or grandmothers had used just such a fork. (“Doughnuts,” someone said wistfully; “you know, I haven’t thought of those doughnuts for years and years; my grandmother used to get up in the morning and make them for breakfast, and I can still remember those hot fresh doughnuts on school mornings. Of course,” she went on, resting one hand casually on her pressure cooker, “no one has *time* for that kind of thing now.”) One of my friends thought she had seen such a fork in her aunt’s kitchen not long ago, but when she called her aunt and asked, her aunt thought she was crazy. “Look, dear,” her aunt said, “this is the twentieth century.”

I took to hanging around people’s kitchens, a habit that made me fairly unpopular and eventually got us largely not invited out to dinner anymore, trying to find out how other people did things. “Don’t you scramble eggs with a fork?” I would ask. “What do you poke potatoes with to see if they’re done? How about little holes on top of pies?”

Well, some people used a table fork and some people used a long two-tined fork, and I talked to a lot of people who never made scrambled eggs at all because they were too rushed for breakfast, and there were lots of gadgets for getting muffins out of toasters, and almost all of them got their pies at a bakery or frozen from the supermarket, and no one in the world but me ever used a little black-handled, four-tined, five-inch kitchen fork. I finally got so embarrassed about my little fork that I tried to use it secretly, so the children could not see and tell their friends, and I paid $5.95 for a great unwieldy thing that flipped pork chops halfway across the kitchen and short-circuited the toaster and could have been used nicely for weeding the garden. Words were passed around the dinner table about the charm of eating in restaurants, and my career as an active, participating member of the family was saved only when I finally got a new little fork.

A friend who hangs around antique shops found it for me in a basement store in Brooklyn. It was unused, authentic, and cost a dollar, because, I suppose, of its rarity. “Is this what you were looking for?” my friend asked. “I just happened to remember that you were interested in old kitchen utensils. Better boil it first if you plan to use it.”

Well, I *do* plan to use it. I am starting right now to look for another one because this one ought to be wearing out in fifteen or twenty years. And unless someone lets me know what the rest of the world uses to cook with, I may even need another one after that.



Miss F. Etti Mology, Spinster

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I’d Like to See You Get Out of That Sentence

LECTURES ABOUT THE Craft of Writing

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“I’m teaching short story at Bennington, and I love it. I have two classes a week. I took the job with two conditions — one, a hundred bucks a week, and the other, that the College president learn to square dance. If he doesn’t learn by this coming Saturday I quit.”

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About the End of the World

A Lecture

I feel that before I read any of my new novel, *The Sundial*, I would be wise to explain how it came to be written, and why, since I would not like to have any of you believe that I cook up this kind of thing in a cauldron.

I had published seven books, and was wandering around whining about writing another, considering and discarding plots, complaining that everything had already been written, and in general behaving like a novelist who needs money.

In order to reassure myself that all the best things had already been written, I took to rereading my own books, and discovered with some embarrassment that there was a kind of similarity to them, not necessarily in plot, which I could find all sorts of learned opinions to excuse, but in images and metaphors. Prominent in every book I had ever written was a little symbolic set that I think of as a heaven-wall-gate arrangement; in every book I have ever written, and, indeed, in the several outlines and rough sketches in my bottom desk drawer, I find a wall surrounding some forbidden, lovely secret, and in this wall a gate that cannot be passed. I am not going to attempt to analyze this set of images — my unconscious has been quiet for a good many years and I think I am going to keep it that way — but I found it odd that in seven books I had never succeeded in getting through the gate and inside the wall.

It occurred to me, then, that the thing to do was to write a new book, and *start* inside — write a kind of inside-out book, and maybe see what I have been writing about all these years when I have been writing outside-out books. What happened, of course, was the end of the world. I had set myself up nicely within the wall inside a big strange house I found there, locked the gates behind me, and discovered that the only way to stay there with any degree of security was to destroy, utterly, everything outside.

Concretely, the story is simple enough. A group of people are living in my big old house, which belongs to an old tyrant named Mrs. Halloran. These people are in the house more or less by chance — some of them are members of the family, one is a governess, others are guests who prefer to stay in the house rather than face destruction in the general cataclysm outside. These people believe for one reason or another in the prophecy handed down by one of their number: that the world outside is going to end, and everything will be destroyed except this house and the people inside it. After a night of horror and destruction they will come out, the only survivors, into a world of loveliness and peace, and become the first of a new race of mankind.

Nothing I have written has ever given me so much pleasure.

Memory and Delusion

A Lecture

The children around our house have a saying that everything is either true, not true, or one of Mother’s delusions. Now, I don’t know about the true things or the not-true things, because there seem to be so many of them, but I do know about Mother's delusions, and they're solid. They range from the conviction that the waffle iron, unless watched, is going to strangle the toaster, to the delusion that electricity pours out of an empty socket onto your head, and nothing is going to change any one of them.

The very nicest thing about being a writer is that you can afford to indulge yourself endlessly with oddness, and nobody can really do anything about it, as long as you keep writing and kind of using it up, as it were. I am, this morning, endeavoring to persuade you to join me in my deluded world; it is a happy, irrational, rich world, full of fairies and ghosts and free electricity and dragons, and a world beyond all others fun to walk around in. All you have to do — and watch this carefully, please — is keep writing. As long as you write it away regularly, nothing can really hurt you.

My situation is peculiarly poignant. Not, perhaps, as sad as that of an orphan child condemned to sweep chimneys, but sadder than almost anything else. I am a writer who, due to a series of innocent and ignorant faults of judgment, finds herself with a family of four children and a husband, an eighteen-room house and no help, and two Great Danes and four cats, and — if he has survived this long — a hamster. There may also be a goldfish somewhere. Anyway, what this means is that I have at most a few hours a day to spend at the typewriter, and about sixteen — assuming that I indulge myself with a few hours of sleep — to spend wondering what to have for dinner tonight that we didn't have last night, and letting the dogs in and letting the dogs out, and trying to get the living room looking decent without actually cleaning it, and driving children to dance class and French lessons and record dances and movies and horseback riding lessons and off to town to buy a Ricky Nelson record, and then back into town to exchange it for Fats Domino, and over to a friend's house to play the record, and then off to buy new dancing shoes….It’s a wonder I get even four hours’ sleep, it really is. Particularly, I might add, since I can’t use the telephone. There is always someone *using* the telephone. The best I can manage to do is shout out the front door to the grocer’s son when he drives past in his hot rod, and tell him to ask the grocer to have fourteen lamb chops ready when I come by later.

Actually, if you’re a writer, the only good thing about adolescent children is that they’re so easily offended. You can drive one of them out of the room with any kind of simple word or phrase — such as “Why don’t you pick up your room?” — and get a little peace to write in. They go storming upstairs and don’t come down again until dinner, which usually gives me plenty of time in which to write a short story.

At any rate, assuming that I am paying for my mistakes in judgment and never have enough hours in a day to spend at the typewriter, I would like to pass on a few things I have learned from those harassed, tense, welcome moments when I finally sit down to write. This, by the way, is what makes for Mother’s delusions. All the time that I am making beds and doing dishes and driving to town for dancing shoes, I am telling myself stories. Stories about anything, anything at all. Just stories. After all, who can vacuum a room and concentrate on it? I tell myself stories. I have a whopper of a story about the laundry basket that I can’t tell now, and stories about the missing socks, and stories about the kitchen appliances and the wastebaskets and the bushes on the road to the school, and just about everything. They keep me working, my stories. I may never write down the story about the laundry basket — as a matter of fact, I’m pretty sure I won’t — but as long as I know there’s a story there I can go on sorting laundry.

I cannot find any patience for those people who believe that you start writing when you sit down at your desk and pick up your pen and finish writing when you put down your pen again; a writer is always writing, seeing everything through a thin mist of words, fitting swift little descriptions to everything he sees, always noticing. Just as I believe that a painter cannot sit down to his morning coffee without noticing what color it is, so a writer cannot see an odd little gesture without putting a verbal description to it, and ought never to let a moment go by undescribed.

I was playing bridge one evening with a musician, a chemistry teacher, and a painter when, during a particularly tense hand, a large porcelain bowl that we kept on the piano suddenly shattered. After we had all calmed ourselves down, we found four completely individual reactions. Looking at all the tiny scattered pieces, I thought that I had never realized before how final a metaphor a broken bowl could be. The chemistry teacher pointed out that someone had emptied an ashtray into the bowl with a cigarette still burning, and of course the heat had shattered the bowl. The painter said that the green of the bowl was deepened when the light caught the small pieces. The musician said that the sound it made when it broke was a G sharp. Then we went back and finished our bridge hand.

Someday I know that I am going to need that broken bowl. I will keep the recollection of those scattered pieces, lying on the piano, and someday when I want a mental image of utter destruction the bowl will come back to me in one of a dozen ways. Suppose, for instance, that someday I had occasion to describe a house destroyed by an explosion; the manner of destruction would be different, of course, but what I can remember is the way the little pieces of the bowl lay there so quietly after they had been for so long parts of one unbroken whole; now, not one of them could have found its place again, and the compactness that had held them together no longer existed in this world.

Suppose I wanted to describe the effect of a sudden shock — I had just played a jack of spades when the bowl broke, and for what must have been three or four seconds I sat staring at the jack of spades uncomprehendingly before I caught my breath again. Suppose someday I want to describe the sense of loss over a treasured and valuable article — my green bowl was not particularly valuable, or I wouldn't have let people dump ashtrays into it, but I can remember how I felt when I swept up the pieces and put them in the garbage and how entirely *destroyed* the pieces looked.

The act of remembering is in itself an odd thing, of course. I had not thought of that green bowl for weeks, until I wanted a vivid image to explain how all things are potential paragraphs for the writer. I have been struggling against an odd memory effect for quite a while now; perhaps if I describe it, it may show more clearly what I mean when I say that nothing is ever useless, and certainly is never lost.

I was talking casually one evening recently to the husband of a friend of mine, and he mentioned his service in the Marines. I said, "Oh, yes, your rifle number was 804041," and then we kind of stared at each other dumbfounded, since one does not usually just happen to know the rifle numbers of the husbands of friends. We finally remembered that some months before, during a similar conversation after another bridge game, he had mentioned his Marine service, and remarked that one thing he would never forget was his rifle number, 804041. Well, it was reasonable for *him* never to forget his rifle number, but hardly likely that *I* would remember it. However, I couldn't forget it. I caught myself reciting it to myself over and over again, wondering why on earth I bothered.

I was having a good deal of trouble at the time, working over a new novel that somehow refused to go together right. I could not make my central character sound true, somehow; there was something basically at odds between her personality as I saw it and the actions she was called on to perform. One night I gave up; I shoved the typewriter away and kicked the dog and snarled that I was giving up on the book and would never write another, and furthermore it was hopeless and I might better be doing anything else in the world and who would choose such a nerve-racking profession anyway, and I was going to bed. So I stamped upstairs and went to bed, somehow forgetting to set the alarm clock.

When I came rushing downstairs the next morning, half an hour late for school, and scrambled wildly around the kitchen trying to get everybody dressed and washed, and also feeling very bad-tempered, I did not go at once into the study. As a matter of fact, it was not until much later in the morning that I went near my desk, but when I did, I got one of the really big shocks of my life. A sheet of paper had been taken from the pile of copy paper and put directly into the center of the desk, right where it would be most visible. On this sheet of paper was written, in large figures, and in my own writing with my own pencil, 804041.

Now, I have walked in my sleep frequently, particularly when I am under pressure with a book, and have often done odd things in my sleep, but I have rarely taken to writing notes to myself, and particularly not in code. What I finally did was what I should have done long before, which is get myself another cup of coffee and sit down quietly and think. Clearly, I was remembering this number as a clue to something else, and it must be something from the conversation when I first heard the number — or at least that seemed the likeliest place to start. I tried to reconstruct the conversation exactly. I could not remember what we had been talking about; I remembered the bridge table and the cards on it and that we had been waiting for the four at the other table to finish a rubber, and I remembered that except for our voices, which were low, the room was so quiet that I could hear my daughter's radio going upstairs. But I could not remember what we had been talking about. All I could remember was 804041.

I assumed that we had talked about the cards, and the game we had just finished, and then what? What do people usually talk about when they are killing time with conversation? Their children…small incidents that have happened…gossip…And then of course I had it, and I knew just why I had had such trouble remembering it. The former Marine had met an old friend of ours in New York, had run into him casually on the street, and had gone to have a drink with the old friend and his new wife, an Italian girl who had been in an anti-Fascist organization and had been caught and tortured. He had made some remark about being sick when he looked at her hands, and I had stopped him from saying anything more, but he had gone on to say that she spoke frankly about her experiences and particularly about a kind of schooling she had gone through to teach her to undergo torture without yielding, a schooling that trained her to withdraw her mind from her body, so that the physical pain was remote and could, by an act of superlative willpower, be endured. He had gone on from this to refer to his own war experiences, and had then remarked that he would never forget the number of his rifle, 804041.

When I remembered all of this and went back to my book again, I found that the trained ability to separate mind and body, a deliberate detachment, was the essential characteristic I had been looking for for my heroine, and was what I had been trying to tell myself by saying the number over and over again. I had made myself forget the woman's frightful experiences because the thought of them was horrible, but the important lesson, the one I needed, was there. What bothers me now is that I *still* can't forget 804041; I wonder what else he said?

That is one half of writing, of course. The lower depths, as it were. The other half is what I might delicately call information. Henry James got the idea for *The Spoils of Poynton* from a single remark heard at dinner, but he also had to find out somehow what lovely possessions looked and felt and smelled like, the tapestries splendidly toned by time, the thrilling touch of the old velvet brocade.

Among other invaluable items of useless information, I recall a book written by an English lady of the eighteenth century, which dwelt long and lovingly on the evils of education for women. This lady deplored the growing desire among the girls of her time to be educated and learn to read and write; her theory was that once a girl started filling her mind with facts instead of fancy embroidery methods and seven easy tunes on the harp, she would turn into an attic storehouse of miscellaneous knowledge, tending to decrease her matrimonial value and rendering her almost useless as a wife and mother, and even, possibly, delusional.

On Fans and Fan Mail

A Lecture

I think that the popular notion of the writer as a person hiding away in a garret, unable to face reality, is probably perfectly true. In my own experience, contacts with the big world outside the typewriter are puzzling and terrifying; I don’t think I like reality very much. Principally, I don’t understand people outside; people in books are sensible and reasonable, but outside there is no predicting what they will do.

For instance, I went the other day into our local drugstore and asked them how I would go about getting enough arsenic to poison a family of six. I had expected that they would behave as people would in any proper Agatha Christie book; one of them, I thought, would engage me in conversation in the front of the store, while someone else sneaked out back to call the cops, and I was ready with a perfectly truthful explanation about how the character in my book had to buy arsenic and I needed to find out how to go about it. Instead, though, no one really paid any attention to me. They were very nice about it; they didn't have any arsenic, actually, and would I consider potassium cyanide or an overdose of sleeping pills instead? When I said I had my heart set on arsenic, they said then I had better get in touch with a taxidermist, since no modern drugstore stocks arsenic anymore at all. Now, you have to concede that such behavior is bewildering; if someone turned up with chronic arsenic poisoning, they probably wouldn't even remember that I was in asking about it.

I actually wanted to talk, though, about the most irrational and annoying aspect of the outside world that is always infringing on a writer's life, and that is what is loosely called "fan mail." I don't answer many of the letters I get, usually, even though most of them are very kind and polite and say they liked my last book; but there is a certain type of letter that makes me wonder who is crazy these days — me or them. There is the kind of letter that asks if I am the Shirley Jackson who taught fifth grade in Toledo, Ohio, in 1902. There is the kind of letter that says I have stolen the correspondent's name for one of the characters in a book and I am going to be sued for libel unless I immediately forward all royalty payments. I got a letter recently saying that the correspondent had just noticed a picture of me in a magazine, and the picture showed me with a dog that was stolen from him several months ago; I was either to send him back his dog or a check for the dog's sentimental value, which he set at two hundred dollars. Or, consider this letter:

Dear Miss Jackson,

I am a sailor on an aircraft carrier in the South Pacific. You are my favorite author and I would appreciate it if you would answer the following questions:

1. Are you married?
2. Do you have any children?
3. Do you have a snapshot of yourself you would send me?

Hoping you will answer this letter as I enjoy literary correspondence.

Sincerely yours.

Of course the only possible answer was:

Dear sailor:

I am forty-two years old, and my oldest son is draft age. I am, however, enclosing a snapshot of my sixteen-year-old daughter, who also enjoys literary correspondence.

Sincerely.

Someday the English teachers of the world are going to be made to suffer for what they do to writers. Every spring — which is term paper time — I get, and every other writer I know gets, twenty or thirty letters, all of one kind. They vary only in the degree of misspelling, and they typically read:

Dear Miss Jackson,

Our high school English class is doing a term paper on its favorite authors. You are my favorite author, so will you please tell me the names of all your books and your best known stories and any television plays or movies you have written and also I would like to know your theories about writing and in general what you are trying to say. Also what you find in your daily life that you can use in books and stories and your likes and dislikes in other writers and if possible a small autographed picture of yourself and anything else you think may be of help to me in my paper. My paper has to be handed in this coming Friday, so I would appreciate a quick reply to this letter. Yours very truly.

As I say, I get twenty or thirty of these letters every spring, and they go into the wastebasket. In one case I had a follow-up letter from the English teacher of one of the girls who had written me; she was furious because her student had failed English for lack of a term paper. She wanted to know who did I think I was, letting that girl fail? The girl's original letter had had eleven misspellings; the teacher's had only three. I did answer several of these when they first started coming, asking to see a copy of the term paper. I finally got hold of one paper. The student had copied my letter word for word.

I would like to finish by reading you my two favorite fan letters. The first of them was sent not to me but to a friend of mine who writes children's books. It reads:

Dear Sir,

I like to read a lot of books but every time I find one I like best and write the author a letter it turns out he is dead. If you are not dead will you please answer this? I love you.

Sadly enough, it was signed only "Linda" and gave no address.

There is one letter I never tire of reading over. It was sent to me shortly after the publication of my story "The Lottery," and was addressed to *The New Yorker,* where the story first appeared. It came, naturally enough, from Los Angeles:

Dear Sirs:

The June 26 copy of your magazine fell into my hands in the Los Angeles railroad station yesterday. Although I donnot read your magazine very often I took this copy home to my folks and they had to agree with me that you speak straitforward to your readers.

My Aunt Ellise before she became priestess of the Exhalted Rollers used to tell us a story just like "The Lottery" by Shirley Jackson. I don't know if

Miss Jackson is a member of the Exhalted Rollers but with her round stones sure ought to be. There is a few points in her prophecey on which Aunt Ellise and me don't agree.

The Exhalted Rollers donnot believe in the ballot box but believe that the True Gospel of the Redeeming Light will become accepted when the prophecey comes true. It does seem likely to me that our sins will bring us punishment through a great scouraging war with the devil's toy (the atomic bomb). I don't think we will have to sacrifice humin beings fore atonement.

Our brothers feel that Miss Jackson is a True Prophet and Disciple of the True Gospel of the Reedeeming Light. When will the next Revelations be published?

Yours in the Spirit.

This letter was never answered.

How I Write

A Lecture

I find it very difficult to distinguish between life and fiction. I am of course the kind of writer who, through some incredible series of coincidences, finds herself actually at the typewriter for only a few hours a day, the rest of the time being spent vacuuming the living room rug or driving the children to school or trying to find something different to serve for dinner tonight.

Most of my time, actually, is spent doing things that require no very great imaginative ability, and the only way to make these mechanical jobs more palatable is to think about something else while I am doing them. I tell myself stories all day long, and have managed to weave a fairy tale of infinite complexity around the inanimate objects in my house, so much so that no one in my family is surprised to find me putting the waffle iron away on a different shelf because in my story it has quarreled with the toaster, and if I left them together they might come to blows; they had quarreled, incidentally, over my getting some of the frozen waffles you drop in the toaster, and the waffle iron was furious. It *looks* kind of crazy, of course. But it does take the edge off cold reality. And sometimes it turns into real stories.

I remember one spring morning I was on my way to the store, pushing my daughter in her stroller, and on my way down the hill I was thinking about my neighbors, the way everyone in a small town does. The night before, I had been reading a book about choosing a victim for a sacrifice, and I was wondering who in our town would be a good choice for such a thing. Also I was wondering what would happen if they drew lots by family; would the Campbell boys, who haven't spoken to each other in nearly twenty years, have to stand up together? And I was wondering what would happen about the Garcia boy, who had married a girl his parents couldn't stand — would she have to be admitted as a member of their family? I was so fascinated by the idea of the people I knew in such a situation, I thought that when I got home I might try writing it down and seeing what happened. So after I bought my groceries and pushed my daughter back up the hill and put her in the playpen, I sat down at the typewriter and wrote down the story I had been telling myself all morning. Because I was interested in the method, I called the story "The Lottery," and after it was printed people kept writing me letters about it, saying what a frightening story it was, and how did I ever think of a horrible thing like that? For a while I tried telling them that I was just thinking about my neighbors, but no one would believe me. Incidentally, no one in our small town has ever heard of *The New Yorker,* much less read my story.

One of the nicest things about being a writer is that nothing ever gets wasted. It's a little like the frugal housewife who carefully tucks away all the odds and ends of string beans and cold bacon and serves them up magnificently in a fancy casserole dish. A writer who is serious and economical can store away small fragments of ideas and events and conversations, and even facial expressions and mannerisms, and use them all someday. It is my belief, for instance, that somewhere in the back of my own mind is a kind of storeroom where there are hundreds of small items I am going to need someday, and when I need them I will remember them. I am also sure that this storeroom must look a good deal like my desk drawers, which also contain all kinds of things I am sure I am going to need someday, such as a pair of roller skates and the curls cut off the children and an old compact and what I think is the inside lining for my heavy winter boots.

I believe that a story can be made out of any such small combination of circumstances, set up to best advantage and decorated with some use of the imagination; I began writing stories about my children because, more than any other single thing in the world, children possess a kind of magic that makes much of what they do so oddly logical and yet so incredible to grown-ups. Now that my children are old enough to read and have become more aware of themselves, I find it almost impossible to write about them without sounding artificial, because they are doing things with that unfortunate adult reasoning that takes away all the magic. Once, however, when I had spent all one rainy day wrestling with my old refrigerator, whose doors tended to jam shut, my younger daughter asked why I didn’t open it by magic.

It was a lot pleasanter to abandon the refrigerator and sit down and write a story about opening it by magic than to go on being sore at it and banging it with my fist; we had to go out for dinner, but of course that’s all right with me anytime. The story, by the way, paid for a new refrigerator, which is *certainly* better than trying to open the old one without magic. What I am trying to say is that with the small addition of the one element of fantasy, or unreality, or imagination, all the things that happen are fun to write about.

I am particularly interested in reality right now, because I am writing a novel in which reality is the key issue. It is a novel about a haunted house and a group of people who go to live in it and make observations upon the psychic manifestations to which they are subjected. Now, no one can get into writing a novel about a haunted house without hitting the subject of reality head-on; either I have to believe in ghosts, which I do, or I have to write another kind of novel altogether. I have found that, more than ever before, I am wandering in a kind of fairy-tale world, although right now it is full of ghosts too.

Before I started writing this, I spent several months reading nothing but ghost stories, going through volume after volume of luminous figures glimpsed floating down the garden path, or mysterious moanings in attics, and perhaps it was not altogether healthy; every now and then I had to go and read a chapter of *Little Women* again to get back my perspective.

When I start writing a book, I go around making notes, and I mean that I literally go around making them; I keep pads of paper and pencils all over the house, and when I am making beds or sorting laundry or trying to find the six odd socks that have gotten down behind the children's dressers, I am going over, endlessly, possible scenes and situations for a novel, and when anything comes out clear I race to the nearest paper and pencil and write it down, frequently addressing it to myself, in my own kind of shorthand dialect. I am apt to find, in the laundry list, a scribble reading, "Shirley, don't forget — no murder before chapter five" or, on my shopping list, "Make housekeeper go home nights" or "Shirley, have old man fall downstairs." When I am ready to write the book, I go and collect all my little scraps of paper and try to figure out what I was thinking when I wrote them.

Two weeks ago, I had written part of the beginning of the book and was having a great deal of trouble making it go together and could not find a suitable name for my secondary female character. One evening, I had been at it for a couple of hours, typing and growling and throwing pages on the floor, and finally I decided to give up. I told my husband that I was going to have to put the book aside, maybe even start another book, maybe never go back to this one again, and I stomped furiously up to bed.

The next morning, when I went to my desk, I found a sheet of typing paper; it had been taken from the pile at one side of the desk and set right in the middle. On the paper was written, “oh no oh no Shirley not dead Theodora Theodora.” It was written in my own handwriting, but as though it had been written in the dark.

I have always walked in my sleep, but I don’t think I have ever been so frightened. I began to think that maybe I had better get to work writing this book awake, because otherwise I was going to find myself writing it in my sleep, and I got out the typewriter and went to work as though something were chasing me, which I kind of think something was. Since then, the book has been going along nicely, thank you, and my female character is named Theodora and is turning out quite well.

Now, incidentally, you can see why a writer might be reluctant to explain where ideas for books come from. Who would ever believe it?

Garlic in Fiction

A Lecture

Far and away the greatest menace to the writer — any writer, beginning or otherwise — is the reader. The reader is, after all, a kind of silent partner in this whole business of writing, and a work of fiction is surely incomplete if it is never read. The reader is, in fact, the writer's only unrelenting, genuine enemy. He has everything on his side; all he has to do, after all, is shut his eyes, and any work of fiction becomes meaningless. Moreover, a reader has an advantage over a beginning writer in not being a beginning reader; before he takes up a story to read it, he can be presumed to have read everything from Shakespeare to Jack Kerouac. No matter whether he reads a story in manuscript as a great personal favor, or opens a magazine, or — kindest of all — goes into a bookstore and pays good money for a book, he is still an enemy to be defeated with any kind of dirty fighting that comes to the writer's mind.

Picture this creature, this clod, this reader, as lying comfortably in a hammock, yawning and easily distracted, a glass of iced tea by his side, half a dozen light novels and a magazine or two right where he can reach them, a portable television set well within his vision, the sun shining lazily and a golden sleepy haze surrounding him. Now ask him to select a story — a story slaved over and polished, edited and refined and perfected with infinite labor — and ask him to lie there and read. Dirty fighting is only half of it — any possible trick must be well within the rules for the writer.

Now, this unspeakable boor in his hammock may be a genuinely serious reader; he may fully intend to read the story in his hand, but it is much, much easier for any given reader *not* to read any given story. Suppose the first paragraph bores him, or the title doesn't look very promising, or he dislikes the name of the hero. Suppose there is an illustration that makes it look as though the story is going to be about love. Or he read a story once before about the same general subject and he didn't like that one. Now, of course a writer cannot go around changing the names of his heroes or the plots of his stories or an illustration or a title on the off chance that there is some reader who is going to be thrown off stride by any of them. It is, of course, the writer’s job to reach out and grab this reader: If he is a reader who cannot endure a love story, it is the writer’s job, no more and no less, to make him read a love story and like it. Using any device that might possibly work, the writer has to snare the reader’s attention and keep it.

Here is one of the greatest pitfalls for beginning or inexperienced writers: Their stories are, far too often, just simply not very interesting. It is easy to be trapped in a story you are writing, and to suppose that the interest you feel yourself in the story is automatically communicated to the reader; this is terribly important to me, the writer tells himself, this is a matter of the most extreme importance to me, and therefore a reader will find it important, too. And the reader, opening one sleepy eye, thinks that the fellow who wrote this thing was certainly pretty worked up about something, wasn’t he; funny how hard it is to stay awake while you are reading it.

Any discussion of what might or might not catch the interest of a reader is hopeless; any magazine editor can give endless meaningless platitudes about what people want to read, or what people ought to read, but in the last analysis no story of any kind for any magazine for any type of reader is going to be interesting unless the writer, using all his skill and craft, sets himself out deliberately to make it so.

I want to call this “garlic in fiction” because I cannot think of a more vivid way of describing the devices of fiction, the particular, frequently almost unnoticed tricks a writer can use to enormous advantage. Far too often we think of a short story as a simple account of something that happens, an account in which one event follows another, and the whole, limited by requirements of time and place, exists coherently and complete.

Even when writing a short story there is a tendency to discount embellishments, to feel that filigree writing does not belong: Leave the metaphors and symbols, the images and adjectives, to the poets and the composers of the Sunday supplements. Yet within the rigid framework of the short story, without in any way destroying its unbroken unity, from the first word to the last, the writer is permitted a good deal of space in which to catch at the reader and hold him with small things, used — and here is where the garlic comes in — sparingly and with great care, but used always to accent and emphasize.

Naturally, every writer has dealt in one way or another with metaphor, and there are few more pathetic sights than a writer hopelessly entangled in a great unwieldy metaphor that has gotten out of control and is spilling all over the story, killing off characters and snapping sentences right and left; huge metaphors, such as this one, are far better left to people with a lot more time and space to write. Adjectives are always good, of course; no short story really ought to be without adjectives, particularly odd ones — such as "fulsome" — that the reader usually has to go and look up. And of course adverbs such as "unworthily" — even if you have to make them up yourself — are always very useful.

I recently attended a symposium on folk music, and the very first words of the very first lecture so enchanted me that I left at once; the speaker began by announcing that this lecture was for "those of you who are musically oriented, banjo-wise," and since I have always wanted to use a phrase like that somewhere, let me make my present position clear by saying that I am speaking to those of you who are fictionally oriented, image-wise, and see how far I get.

I am actually going to talk about what I call images, or symbols. It seems to me that in our present great drive — fiction-wise — toward the spare, clean, direct kind of story, we are somehow leaving behind the most useful tools of the writer, the small devices that separate fiction from reporting, the work of the imagination from the everyday account. Of these the far most important, and the most neglected, is the use of symbols; I am using the word loosely, because it has altogether different meanings elsewhere, and yet I hardly know what other word to use. The thing I am talking about is best identified by reference to a theory of acting that has always seemed to me very profound, and certainly useful to the writer: Before entering upon a role, the actor, having of course familiarized himself with the character he is to portray, constructs for himself a set of images, or mental pictures, of small, unimportant things he feels belong around the character.

There must be at least one basic image, or set of images, for each character in a story, a fundamental symbol the writer keeps always in mind; as these images grow the character grows, and the accumulation of material and information about the image slowly makes up the character in the story. Various things *belong* to a character — a manner of speaking, a manner of moving, a particular emphasis, a group of small physical things — and each of these must take on, like a perfume, the essence of the character they belong to. Just as a tune or a scent can evoke for most of us an entire scene, so the basic image of the character must evoke that entire character and his place in the story. As a result of this, of course, the characters themselves grow apart in the writer's mind, become entirely separate people, and by the end of a book or a story the writer can no more mistake one for another than he can mistake a can of beans for a pearl necklace.

Suppose a story needs a male character. In the story he must further the action, although he is really a minor character. If the story requires no very definite attributes from him, suppose the writer were to assign, arbitrarily, the image of a bird to this character. He need never be named or called a bird, but his gestures and his habits are birdlike, his voice and his very words are sharp and twittering, and in his brief appearance he might select nuts, or pieces of popcorn, and pick them up like seeds from the ground, with a quick darting movement. Even if this character never appears again, he has been alive for the space of a page, perhaps, and has added depth and imagination to a story.

As I say, what I am calling images or symbols or garlic is actually a kind of shorthand, or evocative coloring, to a story. A story is, after all, made up only of words. Characters are given only the briefest physical descriptions and identities; there is really no time in a short story to examine any single person in great detail. Events are merely sketched, given clearly enough to forward the story's action but not described entirely; there is no room in a short story for more than one theme or idea.

Within these strict limits the writer must operate as vividly as he can, drawing as much as possible upon a sympathy with the reader, hoping that a single word will be enough to turn the reader inward, remind him, perhaps, of a similar emotion of his own, to bring him along willingly down the path of the story. Many experiences in life are common to all of us, and a word or two is frequently enough to enrich a story with a wealth of recollection; take, for instance, the words "income tax." There is surely a community of feeling that overwhelms us at the very sound of the words; no two people, naturally, feel exactly the same way about income taxes, but there is no question but that everyone feels *something;* a rueful or joking reference to income tax always brings a sympathetic response, and perhaps the only area where the words do not bring happy recognition is one of wholehearted approval. There are many such powerful words that work by themselves for the writer, but beyond these there must be words and phrases the writer enriches artificially for the purpose of a single story, words that have that weighting only in that story, words that must be used, in short, like garlic.

Perhaps this can best be dealt with by examples. Consider an idea for a fairly lunatic story: A silly young woman, alone in the world, falls in love with a man she has just met, and marries him without any knowledge of his history or background. On their honeymoon, which they spend in a borrowed cottage at the seashore, the wife, falling into conversation with a neighbor in the grocery store, learns that various people around the little community believe that her husband is actually a notorious murderer, one of the kind who habitually drown their wives in the bathtub and collect their insurance. This neighborhood theory is broken gently to the young wife, because no one around quite has the courage to take any action; no one is sure that he *is* the man, but with true neighborly solicitude they want to put the young wife on her guard. Suppose this silly young woman listens with her mouth open to the stories about the vicious murderer: he always persuades his wives to make wills in his favor; he drowns them, of course, while they are bathing; he always chooses a night when there is a full moon; he always brings his wife a box of candy and a bunch of roses on the day when he has decided to kill her.

Our young wife has been in the grocery because she was buying four lamb chops for their dinner. She will have to go back to their lonely cottage, carrying her four lamb chops, and wait for her husband to come home. She knows where her husband is — he has gone to take various papers, including the will she has just signed, and leave them in his safe-deposit box. She knows there is going to be a full moon because he made some romantic remark about it before he left in the morning. He is due to come home any minute. She had intended to put on one of her prettiest dresses and cook him a little dinner, just for the two of them, and then perhaps they would walk by the ocean and look at the moon. Now, with her new information, what should she do? Should she try to take a bath fast and get it over with before he comes home? Will she discover that the lock on the bathroom door is broken? Is it really worthwhile for her to bother setting the table for two or even to cook her lamb chops?

Suppose, while she is wavering, her husband comes home early. He is carrying a box of candy and a great armful of red roses. The entire story can now be brought to a conclusion without ever referring again to the rude facts. On the one hand, the wife ought in decency to thank her husband for bringing her candy and flowers; on the other hand, how can she possibly say, “Thank you, I know exactly why you brought them”? The conversation, as a matter of fact, would be extremely funny, particularly if the husband’s position remained ambiguous; no one, after all, is *sure* that he is a murderer. If he is not a murderer, his reaction to his wife’s terrified remark that she thought she would go without a bath might be one of considerable surprise; she would hardly be in the habit of consulting him, after all, when she wanted to take a bath. If he is very hungry and says cheerfully that the lamb chops look very small and that he could eat all four of them himself, his wife can only conclude that he intends to dine alone, afterward. I see the story as ending with the wife, maddened by suspense, shouting wildly that all right, all right, he can stop hanging around waiting; if it will make him any happier she’ll go and take her old bath, and the husband would be altogether dumbfounded — or pretending to be.

Now, here there need never be a moment when the wife asks her husband point-blank if he intends to murder her, or a moment when the husband reveals himself and announces his plans; everything is taken care of by the lamb chops and the bath, the roses and the moon. If the story were broken off where I have left it, one additional sentence could give the reader a full ending. If the lamb chops were cooked at all, there must have been one place set at the table — or two. The candy might be opened — or set carefully aside for the next time.

I want to give you another example, this time from my own novel, where I had a difficult problem and found that I could solve it only by taking it out of the actual, as it were, and dealing with it symbolically. Before I use an example from my own work, I want to mention that I am the only writer whose work I am competent to discuss; it would be presumptuous of me to analyze or assign purpose to other writers. I do know how and why I do things, but with other writers I would largely be guessing, so it is not entirely from vanity that I turn to my own works for examples, and garlic.

If I say "white cat" to all of you, I daresay it would certainly, as a phrase, have some meaning in itself. Almost everyone can picture a white cat or ideas associated with a white cat; there are as many ideas about white cats, I suppose, as there are white cats in the world. The problem of a writer who wants to create a symbol, artificially endowed with a specific emotional weighting, is to invent one white cat that has a particular surrounding of emotional meaning, pertaining to one book and one character. In the book I have just finished, *The Haunting of Hill House,* the building up of a cumulative set of symbols was the only way to manage a particularly difficult passage. My problem was to take Eleanor, a woman of thirty-two, from her home in New York City to a haunted house two hundred miles away. In the course of this journey, which begins the book, she was to be built up as a wholly sympathetic character, the main character in the book; she was to be shown as infinitely lonely and unhappy. At the same time, there had to be a transition for the reader, from the sensible environment of the city to the somewhat less believable atmosphere of the haunted house, and the preparation had to be made carefully, in Eleanor's mind and the reader's, for the introduction of the horrors to come later, and Eleanor's reactions. The reader had to be persuaded to identify sufficiently with Eleanor so that when later he encounters with her the various manifestations in the haunted house he will be willing to suspend disbelief and go along with Eleanor, because she has become thoroughly believable. This was hard.

I thought that the best way to lead the reader and Eleanor into an atmosphere of unreality was by working through a kind of unreality both of them could accept readily, a kind of daydreaming fairy-tale atmosphere quite natural to Eleanor under the circumstances. She is driving alone, a trip of two hundred miles, and it is not surprising that she tells herself little stories while she travels. The fairy-tale atmosphere begins when Eleanor comes to the garage in the city where her car is kept, and accidentally stumbles against a little old lady who is quite angry, in the best old-witch tradition, but is eventually placated, and as Eleanor gets into her car the little old lady says, “I will pray for you, dearie.” Eleanor thinks of this as a good omen for a journey about which she has considerable misgivings, and as she drives on, the little old lady is woven into her fantasies. Eleanor drives through a little village and sees and admires an old lovely house with two stone lions on the steps, and in the minute or so it takes for her to pass the house she has made up an entire lifetime for herself in the house with the stone lions; she has washed their faces every morning, and inside the house she has lived long quiet years, graciously, growing older in quiet elegance, with a little old lady to bring her a glass of blackberry wine each evening and help her care for the stone lions.

Before she has quite completed her dream of the lions, she passes an oleander hedge along the road, and she imagines that she might stop her car and go through the gate in the hedge and step into a castle, magically released from a spell by her coming, and she thinks that she would run down a path of jewels to a terrace before the castle, where there are fountains and stone lions and a little old lady who is actually the queen, her mother, waiting for the princess to come home and break the spell. Before she has quite unwound this story, she comes upon a little cottage almost buried in roses, and sees a white cat sunning itself on the step; she thinks that perhaps she will stop and live here forever, becoming a little old lady herself with a tiny pair of stone lions by her fireplace, oleanders and roses planted close beside her door, and she will make love potions for village maidens and dig magic herbs in the forest.

After Eleanor has driven a hundred miles, she stops at an inn for lunch, and while she is sitting in the inn a little girl at a nearby table cries out clearly that she will not drink her milk because she does not have her cup of stars. Eleanor is thinking with delight that of course a cup of stars is vital and essential for any fairy-tale heroine when the little girl's mother explains to the waitress that it is not really a cup of stars, but a cup with stars painted inside, so that when the little girl drinks her milk at home she can see the stars in the cup.

Now, the basic emphasis in the entire journey has been Eleanor's longing for a home, for a place of her own, and of course for a real cup of stars to break the spell of dullness and loneliness that she has always known. Five symbols have been set up. First there is the little old lady who is praying for Eleanor, then the two stone lions, then the oleander bushes and roses, then the white cat, then the cup of stars. Now, you see, the phrase "white cat" is beginning to take on the meaning it needs for the book. Each of these cumulative symbols dovetails with the others, each belongs absolutely to the journey between reality and unreality, and each must carry the weight of Eleanor's loneliness and longing for a place where she belongs.

Now, these artificially loaded words can only be used with extreme care, and there again is the garlic. Garlic is a splendid thing, and one that is irreplaceable, yet there is no question but that it is possible to use too much of it. This collection of weighted words can only be used like garlic, where they will do the most good, and they must never be used where they will overwhelm the flavor of another passage. They can only be used, in short, in spots where it is essential to emphasize Eleanor's loneliness, and then only in very small quantities. If one of the other characters in the book happens to remark that he dislikes cats and Eleanor says at once that she likes cats, but only white ones, what she is saying, of course, is that she likes white cats and has a dream of living alone in a little cottage covered with roses with an old lady praying for her and oleander bushes by the door. Consequently, Eleanor cannot make such a remark unless it is absolutely necessary, and the other character cannot even be made to remark that he dislikes cats unless Eleanor's entire structure of fantasy has to be evoked at that particular moment.

One side result of this, of course, is that the garlic-laden symbols cancel out any similar references. Eleanor cannot, for instance, admire a pair of Chinese porcelain lions without keying in to the whole laborious story again; she cannot have any dealings with black cats or tortoiseshell cats; she cannot admire a privet hedge or drink from a cup painted pink on the inside. Moreover, each time one of these symbols turns up, it gathers new meanings and identities; when, later in the book, Eleanor wants to make an impression on one of the other characters and says boastfully that when *she* was a child *she* used to have a cup of stars, this is supposed to act as a kind of jolt to the reader, because of course it was not Eleanor as a child who had a cup of stars, but a strange child in an inn. Eleanor's appropriating the cup of stars has become a further statement about her own lost loneliness; she has suddenly made a picture of herself as a little girl in an inn with a loving mother and father indulging her pretty whims.

Furthermore, it is beginning to appear that Eleanor is sinking into her fantasies, is moving herself into her dreamworld where she is loved and secure, and is perhaps already beginning to see herself as an enchanted princess or a happy child. Before she is through, Eleanor has made every one of her symbols her own; simply by presenting these various things as real, as belonging to her, she has come from her unhappy real life to a very happy, very dangerous, unreal life. By the end of the book, Eleanor is looking at other characters and thinking "I remember you; you dined with me once, long ago, in my home with the stone lions on the terrace." Her last sad statement — spoken as she is leaving the haunted house at the insistence of the others, who do not believe she is safe there any longer — is "But nothing can hurt me; somewhere, someone is praying for me."

It has become a statement that she is so far lost in fantasy that reality cannot touch her anymore; she is safe from danger because she no longer believes in its existence. The other characters, who believe reasonably enough what Eleanor has told them — that she has a little house where she keeps her cup of stars that she used as a child, where she has a white cat, where she has two small stone lions on the mantelpiece and roses and an oleander bush by the door — think that they are doing the right thing by sending Eleanor away; they think they are sending her home.

I would like to finish by reading two stories that demonstrate in a rather extreme fashion the idea of substituting symbols for characters; in one of them, the hero does not appear at all, and in the other, the heroine makes only the most brief token appearance.

The Memoirs

Jackson's second home in North Bennington, Vermont, and the location of her death

Life among the Savages (1953)

AN UNEASY CHRONICLE

Life among the Savages: An Uneasy Chronicle was first published by Farrar, Straus & Young in the summer of 1953. It is a semi-fictional memoir about Jackson's domestic life with her husband and four children in a large, ramshackle house in Vermont. Many of the stories included had previously been published in popular 'women's' magazines, such as *Good Housekeeping and Mademoiselle*. The characters featured in the work are recognisable as Jackson and her family, but not everything related with the stories is true or an accurate reflection of events. The book was a critical and commercial success and four years later, in 1957, the sequel, *Raising Demons*, was published.

A humorous, self-effacing and witty portrait of the domestic life led by the author, *Life among the Savages* chronicles the chaotic and at times absurd aspects of running a home and being a wife and mother. Jackson details the mundane experiences of everyday life, like mediating disputes between children or having rats in the cellar, with sardonic wit. The tone is warm, but there is a clear undercurrent that serves to undermine the overly romanticised or idyllic view of marriage and especially motherhood, that prevailed at the time. While not alluded to in the work, Jackson's relationship with her husband was often tumultuous; Hyman did not believe in monogamy and frequently indulged in brief affairs with other women, much to her distress.

Jackson with her children, 1964

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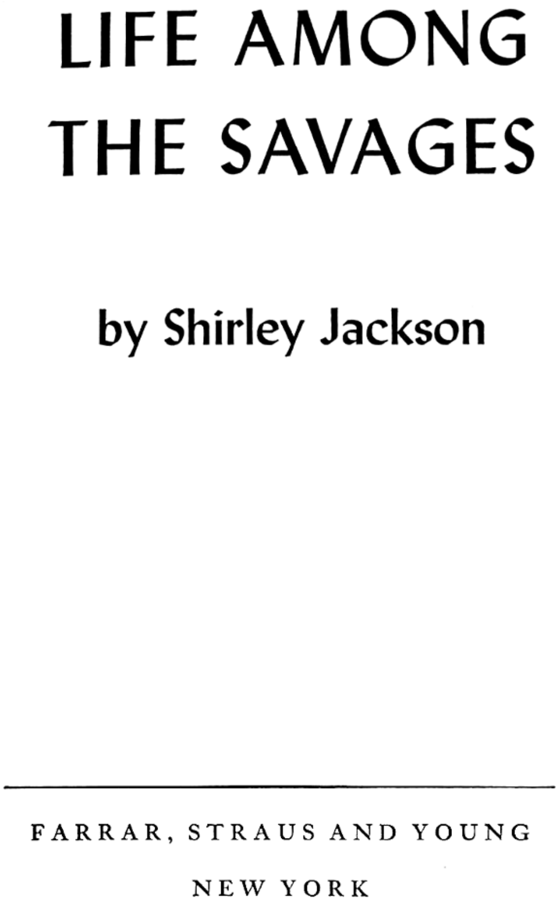

LIFE AMONG THE SAVAGES

by Shirley Jackson

FARRAR, STRAUS AND YOUNG
NEW YORK

The first edition's title page

For the Children's Grandparents

One

OUR HOUSE IS old, and noisy, and full. When we moved into it we had two children and about five thousand books; I expect that when we finally overflow and move out again we will have perhaps twenty children and easily half a million books; we also own assorted beds and tables and chairs and rocking horses and lamps and doll dresses and ship models and paint brushes and literally thousands of socks. This is the way of life my husband and I have fallen into, inadvertently, as though we had fallen into a well and decided that since there was no way out we might as well stay there and set up a chair and a desk and a light of some kind; even though this *is* our way of life, and the only one we know, it is occasionally bewildering, and perhaps even inexplicable to the sort of person who does not have that swift, accurate conviction that he is going to step on a broken celluloid doll in the dark. I cannot think of a preferable way of life, except one without children and without books, going on soundlessly in an apartment hotel where they do the cleaning for you and send up your meals and all you have to do is lie on a couch and — as I say, I cannot think of a preferable way of life, but then I have had to make a good many compromises, all told.

I look around sometimes at the paraphernalia of our living — sandwich bags, typewriters, little wheels off things — and marvel at the complexities of civilization with which we surround ourselves; would we be pleased, I wonder, at a wholesale elimination of these things, so that we were reduced only to necessities (coffeepot, typewriters, the essential little wheels off things) and then — this happening usually in the springtime — I begin throwing things away, and it turns out that although we can live agreeably without the little wheels off things, new little wheels turn up almost immediately. This is, I suspect, progress. They can make new little wheels, if not faster than they can fall off things, at least faster than I can throw them away.

I remember the morning, long ago, when the landlord called. Our son Laurie was three and a half, and our daughter Jannie was six months old, and I had the lunch almost ready and the diapers washed, along with the little shirts and the nightgowns and the soakers and the cotton blankets, and they were all drying on the line (and I don't care what *any*one says, that's a morning's work, when you consider that I had also made brownies and emptied the ashtrays) and then the landlord called. He was a kindly man, and a paternal one, so that he asked first about my health, and my husband's health, and then he asked how was our boy? and how was the baby? and when I said that we were all fine, fine, he said that of course we were aware that our lease was up? I said well, no, we hadn't really known that our lease was up. So he said well, he supposed that we hadn't looked at the lease recently and I (wondering if that was the paper Laurie had torn up and eaten) said that it had been quite a while, really, since we sat down together and read over our lease. That was too bad, he said. Wasn't it, I said. Because, he said, his voice gentle, the apartment had been rented to someone else. After a minute I said rented? to someone *else?* Then I laughed and said what were *we* supposed to do — move? He said well, yes, we were supposed to do just that.

"Naturally," he went on, "we could evict you if we wanted to."

"You could?" I was thinking of letters to the president, appeals for the sake of our two small children. "We'd much rather you'd just move out," he said.

"But where?"

He laughed genially. “Ask me another,” he said. “Apartments are mighty tough to find these days.”

“I suppose we could take a look around,” I said dubiously. Letters, I was thinking, sue them for the piece of plaster that fell on my husband while he was shaving: lawyers.

“We’ll expect to take possession around May first,” he said.

“Today is March twenty-fifth,” I said.

“That’s right,” he said. “Rent almost due,” and he laughed again.

The next day we got a letter saying that it was “first notice of warning to evict.” I began to think in terms of pouring boiling oil from the windows and barricading the doors with the dining room table. What made both of us even angrier was the fact that we had never had any intention of renewing our lease, but had planned vaguely on moving as soon as we found another place. “The very idea,” I told my husband indignantly, “renting this apartment to someone else without fixing that broken step. The one on the stairs.”

“Leave a note for the new people about the cockroaches,” my husband advised. He also advised strenuously against bringing suit for some undetermined reason (the piece of plaster? the neighbor’s radio?) and said, patting me on the shoulder, that he knew how anxious I had been to find another place.

Our fondest dream had been to move to Vermont, to a town where a couple we knew had settled and from which they had written us glowing accounts of mountains, and children playing in their own gardens, and clean snow, and homegrown carrots, and now suddenly it looked overwhelmingly as though we moved either to Vermont or to a tent in the park. I called half a dozen city agents, and they all laughed as gaily as our landlord had laughed; “Got any relatives you could move in with?” one of them asked me.

Finally, two hardy adventurers making for unexplored territory, we left the children with their grandparents, got ourselves and our suitcases and our overshoes onto a train at the station, and set out, an advance scouting party, for the small town where our friends lived, and where the mountains were so high and the snow so clean. There was no doubt, we discovered, about the snow. Our city overshoes went in over their heads as we stepped off the train, and for the three days we were there we both went constantly with damp feet and small bits of ice melting against our socks.

One nice thing was, there were lots and lots of houses available. We heard this from a lady named Mrs. Black, a motherly old body who lived in a nearby large town, but who knew, as she herself pointed out, every house and every family in the state. She took us to visit a house which she called the Bassington house, and which would have been perfect for us and our books and our children, if there had been any plumbing.

"Wouldn't take much to put *in* plumbing," Mrs. Black told us. "Put in plumbing, you got a real nice house there."

My husband shifted nervously in the snow. "You see," he said, "that brings up the question of … well … money."

Mrs. Black shrugged. "How much would *plumbing* cost?" she demanded. "You put in maybe twelve, fifteen hundred dollars, you got a real nice house."

"Now look, if we had fifteen hundred dollars we could give an apartment superintendent—" my husband began, but I cut in quickly, "You must remember, Mrs. Black, that we want to *rent*."

"Rent, did you?" said Mrs. Black, as though this proved at last that we were mere fly-by-nights, lookers at houses for the pleasure of it. "Well, if *I* was you folks, small children and all, well, *I*'d buy."

"But money—" my husband said.

"Money?" said Mrs. Black scornfully. "Two, three thousand dollars." She thought. "On the other hand," she said brightly, "if you was to fix it up *yourselves* — set in the plumbing, do a little painting, fix a few things maybe, you might cut your price down considerable."

She was looking directly at my husband as she said this, and he smiled weakly and nodded, obviously for that brief moment taken in by the notion that he might himself set in the plumbing. "You got to *figure*," Mrs. Black pursued, "you put down maybe two, three thousand dollars, you get a first mortgage from Henry Andrews down to the bank, you sign to put in a few improvements — all you got to figure *there* is title, I think, and maybe equity, Henry Andrews can tell you just exactly *what*. Taxes, o'course. Insurance, you'd want, and then you figure heat and electric, and maybe you could get Bill Adams to put in the plumbing for you for less on account it's his wife's sister owns the house, and there you are. Ten, fifteen years, you got a real nice house here, and you *own* it. Other way, you'd still be paying rent."

"But money—" my husband said.

Mrs. Black continued smoothly, "Other hand," she said, "you might like the McCaffery house. Now *there's* one with plumbing."

The McCaffery house may have had plumbing for all we ever knew; we could not get to it because the dirt road leading up to the top of the hill where the house sat was impassable with snow. "Have to clear *this* out some," Mrs. Black said, as we all stood at the bottom of the hill looking up at the house.

A Mr. Miller, who wore a leather jacket and a cap with earmuffs, took us to see the Donald house. This was a pretty place, set in an acre of marsh, but we unreasonably required a furnace, which Mr. Miller figured we ought to be able to put in for maybe two, three thousand. “Heat it with stoves, *I* would,” he said. “Don’t cost’s much to run’s a furnace.”

“Money—” my husband said.

“Might be,” Mr. Miller said, looking doubtfully at my husband, “might be you’re handy-like around a house?”

Mr. Faber, who wore checked hunting pants and rolled his own cigarettes, showed us the Grant house, which had only three rooms and a lovely garden, and the Exeter house, which was big and rambling and heated and even had plumbing. “Real nice house here,” Mr. Faber said as we stood, wondering, in the panelled dining room. “Priced at fifty thousand, but he ought to come down some on *that*.”

“Fif—” said my husband.

“Well,” Mr. Faber said sadly, “I didn’t suppose you cared to go *that* high, but I figured you’d enjoy *seeing* it.”

Mrs. Black, who picked us up again at nine the next morning, took us to see the Hubbard house, which had been made over from an old farmhouse, and had lovely floors and high ceilings and fireplaces and clean colored walls and even a garage, but no bedrooms. “The living room *alone* is seventy foot,” Mrs. Black said. “Studio type house, you might say.” She hesitated. “Matter of three, four thousand to build on a wing,” she suggested hopefully.

“But we want to *rent*,” I said, wailing. “We don’t want to put things in and build things on and plough things out, we want to rent a house that’s all put together *before* we move in.”

Mrs. Black sighed. “There’s a nice place, the Exeter house,” she said at last. “Real big, suit you folks fine. Priced at—”

By the end of the second day we had even looked at a barn which someone had thought he might just rent out, but there were two cows and a tractor in that, and even Mrs. Black's optimistic suggestion that we could easily make up the stalls into bedrooms for the children could not encourage us.

"Weall," Mrs. Black said as she said goodbye to us in front of our friends' house, "I guess you folks are pretty lucky you got a place to live in the city."

Wearily, that evening, we sat in the comfortable living room of our friends' house, sheltered beneath a roof, securely, though temporarily, housed, and tried frantically to plan. It was April second, we had had our second notice of warning to evict, and we had begun to think wildly of renting a trailer, or having the children live with their grandparents, or borrowing a tent and a canoe and exploring the Great Lakes.

"Exeter," my husband said, miserably, "Exeter, McCaffery, Grant. Bassington, Hubbard, Donald. McCaffery, Bassington, Donald, Grant. Exeter, Hubbard—"

"We just can't *live* in a house without plumbing," I said.

"Or a furnace," my husband said. "McCaffery, Hubbard—"

"Maybe we *could* get an extension from our landlord," I said without hope. "Maybe if he knew how hard we tried he might let us have a few weeks more."

Our friends sat, shaking their heads sympathetically, although their own home was paid for and firmly fixed upon its foundations, with its furnace working smoothly and its plumbing in repair.

"If we only had some *money*," my husband said and everyone sighed.

We had to take the train home the next day, and on the way to the station I stopped in at the one grocery in town for cigarettes. After I had paid him the grocer said, "Couldn't find a place, I guess."

“No,” I said, surprised, although I was to learn later that the grocer not only knew our housing problems, but the ages and names of our children, the meat we had been served for dinner the night before, and my husband’s income.

“Too bad you weren’t interested in the Fielding place,” the grocer said.

“We didn’t even hear about it,” I said.

“Would have called you,” the grocer said, “but Mae Black, *she* said you only wanted to buy. Not for sale, the Fielding house.”

“What’s it like?”

The grocer waved his hand vaguely. “Old,” he said. “Been in the family a long time.” He accepted a nickel from a small boy, helped him take the wrapper off a popsicle, and said, “Whyn’t you call old Sam Fielding? I bet he’d be real glad to take you over there.”

There was only one train a day from the town. If we stopped long enough to look at the Fielding house we would not be able to leave until tomorrow; I hesitated, and the grocer said, “Won’t do any harm to *look*, anyway.”

I went outside and put my head in through the window of the car where my husband was waiting with our host and hostess. “Ever hear of a house called the Fielding house?” I asked.

“The *Fielding* house?” said our hostess, and our host said, “What on earth do you want with *that?*”

“What’s the matter with it?” I asked.

“Well,” said our hostess, “it’s a thousand years old, I think.”

“A million,” said our host. “It’s …” He gestured helplessly. “It’s got these big white pillars across the front,” he said.

“Is there a house in back of the pillars?” my husband asked. “Because if there is, and it has plumbing and a furnace and bedrooms and they’ll rent it to us, we're going to be living there."

The Fielding house was a very old house about a mile out of town. It was the oldest in its neighborhood and the third oldest in the township; we had passed it, we realized with something of a shock, several times when we drove with Mrs. Black or Mr. Miller or Mr. Faber to look at other houses. It had been built — I looked it up in the town history shortly after we moved in, when I was vainly trying to come to terms with it — about eighteen-twenty, by a doctor named Ogilvie, who set it up as a manor house in the center of a great farm. The classical revival was upon the county then, and Doctor Ogilvie modeled his house after, presumably, a minor Greek temple; he set up the four massive white pillars across the front, threw wings out to both sides and then, with true New England economy, left the house only one room deep behind its impressive facade. When the Ogilvie family died off or moved away, as it did shortly after the house was built, it passed into the hands of a family named Cortland, who sold off most of the farm land and changed Doctor Ogilvie's woodshed into a summer kitchen. The Cortlands eventually sold the house to a family named Fielding, who promptly bought back all the surrounding land, now somewhat built up with houses, rented the houses out, set up a lumber mill on the river that used to run across Doctor Ogilvie's farm, and hired their tenants as employees. It seemed from the town records that the original Fielding had been a farmhand for Doctor Ogilvie, and the family no doubt had their eyes on the place even then. As the town developed the Fieldings became wealthier, and eventually the final generation of authentic Fieldings died off in the house and the entire property went to three cousins, all of whom lived in severely modern houses in neighboring towns, doing handsomely on their interests in the lumber mill.

When the manor house was put up for rent it was as though a vital part of the town had slid imperceptibly into the river, and a great coolness arose between the Fielding heirs and the Bartletts, who owned the second oldest house in town. During the worst housing shortages, when the lumber mill was going full blast night and day, the old manor house on top of the hill stayed empty, its white pillars sagging and its driveway choked with dead leaves or smooth with unmarked snow. When we saw it first it looked faintly ridiculous, and even the fences on either side and along the front leaned a little bit away from it, without actually renouncing it, as though they deplored it privately and yet wanted to present a unified front to the world of inhabitants. Sam Fielding was the only one of the Fielding cousins who retained the family name and so it had apparently been felt that he was the logical one to show us the house; he was a small quiet old man with the slow voice of the thoughtful Vermonter, and he stood with us at the foot of the lawn and he and my husband and I stared silently up at the huge pillars, the spread wings, the iron weather vane which stared mutely back at us.

"That's it," said Mr. Fielding undeniably. "I'd like to get *some* use out of it." He looked away quickly, as though avoiding an accusing glance from the house. "Good house," he added.

"It looks so …" I hesitated. "Imposing," I said finally.

"Imposing," Mr. Fielding agreed. He declined a cigarette from my husband and took out a cigarette of his own; it was the same brand, but it was his own. "Clean it up some," he said, nodding his head at the house.

"May we go inside?" I asked. "If we *were* interested in the house, I'd rather like to see the inside."

"Door's open," Mr. Fielding said.

We hesitated, my husband and I. Mr. Fielding settled himself comfortably on a tree stump and crossed his legs. "Door's open," he said again.

Together my husband and I made our way to the front door, avoiding just in time the broken step that led onto the porch. Once among the pillars the sense of the house came upon one with a rush; here was a *house*, as compared with the makeshift McCafferys and Exeters. My husband tried the front door tentatively, and it swung open. Gingerly, watching out for broken floorboards, we went inside, into a wide hall shadowed by the pillars and backed by a straight, lovely, colonial stairway; somewhere to our right were a carpet flooded with red cabbage roses and a harmonium, under dark old pictures which seemed to lean forward a little to watch us, surprised; we went into a kitchen where a monumental ironwork stove threatened to fall on us, and in the kitchen there was a table thick with dust and on it were a dusty cup and a plate with two solid, ancient doughnuts on it. There was a chair pushed a little away from the table.

"I'm sorry we stayed," I said to my husband earnestly, my hands shaking as I looked at the two hideous doughnuts, "we interrupted their lunch, let's leave right away."

"If it weren't the only house in town …" he said, but he followed me rapidly outside.

Mr. Fielding rose to meet us as we came back down between the pillars, and when we were near him he said, "Weather's closing in. Snow before morning." He escorted us solemnly to the station, discussing the weather, and as our train came in he remarked, "Fix her up some, then, before you folks come in the spring."

"Tell me," I said, "how long since anyone's been *in* that house?"

"Not since the old man died," he said. "Four year I figure that might be."

"But to straighten it up?" I insisted. "Look over his things, or anything?"

“Never really figured it would rent,” he said thoughtfully. “No sense rushing things.”

He waved to us kindly when we got onto the train. During most of that next two weeks I held firmly to the impractical conviction that I didn’t *care* if it was the last house in the town, or in the world for that matter, and I didn’t *care* if it meant living in the park, I was not going to live in a house with two petrified doughnuts. The following week, however, we received a letter from Mr. Fielding, saying that the house was being fixed up, and did we feel that fifty dollars a month was too much rent?

“You seem to have taken the house,” I said unjustly to my husband.

“It’s probably because we went inside,” he said. “No one else has ever gone inside, and that probably constitutes a lease.”

A week later we received another letter from Mr. Fielding, saying that the house was all ready for us, except for the outside, which would be painted when the weather opened up. Since we had not answered his last letter, he figured that his rent was too high, and did we think we could manage forty?

A strong sense of guilt impelled my husband to write back immediately saying that fifty dollars a month was fine; “before he *gives* it to us,” he told me.

“But I’m not—” I said, realizing that of course I was.

I came up on the train, a day after my husband. I brought with me a wildly excited Laurie, and Jannie, in a basket; and all the way up on the train, crushed in between Laurie and the baby’s basket and the suitcases and the sandwiches, I was wondering if anyone had thought to take away the kitchen table and the doughnuts: my husband had promised that if we really couldn’t stand it we could try once more to find something in the city. Mr. Fielding was with my husband to meet us at the station, and when I saw Mr.

Fielding again the whole clear sense of the house came back to me and I was ready to turn around and go back right then. He smiled at me cheerfully, said, “Afternoon, young fellow,” to Laurie, and stared gravely at the baby for a minute; she stared back at him, and then he nodded to me and said reassuringly, “Fixed her up some.”

I knew what he meant when I saw the house. It had been literally scraped clean, down to the wood in the walls. Mr. Fielding had put on new wallpaper, rich with great gorgeous patterns, the windows had been washed, the pillars straightened, the broken step repaired, and a cheerful man in the kitchen was putting the last touches of glittering white paint to the new shelving; there was a brand new electric stove and a new refrigerator, the floors had been repaired and varnished, a hornets’ nest had been removed from the farthest pillar on the right. The lawn was just beginning to show green, and Laurie ran in and out between the pillars, touching every one, and then, shouting, up and down the straight stairway. In her basket Jannie smiled, looking up at the sky over the trees.

“It’s beautiful,” I said to Mr. Fielding, almost in tears. “I thought it would look like it did before.”

“Needed some work done,” Mr. Fielding agreed. Then he nodded at the new kitchen stove and said, “Did the old place good.”

Just then our moving van arrived, and the three muscular, brazen fellows who had looked so natural carrying our furniture out of the apartment became abruptly incongruous carrying our small chairs and tables in between the pillars.

“Put in some more plumbing, too,” Mr. Fielding said, and departed.

For the first week or so things were completely at cross-purposes. Our furniture, which had been more than adequate for a city apartment, here spread all too thinly among the echoing rooms of the house, and we had to fill out with odd tables and chairs bought from Mr. Fielding and from nearby second-hand shops. The house had grown enormously, I later learned, from Doctor Ogilvie's original structure. The Cortlands had added the summer kitchen, but the Fieldings had added on and on, so that the room which had been the summer kitchen, for instance, and hitched on to the back of the house in the first place, was now smack in the middle, tucked in among larger and sturdier rooms, and was no longer a kitchen at all but only a dark little room which was sometimes difficult to find. We had only three beds and we had six bedrooms, so Mr. Fielding sold us, for fifty cents, a bed that had been only recently taken out of the house and put into one of the capacious barns. We tried to buy the harmonium but the Fieldings had sold it to an antique dealer; we did buy the carpet with the cabbage roses, since it was the only one which would fit into the vast desert of the parlor; we declined, with one voice, the old kitchen table. All these things, the ones that had been in the house before, and other things which had been in similar old houses and knew their ways, fell naturally into good positions in the rooms, as though snatching the best places before the city furniture could crowd in. No matter how much we wanted to set our overstuffed chairs on either side of the living room fireplace, an old wooden rocker that Mr. Fielding had given us insisted upon pre-empting the center of the hearth rug and could not in human kindness be shifted. An old highboy, which was a contemporary of the rocker although it had come from a barn across town, took over the living room corner near the rocker, and the two of them lived there in silent companionship.

After a few vain attempts at imposing our own angular order on things with a consequent out-of-jointness and shrieking disharmony that set our teeth on edge, we gave in to the old furniture and let things settle where they would. An irritation persisted in one particular spot in the dining room, a spot which would hold neither table nor buffet and developed an alarming sag in the floor when I tried to put a radio there, until I found completely by accident that this place was used to a desk and would not be comfortable until I went out and found a spindly old writing table and set a brass inkwell on it.

There was a door to an attic that preferred to stay latched and would latch itself no matter who was inside; there was another door which hung by custom slightly ajar, although it would close goodhumoredly for a time when some special reason required it. We had five attics, we discovered, built into and upon and next to one another; one of them kept bats and we shut that one up completely; another, light and cheerful in spite of its one small window, liked to be a place of traffic and became, without any decision of ours, a place to store things temporarily, things that were moved regularly, like sleds and snow shovels and garden rakes and hammocks. The basement had an old clothesline hung across it, and after the line I put up in the back yard had fallen down for the third time I resigned myself and put up a new line in the basement, and clothes dried there quickly and freshly. We stocked the woodshed, since we had four fireplaces, and my husband discovered an odd pleasure in splitting wood, and the sound of an axe in the woodshed echoed agreeably through the kitchen. One bedroom chose the children, because it was large and light and showed unmistakable height-marks on one wall and seemed to mind not at all when crayon marks appeared on the wallpaper and paint got spilled on the floor. We put bookcases in the little dark room downstairs, and after the second week my husband got so he could find it nine times out of ten.

It *was* a good old house, after all. Our cats slept on the rocking chair; our friends came to call. We accustomed ourselves to trading at certain stores and we bought our cheese locally and we found a doctor and a dog; Laurie entered the community nursery school and learned, as I had, to identify the house by saying “It’s the old Fielding house — the one with the pillars.” Toward the end of our first year there the painter arrived to do the outside of the house, and he painted it white with green trim, the colors it had always been painted before; indeed, I doubt if he owned any other colors of paint. “Not many houses like *this* nowadays,” he told me, smiling benignly down at me from the top of his ladder, “don’t find houses *built* like this any more.”

I looked from the front porch in through the glass of the front door, seeing the slim line of the stairway and the bright curtains in the dining room. “It’s a good old house,” I said.

“Can always tell by the cats,” the painter said enigmatically.

I found that, where in the city I had always been too busy to do anything at all, I was now making odd things like gingerbread and cabbage salad. Laurie started a crude garden out back, and Jannie took her first step in the dining room. Once I left both of them with our next-door neighbor, and went into the city for a wild two-day shopping trip; when I wandered into our old neighborhood and stood in front of our old apartment house I could only think how small and dirty it looked. “No pillars *there*,” I told myself with deep gratification, and wished I could write our old landlord and tell *him*.

So, the house was old when we found it, and noisy when we entered it, and it took very little time for it to fill up. Our children brought in friends and rocking horses and paint brushes, we brought in friends and books and little wheels off things. I learned to make pie crust — although I have not the touch of a born pie-maker, I am afraid. People from the city began driving up for weekends in the nice weather.

Jannie spoke for a long time about a faraway voice in the house which sang to her at night, and we put the Christmas tree in the corner of the living room where the lights shone at night out between the pillars; we raked leaves on the front lawn and went sledding down the hillside. We began to speak slightingly of city-folk.

I have, as I say, never found a way of life preferable to this; its only fault — aside from the back-breaking labor and the vicious pie crusts which refuse to brown — is that it goes on and on, without, it seems, any major change at all. I observe my neighbors and it seems to me that they are content to live on, registering and employing each day but not in the least distinguishing one day beyond another, and, although that is obviously the best way of passing time, it makes, I feel, for little or no excitement. Even a major event (like our hurricane, or the time we had the flood, or that terribly heavy snow when all the electricity was out for three days) tends to become, by the next day, only a remembered landmark— "that was two days, I recollect, before the hurricane, because we had all those raspberries to set out …" — and even the last trump will, I am afraid, make no more of an impression on our community ("… well, now, let's see; that there bugle blowed around about three in the afternoon, and I remember the day because it was the day I w's supposed to hammer on the boards on that there gate, and here it's been maybe six weeks since that ol' bugle, and there hangs the gate right now …"). When I think about it, I can only remember the year Laurie was born because I was waiting to get a new winter coat.

One of the most unnerving, and least original, observations I have made about my children is that as these years turn and Christmas inevitably follows the fourth of July and the fourth of July inevitably follows Christmas, they tend to grow older. Every October, for instance, Laurie has a birthday. Every November, incredible as it may sound, Jannie has a birthday; the fact that I also have a birthday every December is unfortunately entirely believable but somehow less heartwarming. When we first came to the house in the country, Laurie was something over three years old, and Jannie was six months, and then suddenly — although I had in the meantime grown a year older, and so had my husband, and we wished one another "Happy Birthday" very properly — Jannie was almost two and had become a legitimate member of the family named Jannie (instead of Baby, or The Baby), and Laurie was just short of five and was clamoring for the right to vote on domestic policies.

The day Laurie started kindergarten he renounced corduroy overalls with bibs and began wearing blue jeans with a belt; I watched him go off the first morning with the older girl next door, seeing clearly that an era of my life was ended, my sweet-voiced nursery-school tot replaced by a long-trousered, swaggering character who forgot to stop at the corner and wave goodbye to me.

He came home the same way, the front door slamming open, his cap on the floor, and the voice suddenly become raucous shouting, "Isn't anybody *here?*"

At lunch he spoke insolently to his father, spilled Jannie's milk, and remarked that his teacher said that we were not to take the name of the Lord in vain.

"How *was* school today?" I asked, elaborately casual.

"All right," he said.

"Did you learn anything?" his father asked.

Laurie regarded his father coldly. "I didn't learn nothing," he said.

"Anything," I said. "Didn't learn anything."

"The teacher spanked a boy, though," Laurie said, addressing his bread and butter. "For being fresh," he added with his mouth full.

"What did he do?" I asked. "Who was it?"

Laurie thought. "It was Charles," he said. "He was fresh. The teacher spanked him and made him stand in a corner. He was awfully fresh."

"What did he do?" I asked again, but Laurie slid off his chair, took a cookie, and left, while his father was still saying "See here, young man."

The next day Laurie remarked at lunch, as soon as he sat down, "Well, Charles was bad again today." He grinned enormously and said, "Today Charles hit the teacher."

"Good heavens," I said, mindful of the Lord's name, "I suppose he got spanked again?"

"He sure did," Laurie said. "Look up," he said to his father.

"What?" his father said, looking up.

"Look down," Laurie said. "Look at my thumb. Gee, you're dumb." He began to laugh insanely.

"Why did Charles hit the teacher?" I asked quickly.

"Because she tried to make him color with red crayons," Laurie said. "Charles wanted to color with green crayons so he hit the teacher and she spanked him and said nobody play with Charles but everybody did."

The third day — it was Wednesday of the first week — Charles bounced a seesaw onto the head of a little girl and made her bleed and the teacher made him stay inside all during recess. Thursday Charles had to stand in a corner during storytime because he kept pounding his feet on the floor. Friday Charles was deprived of blackboard privileges because he threw chalk.

On Saturday I remarked to my husband, "Do you think kindergarten is too unsettling for Laurie? All this toughness and bad grammar, and this Charles boy sounds like such a bad influence."

“It’ll be all right,” my husband said reassuringly. “Bound to be people like Charles in the world. Might as well meet them now as later.”

On Monday Laurie came home late, full of news. “Charles,” he shouted as he came up the hill; I was waiting anxiously on the front steps, “Charles,” Laurie yelled all the way up the hill, “Charles was bad again.”

“Come right in,” I said, as soon as he came close enough. “Lunch is waiting.”

“You know what Charles did?” he demanded, following me through the door. “Charles yelled so in school they sent a boy in from first grade to tell the teacher she had to make Charles keep quiet, and so Charles had to stay after school. And so all the children stayed to watch him.”

“What did he do?” I asked.

“He just sat there,” Laurie said, climbing into his chair at the table. “Hi Pop, y’old dust mop.”

“Charles had to stay after school today,” I told my husband. “Everyone stayed with him.”

“What does this Charles look like?” my husband asked Laurie. “What’s his other name?”

“He’s bigger than me,” Laurie said. “And he doesn’t have any rubbers and he doesn’t ever wear a jacket.”

Monday night was the first Parent-Teachers meeting, and only the fact that Jannie had a cold kept me from going; I wanted passionately to meet Charles’ mother. On Tuesday Laurie remarked suddenly, “Our teacher had a friend come see her in school today.”

“Charles’ mother?” my husband and I asked simultaneously.

“Naaah,” Laurie said scornfully. “It was a man who came and made us do exercises. Look.” He climbed down from his chair and squatted down and touched his toes. “Like this,” he said. He got solemnly back into his chair and said, picking up his fork, “Charles didn’t even *do* exercises.”

“That’s fine,” I said heartily. “Didn’t Charles want to do exercises?”

“Naaah,” Laurie said. “Charles was so fresh to the teacher’s friend he wasn’t *let* do exercises.”

“Fresh again?” I said.

“He kicked the teacher’s friend,” Laurie said. “The teacher’s friend told Charles to touch his toes like I just did and Charles kicked him.”

“What are they going to do about Charles, do you suppose?” Laurie’s father asked him.

Laurie shrugged elaborately. “Throw him out of school, I guess,” he said.

Wednesday and Thursday were routine; Charles yelled during story hour and hit a boy in the stomach and made him cry. On Friday Charles stayed after school again and so did all the other children.

With the third week of kindergarten Charles was an institution in our family; Jannie was being a Charles when she cried all afternoon; Laurie did a Charles when he filled his wagon full of mud and pulled it through the kitchen; even my husband, when he caught his elbow in the telephone cord and pulled telephone, ashtray, and a bowl of flowers off the table, said, after the first minute, “Looks like Charles.”

During the third and fourth weeks there seemed to be a reformation in Charles; Laurie reported grimly at lunch on Thursday of the third week, “Charles was so good today the teacher gave him an apple.”

“What?” I said, and my husband added warily, “You mean Charles?”

“Charles,” Laurie said. “He gave the crayons around and he picked up the books afterward and the teacher said he was her helper.”

“What happened?” I asked incredulously.

“He was her helper, that’s all,” Laurie said, and shrugged.

"Can this be true, about Charles?" I asked my husband that night. "Can something like this happen?"

"Wait and see," my husband said cynically. "When you've got a Charles to deal with, this may mean he's only plotting."

He seemed to be wrong. For over a week Charles was the teacher's helper; each day he handed things out and he picked things up; no one had to stay after school.

"The P.-T.A. meeting's next week again," I told my husband one evening. "I'm going to find Charles' mother there."

"Ask her what happened to Charles," my husband said. "I'd like to know."

"I'd like to know myself," I said.

On Friday of that week things were back to normal. "You know what Charles did today?" Laurie demanded at the lunch table, in a voice slightly awed. "He told a little girl to say a word and she said it and the teacher washed her mouth out with soap and Charles laughed."

"What word?" his father asked unwisely, and Laurie said, "I'll have to whisper it to you, it's so bad." He got down off his chair and went around to his father. His father bent his head down and Laurie whispered joyfully. His father's eyes widened.

"Did Charles tell the little girl to say *that?*" he asked respectfully.

"She said it *twice*," Laurie said. "Charles told her to say it *twice*."

"What happened to Charles?" my husband asked.

"Nothing," Laurie said. "He was passing out the crayons."

Monday morning Charles abandoned the little girl and said the evil word himself three or four times, getting his mouth washed out with soap each time. He also threw chalk.

My husband came to the door with me that evening as I set out for the P.-T.A. meeting. “Invite her over for a cup of tea after the meeting,” he said. “I want to get a look at her.”

“If only she’s there,” I said prayerfully.

“She’ll be there,” my husband said. “I don’t see how they could hold a P.-T.A. meeting without Charles’ mother.”

At the meeting I sat restlessly, scanning each comfortable matronly face, trying to determine which one hid the secret of Charles. None of them looked to me haggard enough. No one stood up in the meeting and apologized for the way her son had been acting. No one mentioned Charles.

After the meeting I identified and sought out Laurie’s kindergarten teacher. She had a plate with a cup of tea and a piece of chocolate cake; I had a plate with a cup of tea and a piece of marshmallow cake. We maneuvered up to one another cautiously and smiled.

“I’ve been so anxious to meet you,” I said. “I’m Laurie’s mother.”

“We’re all so interested in Laurie,” she said.

“Well, he certainly likes kindergarten,” I said. “He talks about it all the time.”

“We had a little trouble adjusting, the first week or so,” she said primly, “but now he’s a fine little helper. With lapses, of course.”

“Laurie usually adjusts very quickly,” I said. “I suppose this time it’s Charles’ influence.”

“Charles?”

“Yes,” I said, laughing, “you must have your hands full in that kindergarten, with Charles.”

“Charles?” she said. “We don’t have any Charles in the kindergarten.”

It was soon after this meeting — the whole question of Charles having somehow dissipated and become without discussion a forbidden topic — that my husband, moved by some obscure impulse which may or may not have been connected with Charles, bought himself an air gun. I have never really believed that my husband is the Kit Carson type, but it is remotely possible that occasionally a feeling for the life romantic overcomes him; this air gun was large and menacing and he told me, in that terribly responsible voice men get to using when they are telling their wives about machinery, or guns, or politics, that he got it for target practice.

There had been a rat in the cellar, he said; he was sure he had seen a rat when he went down to start the furnace. So, of course, he was going to shoot it. Not trap it or poison it — that was for boys and terriers; *he* was going to shoot it.

For the better part of a Sunday morning he crouched dangerously at the open cellar door, waiting for the rat to show his whiskers, which the rat was kind enough not to do. Our two excellent cats were also staying inside, sitting complacently and with some professional interest directly behind my husband. The rat hunt was broken up when the kitchen door banged open and Laurie crashed in with three friends to see how his father shot the rat. Eventually, I suppose, the rat wandered off, although I do not see how he could conceivably have been frightened by the prospect of being shot. Probably he had never realized until then that he had strayed into a house with cats *and* children. At any rate, my husband and the cats, hunting in a pack, managed to bring down even better game; it must have been about the Tuesday after the rat hunt that our female cat, Ninki, who is something of a hunter, caught a chipmunk. She has done this before and will do it again, although I am sure she will never again ask my husband to sit in with her. The chipmunk she caught that morning — it was about nine-thirty — was not co-operative, and when Ninki brought him into the kitchen, where she usually brings chipmunks with some odd conviction that she must eat them in her own dish, the chipmunk ducked under her paw and raced madly to a rather tall plant on the window sill. The plant was just strong enough to bear the weight of one chipmunk, and Ninki, in a sort of frenzy, hurried into the dining room where my husband was just finishing his coffee and talked him into going into the kitchen to see her chipmunk in the plant. My husband took one look and went for his air gun.

Ninki was able to get onto the window sill, but the plant was tall enough and the pot it stood in shaky enough so that she could not quite reach the chipmunk, who was standing precariously on the very top of the plant. My husband drew a careful bead with the air gun and then found that unless he stepped up and held his weapon against the chipmunk's head, he stood a very good chance of missing the chipmunk, if not actually the cat, who was a large and intrusive target.

By this time, of course, I had put down my coffee cup and was standing in the doorway between the kitchen and the dining room, safely out of range as women should be when men are hunting, and saying things like "Dear, why don't you put a paper bag over it or something and take it outside?" and "Dear, don't you think it would be easier if—"

Ninki was by this time irritated beyond belief by the general air of incompetence exhibited in the kitchen, and she went into the living room and got Shax, who is extraordinarily lazy and never catches his own chipmunks, but who is, at least, a cat, and preferable, Ninki saw clearly, to a man with a gun. Shax sized up the situation with a cynical eye, gave my husband and his gun the coldest look I have ever seen a cat permit himself, and then leaped onto the window sill and sat on the other side of the flowerpot. It made a pretty little tableau: Ninki and Shax sitting on either side of the flowerpot and the chipmunk sitting on top of the plant.

After a minute the chipmunk — feeling rightly that all eyes were upon him — fidgeted nervously, and the plant began to sway. As the chipmunk was very nervous and the top of the plant very supple, soon the top of the plant began to swing from side to side, like a pendulum, so that the chipmunk, going faster and faster, rocked over to one cat and then to the other, grazing a nose of each, while they backed away dubiously. My husband still had his aim on the chipmunk, and *he* began to rock back and forth. When the cats finally realized what was happening, they took turns batting the chipmunk as he swung between them.

All of this happened so quickly that I believe — unless I prefer to move out I have no choice *but* to believe — that my husband pressed the trigger of the air gun without really meaning to, because it is certain that he missed the chipmunk and the cats, and hit the window. The crash sent cats, chipmunk, and Nimrod in all directions — the cats under the table, the chipmunk, with rare presence of mind, out the broken window, and my husband, with even rarer presence of mind, back to the dining room and to his seat at the table. I advanced from my post in the kitchen doorway and picked up the air gun from the floor; then, with what I regard as unique forbearance, I went for the broom and dustpan. All I permitted myself, spoken gently and without undue emphasis, was “Thank heaven Laurie is in school.”

I was indulgent enough to return the air gun to my husband after a few days, but I would have thought that Ninki had more sense. Perhaps she never dreamed I would give the air gun back, or perhaps she just thought target practice around the house had been given up as impractical; perhaps, with some kind of feline optimism I cannot share, she believed that the chipmunk episode had been a freak, the sort of thing that might happen to any man confronting an oscillant chipmunk.

So it was not more than a week later that Ninki gave the air gun another chance. It was a cool evening, and I was lying on the couch with a blanket over me, reading a mystery story; my husband was sitting quietly in his chair reading the newspaper. We had just congratulated one another on the fact that it was now too late for casual guests to drop in, and my husband had mentioned three or four times that he thought he might like some of that pot roast in a sandwich before he went to bed. Then we heard Ninki's unmistakably triumphant mighty-hunter howl from the dining room.

"Look," I said apprehensively, "Ninki's got something, a mouse or something. *Make* her take it outside."

"She'll get it out by herself."

"But she'll chase it around and around and around the dining room and kill it there and—" I gulped unhappily " — eat it. Get it out *now* while it's still alive."

"She won't—" my husband began, when Ninki's triumphant wail broke off with a muffled oath and Ninki herself came hurriedly to the dining room door and stared compellingly at my husband.

"Do you *always* need help?" he asked her crossly. "Seems to me a great big cat like you—"

I shrieked. Ninki lifted her head resignedly, as one whose bitterest views of fate have been confirmed; my husband gasped. Ninki's supper, a full-grown and horribly active bat, was sweeping magnificently down the length of the living room. For a minute I watched it with my mouth open and then, still yelling, buried my head under the blanket.

"My gun," I heard my husband shouting at Ninki, "where is my gun?"

Even under the blanket I could hear the flap of the bat's wings as it raced up and down the living room; I put my knees under my chin and my arms over my head and huddled under the blanket. Outside, they were stalking the bat; I could hear my husband tiptoeing warily down the room, with Ninki apparently right behind him, because he was saying, "Don't *hurry*, for heaven's sake, give me a chance to *aim*."

A hideous thought came to me. "Is it on me?" I said through my teeth, "just tell me once, is it on me, on the blanket? Ninki, *is* it? Is it?"

"Now you just stay perfectly still," my husband said reassuringly. "These things never stay in one place for very long. Why, only the other day I was reading in the paper about a woman who—"

"Is it on the *blanket?*" I insisted hysterically, "on *me?*"

"Listen," my husband said crossly, "if you keep on shaking like that, I'll *never* be able to hit it. Hold still, and I'm sure to miss you."

I do not know what the official world's record might be for getting out from under a blanket, flying across a room, opening a door and a screen door, and getting outside onto a porch with both doors closed behind you, but if it is more than about four seconds I broke it. I thought the bat was chasing me, for one thing. And I knew that, if the bat were chasing me, my husband was aiming that gun at it, wherever it was. Outside on the porch, I leaned my head against the middle pillar and breathed hard.

Inside, there was a series of crashes. I recognized the first as the report of the air gun. The second sounded irresistibly like a lamp going over, which is what it turned out to be. The third I could not identify from the porch, but my husband said later that it was Ninki trying to get out of the way of the air gun and knocking over the andirons. Then my husband spoke angrily to Ninki, and Ninki snarled. Each of them, it seemed, thought the other one had frightened the bat, which had left the blanket when I did, although not half so fast, and was now circling gaily around the chandelier.

“Come on in,” my husband said through the door; he tried to open it but I was hanging on from the outside; “Come on in, it won’t hurt you. I promise it won’t.”

“I’ll stay out here,” I said.

“It’s just as frightened as you are,” he said.

“It is *not*,” I said.

Then he apparently spoke to Ninki again, because he said excitedly, “It’s landing; keep away now, you’ll be hurt.”

There was a great noise of rushing and snarling and shooting, then a long silence. Finally I asked softly, “Are you all right?”

Another silence. “Are you all *right?*” I said.

Another silence. I opened the door a crack and peered in cautiously. My husband was sitting on the couch, beating his hands on his knees. The air gun was on the floor. Ninki and the bat were gone.

“Is it all right to come in?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” my husband said, looking at me bitterly, “have you got a ticket?”

“I mean,” I said, “where’s the bat?”

“She’s taken it into the dining room,” my husband said.

There was a nick in the wallpaper over the couch. In the dining room Ninki was growling pleasurably, deep in her throat. “She went faster than the pellet, is all,” my husband said reasonably. “I was just getting ready to aim and she passed me and passed the pellet and hit the bat just as the pellet hit the wall.”

“Hadn’t you better get it out of the dining room?” I asked.

He began to beat his knees again. I went back to the couch, shook the blanket thoroughly to make sure there had been only one bat on it and that one was gone, and settled down in my chair with my mystery story. After a while Ninki came out of the dining room, nodded contemptuously at my husband, glanced at me and, with a grin at the air gun, got onto my husband's chair and went to sleep on his paper.

I took the air gun and put it on the top shelf of the pantry, where I believe it still is. Now and then it occurs to me that in case of burglars I can take it down to protect the house, but I really think one of the kitchen knives would be safer, if Ninki is not around to take care of me.

It was only the next morning that the man came to fix the glass in the kitchen window, and when Laurie, who was on his reluctant way to school, told the man his father had shot it out with a gun, I laughed cheerily and remarked that boys always had such good stories to cover their own misdeeds. Laurie looked at me in honest indignation, and I told him that he could take a package of gum from the pantry. Although I do not believe in actually encouraging children to tell lies, and do not in any case suppose that one pack of gum can cover up a flagrance like that one, Laurie gave every impression of being satisfied to share a joke about his father. It never occurred to me that the foundations of our parental authority were being slowly shattered until he came home from school some three or four days later with his jacket torn and an air of great innocent suffering. He was half an hour late, and he was accompanied by two of his friends, both of unsavory character; they strode manfully into the house and on into the study where my husband was peacefully doing research for an article on extinct fishes. I heard part of the conversation from upstairs where I was trying to dress Jannie after her nap. With my mind almost unoccupied, I listened without any real attention. "And they threw stones," one of Laurie's friends said in a thin, excited voice; he is somewhat older than Laurie, and he usually tells Laurie’s stories for him when Laurie is too modest to tell them for himself, “and they said *terrible* language, and they *hit* Laurie, and *everything*.”

“Where were *you* all this time?” my husband asked. I could feel through the floor the righteous indignation mounting in the study. “Where were you two while these boys were hitting Laurie?”

There was a moment of quiet, and then Laurie’s voice: “George was behind the tree, and William was running up here to tell you.” Laurie apparently stopped to think for a minute. “I didn’t run,” he added finally, “because I *can’t* very well, in these snow pants.”

The enemy — I could see them from the upstairs front window — were still lingering outside, backing down the hill slowly, prepared to do further battle. Then I heard the front door slam. My husband issued forth, supported valiantly on either side by Laurie’s two friends, while Laurie, with commendable discretion, stayed just inside the front door, yelling, “Here comes my *father!*”

Halfway up the hill, the enemy waited for my husband, and, although I could not hear, I could see them — my husband speaking fiercely and the enemy looking at him with wide, honest eyes. Presently the battle was resolved; my husband turned and stamped back to the house and the enemy went on down the hill, turning at a safe distance to call inaudible insults.

When my husband came inside, I went downstairs to meet him. “Well?” I said.

All of them began talking at once. “And they *hit* Laurie and *every*thing,” his talkative friend said; “They even chased *me*,” his other friend added.

“And these darn old snow pants,” Laurie said at the same time, while over all of them rose the voice of my husband saying, “Ought to be taught better manners. Boy like that deserves a good whipping."

Jannie came down the stairs behind me, asking hopefully, "Was Laurie bad? I'm good, aren't I? Did Laurie do something *new* bad?"

When I had isolated the various political maneuvers into offense and defense, the story went something like this: Laurie and his two friends were walking home from school, entirely without malice, not hurting anybody and minding their own business. As a matter of fact, they stopped quite of their own accord to pick up the books of a little girl who had dropped them into a mud puddle. Furthermore, they were not even thinking any harm, because they were all three most unpleasantly surprised when the largest of the enemy, a boy named David Howell, came up behind them and pulled on the hood of Laurie's jacket. When Laurie said "Hey!" — and we all agreed he was perfectly justified — David spat at him, pronounced half a dozen forbidden epithets, and finally struck him. Laurie's two friends took no active part in the battle, partly because David was bigger than any of them and partly because, as they explained at great length, they felt strongly that it was Laurie's fight and interference would not be sporting. They had come home with Laurie, however, to be his witnesses and to see that justice was done.

"What did you do to David?" I asked my husband.

"I said you'd tell his mother," he said virtuously.

I have seen David's mother, have even spoken to her at P.-T.A. meetings. She is one of those impressive women who usually head committees on supervising movies, taking the entire sixth grade on a tour of one of our local factories, or outlawing slingshots, and I daresay she would be the first person everyone would think of if there should arise an occasion for the mothers to lift the school building and carry it bodily to another location. I felt very strongly, as a matter of fact, that bringing David's mother into this incident was a grave tactical error.

But there were the four of them looking at me trustingly — five, if you count Jannie, who was saying "Poor, poor Laurie," and rubbing his head violently.

"I'll phone her right away," I said, trying to make it sound resolute and threatening. After some unavoidable fumbling with the telephone book I found the Howells' number and finally, with everyone sitting around the phone expectantly, cleared my throat, straightened my shoulders, and briskly gave the number to the operator. After a minute, a strong, no-nonsense voice said "Hello?"

"Hello," I said faintly, "is this Mrs. Howell?"

"Yes," she said. She sounded quite civil, so I changed my mind and said as politely as I could, "Mrs. Howell, I don't know if your boy David has told you about attacking my son Laurie on his way home from school today, but I thought I'd better call you anyway and see if we can't do something about it." Realizing that I had ended a little weakly, I added, "Laurie is *quite* badly hurt."

Laurie looked up, gratified, and nodded. "Tell her I'm dead," he said.

"Mrs. Howell," I said into the phone, scowling at Laurie, "I *do* think that a boy so much bigger than Laurie — a boy so much bigger, as David is — I mean, David is so much bigger than Laurie that I *do* think—"

All this time Mrs. Howell had been silent. Now she said amiably, "I quite agree with you, of course. But I can't quite believe this of David; David is such a *quiet* boy. Is your little boy sure it wasn't David Williams or David Martin?"

"Are you sure it wasn't David Williams or David Martin?" I asked hopefully of the audience beyond the telephone. They all shook their heads violently, and one of Laurie's friends — the one who ran — said enthusiastically, "I know David Howell, and it was him all right. Anyway, he's always doing things like this. Two, three times now, he's hit Laurie. And me, too. He hits everybody."

"It was certainly your David," I said to Mrs. Howell. "They all agree on that. He picked a fight with Laurie on the way home from school and really hurt Laurie *quite* badly."

"Well," she said. "I'll certainly speak to David," she added after a minute.

"Thank you," I said, perfectly content to depart with this empty triumph, but my husband said, "Tell her he was fresh to me, too."

"He was fresh to my husband, too," I said obediently into the phone.

"Really?" Mrs. Howell said, as though David were fresh to her husband all the time and this was no surprise. "Well," she said again, "I'll certainly speak to him."

"Tell her he's hit me lots of times," Laurie said.

"Don't forget the bad words," one of Laurie's friends prompted.

"Make it really forceful," my husband said. "Why should he get away with a thing like this?"

"Will you see that this is stopped once and for all?" I demanded emphatically into the phone.

Her voice sharpened. "I *said* I'd speak to David," she repeated ominously.

"Thank you," I said hastily, and hung up.

We were congratulating one another on our victory when the phone rang. "This is Mrs. Howell," she said when I answered, and her voice had lost much of its civility. "I spoke to David," she went on. "I told you I would.

And it seems that David was not entirely at fault." She dwelt on the last few words as though they gave her some fierce pleasure.

"I don't understand," I said. "Laurie was just walking along the—"

"I beg your pardon," she said, still with great relish. "What about the rock he threw at David?"

I looked at Laurie over the top of the phone, and he returned my glance with sober earnestness. "What rock?" I said, and Laurie's gaze did not waver, but an odd sort of reminiscent pleasure crept into his eye.

"Laurie," said Mrs. Howell plainly, "threw a rock and hit David in the head. There's a big big bump. David hadn't done *any*thing up to then. But if your little boy throws rocks, I can hardly blame—"

I retreated abruptly to safer ground. "Surely," I said, "you are not going to say that there is *any* excuse for a bigger boy hitting a smaller boy?"

"I shall certainly speak to David about that," she said stiffly. "But then, when Laurie's father called David a little sneak and said he ought to be horsewhipped—"

"What about what David called Laurie?" I countered tellingly. "It was so bad that Laurie wouldn't dream of repeating it."

Laurie and his two friends immediately said loudly what it was.

"Your husband said David ought to be horsewhipped," she said, not shaken, and almost, I thought, as though he were not actually the first person who had suggested major punishment for David, "and poor little David tried to tell him that Laurie had been throwing rocks. You really *ought* to do something about a child throwing rocks. None of *my* children throw rocks; it's something *I* can't stand. But poor little David—"

"David did so throw rocks," I said. "And if my husband said—"

"I did not say it," my husband said.

“Surely there is no excuse,” she said, “for a grown man to pick on a poor little boy.”

I backed up again. “What about poor little Laurie?” I asked. “He was *quite* badly hurt. Surely there is no excuse—”

“Poor little David—” she began.

“And my poor little—” I said, and then started again.

“My husband, I mean. What about the names they yelled at *him?*”

I was suddenly reminded of the time Mrs. Howell had taken part in a local debate, holding and maintaining with absolute conviction the position that our state should secede from the United States to avoid having its natural resources completely depleted. “Furthermore—” she was saying.

“What a way to bring up a child,” I said gently. “What kind of a mother are you?”

My audience, I perceived, was growing restless. Laurie’s two friends were putting on their overshoes; Laurie himself had entered into an elaborately casual game with Jannie that had taken them almost to the kitchen doorway, and my husband was sauntering almost noiselessly back to the study.

“Now you listen to me,” Mrs. Howell began, her voice rising, “now you listen to me—”

I hung up gracefully and followed Laurie into the kitchen.

“Laurie,” I said sternly, “did you throw a rock at David?”

Laurie pondered, frowning, his head on one side and one finger thoughtfully tapping his cheek. “I forget,” he said at last.

“Try to remember,” I said threateningly. Laurie shook his head in despair. “I just forget,” he said.

I went to the study door. “Did you call David a little sneak?” I demanded.

My husband looked up from his article on extinct fishes. “A little what?” he said.

“A little sneak.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” my husband said. “Why would I call what’s-his-name a little sneak?” He turned back to his article. “Are you still worrying about *that?*” he asked.

The phone rang. I strode over and slammed it out of the receiver. “Well?” I said.

“If you think you can just hang up on people just because your son is a little bully and goes around throwing rocks and—”

“If you think you and your half-witted David can get away with picking on every child in the neighborhood just because he’s overgrown and stupid—”

“If you would care to—”

“Perhaps *you* would like to—”

We hung up simultaneously. My husband opened the study door and looked out. “Who were you talking to?” he asked.

“Look,” I said, “if you’d just take care of your own affairs and let Laurie fight his own battles and not come to me to—”

“I’m good, aren’t I?” Jannie said. She came over and pulled at my hand. “I’m *good*, aren’t I?”

My husband said loudly, “Let’s box for a while, son. Get the gloves.” Without looking at me he added, “We’ll box out in the woodshed. Then,” he said thoughtfully, “the noise won’t bother Mother when she’s on the phone.”

“Aren’t I?” said Jannie urgently. “*Are*n’t I?”

I reached for the phone, and then hesitated. It was time to start the potatoes for dinner; I had a quick picture of Mrs. Howell peeling potatoes with one hand while she held a phone with the other, and I heard Laurie yelp as he walked into what was almost certainly a right cross.

“Want to help Mommy make dinner?” I asked Jannie.

Mrs. Howell and I met at the meat counter in the grocery the next morning; she smiled and I smiled and then she said, “How is Laurie today?”

“He seems much better, thanks,” I said solemnly. “And David?”

“Fairly well,” she said without turning a hair.

“Horrible little beasts,” I said.

“Liars, all of them,” she said. “*I* never believe a word they say.”

We both laughed and turned to regard the meat. “They certainly do eat, though,” she said mournfully. “I suppose it’s hamburger again today.”

“I was thinking about liver,” I said.

“Will Laurie eat liver?” she asked with interest. “David won’t touch it; do you cook it any special way?”

I remember that during that fall and winter Laurie was still wearing, when I forced him, a pair of red overalls onto which I had embroidered — during a time when I was somewhat more free and had a good deal more time to spend on the pretty little delicacies of life — a “Laurie” in green silk. He wore it to school only once, as I remember, and after that we made a bargain about how if I didn’t make him wear it in public he would try to bring himself to it on strictly private occasions. When it began to grow noticeably short on him, without being noticeably worn, I whimsically crossed out the “Laurie” with a green embroidered line, and embroidered “Joanne” underneath, and shortened it along with half a dozen other pair of overalls for Jannie. She wore it during the late spring and early summer, when Laurie first started going to the barber to get his hair cut; she was now wearing the green corduroy jacket Laurie had worn the day we moved. This was when my personal schedule resolved itself into a round of hemlines and chocolate pudding. When I was not shortening or lengthening the one I was stirring the other. The summer saw Jannie inherit a number of pullover shirts, which are fortunately without gender, and thousands of bachelor socks, in preparation for nursery school in the fall. Laurie had a new jacket for school, which we were taught to call a windbreaker rather than a jacket, and his shoes were so huge that I was uncomfortably made aware that he had passed from the lower-priced size into the higher-priced size.

Summers go by so quickly, with a minimum of washing and a maximum of daylight, that we none of us have ever been able to perceive that infinitely cruel moment when the year turns and the days draw in; one morning the children were drinking lemonade in the back yard and talking largely of what they planned to build during the summer, and the next afternoon they were raking leaves and Jannie had lost a sandal in the leaf pile, to be hidden until perhaps next spring. Mothers have their own seasonal occupations; one afternoon I was sitting quietly in the living room, lengthening and shortening overalls in a sort of unworldly account; I had done three pair — one short and two long — when Laurie wandered in and stood in the center of the room, regarding me bleakly. Behind him trailed his dear friends Stuart and Robert, and after a few minutes, about as long as it takes short fat legs to catch up, Jannie plodded in. Our big dog Toby followed *her*. They lined themselves up in the center of the carpet and stood looking at me silently.

I looked up, forcing an expression of bright cheer onto my face. Unasked I said, “You may each have a piece of candy from the dish on the table.”

“No, thank you,” said Laurie gloomily.

“No, thank you,” said Robert.

“No, thank you,” said Stuart.

They stood sadly, watching me as I pushed the needle in and out of the cloth.

"No, thanks," said Jannie.

Laurie sighed deeply; so did Stuart and then Robert. I smiled falsely and said, "Would you each like an apple then?"

Laurie shook his head, so did Stuart and Robert and then, finally, Jannie.

"Nothing at all," said Laurie tragically. He paced over and sat down on the couch, and Robert and Stuart followed him. The three of them watched me sewing, and I tried with some embarrassment to hide what I was doing.

Toby still sat in the middle of the floor, looking with perplexed eyes first at me and then at the boys.

"Would you like to run down to the store and get some ice cream for all of us?" The boys shook their heads, as one man.

Jannie sat down solidly on the floor next to Toby and asked me, "Are you fixing Laurie's overalls?"

"Why, I certainly am," I said gaily.

"For school tomorrow?" Jannie asked.

There was a long silence. Then Laurie said, "Aaaaaah, *keep* quiet," to Jannie.

"What you talking about it for?" Stuart demanded.

"Old big-mouth Jannie," Robert said.

"Never mind, boys," I said. "You've had a fine summer."

"But *school*," Laurie said, as one to whom a vast injustice has been done.

"I know," I said. "Would you each like a cookie?"

"Naw," Laurie said.

"Why'n earth they want us to go to school *any*way?" Stuart demanded.

"Old first grade," Robert said.

“Why,” I said treacherously, “first thing you know you’ll be having a wonderful time in school. You’ve just forgotten what school is *like*.”

“*No*, we haven’t,” Robert said.

“*I* used to *love* school,” I said.

This was a falsehood so patent that none of them felt it necessary to answer me, even in courtesy. They sat and stared at me instead.

“Why don’t you do something — play, or something?” I asked. “Then you’d forget all about it.”

“We could play school,” Jannie suggested. “Why don’t we play school?”

She was silent as the three faces turned evilly towards her.

“We could ride our bikes,” Robert said unenthusiastically.

“*Why* don’t you?” I said, with great animation. “That would be *fun*.”

“We could have a war,” Stuart said.

“We could play store,” Laurie said.

“We could play school,” Jannie said.

“Listen,” Stuart said, “we could be Indians and Jannie could be our prisoner …”

“We could tie her up,” Laurie said, looking at his sister speculatively.

“I will be your prisoner,” Jannie said cheerfully, “and you must all tie me up and be Indians.”

“No, *listen*,” Robert said. Activity came to all three of them at once. Robert rolled off the couch and ran into the hall, and the other two followed. After a minute Jannie hoisted herself off the floor and went along too. Toby, opening one eye, sighed deeply and got up; he had just started across the floor when the three boys and Jannie came hurrying back.

“Listen,” Laurie said to me excitedly, “we’re going to make a show. You’re going to be the audience, and you got to go out in the kitchen while we get ready.”

It was the last day of vacation; I put my needle carefully through the hem I was sewing and folded all the overalls and set them aside. Laurie and Robert pushed me out into the kitchen, where I took a handful of cookies and sat down, munching, to wait.

After about five minutes and much loud consultation they called me back and sat me down on the couch. Then Stuart sat in the chair I had vacated and took up the newspaper.

"I'm supposed to be reading the paper," he told me condescendingly.

Laurie and Robert and Jannie and Toby were in the dining room; I could hear them arguing. Finally there was a knock on the dining room door and Stuart put down his paper and said, "Come in." Laurie entered, wearing his cowboy hat, his spurs, his gun, his cowboy vest, his neckerchief, his lasso, and his boots. "Hi, pardner," he said.

"Hi, pardner," Stuart said.

Laurie sat down in the chair across from Stuart, and he and Stuart regarded one another intently.

"How are you, pardner?" Laurie enquired at last.

"Oh, I'm fine, pardner," Stuart said. They giggled slightly and then Stuart, with a large expansive gesture, said, "Have some candy, pardner."

"Thanks, pardner, don't mind if I do," Laurie said. He swaggered over to the table, helped himself to a piece of candy, and went back to his chair. He finished the candy, licked his fingers and then, with a loud and dramatic groan, grasped his stomach and rolled off the chair onto the floor, where he lay still groaning. "See," he said, raising his head to look at me, "the candy was poisoned."

"I see," I said. "Very effective."

Laurie subsided, and there was a long pause, during which Stuart began to fidget, looking at the candy dish. Then finally he said, "Robert, come *on*," and Robert said from the dining room, "Okay, I'm *coming*. I got to get my *gun* on, don't I?"

Then there was another knock on the dining room door, and Stuart said "Come in."

Robert came in, said "Hi, pardner," and sat down.

"Hi, pardner," Stuart said. "Have a piece of candy."

"Don't care if I do," said Robert. He took his candy, swallowed it whole, and then fell groaning on top of Laurie.

"Now me," Jannie howled from the dining room, and she hurried in, said "Hi, pardner," over her shoulder to Stuart, and took a piece of candy. "Can I have two?" she asked me, and I shook my head no. She ate her candy, groaned shrilly, and sat on Robert.

"Guess I'll have a piece of candy too," Stuart said. He fell groaning onto the heap on the floor.

I began to applaud, and Laurie put his head up and said, "*That*'s not the end."

"Sorry," I said. I started to take a piece of candy, remembered in time that it was poisoned, and drew back my hand.

Laurie disengaged himself from the pile on the floor. "Now the stagecoach," he said.

The others got up and dusted themselves off. Everybody retired to the dining room, and I waited.

Finally Laurie reappeared, leading Toby by the collar. "I'm the good cowboy," he explained to me. "I'm Hop-along Cassidy and I—"

"*I*'m Hopalong Cassidy," Robert's voice rose protestingly from the other room.

"I'm Roy Rogers," Laurie continued smoothly, "and this is the stagecoach and I'm riding along with it."

"What's the stagecoach?" I asked, confused.

"Toby is," Laurie said. Toby glanced at me in mild apology. "See," Laurie said, "the gold is in the stagecoach and the bad guys are going to try and get it, but me and my gang, we're riding close along …" He began to hurry Toby across the room, making galloping cowboy noises, while Toby stumbled reluctantly along behind him.

"Good dog," I said reassuringly, and Toby put his head down and galloped resolutely. "Good dog," I said.

As they passed the dining room door for the second time the horde of bandits fell upon them. Stuart and Robert brandished their guns, shouting fearfully and making simultaneous sounds of horse hooves and gunfire. Jannie, a small stout cowboy in a flapping hat, carrying a water pistol, followed fiercely, saying "Bang," with outlaw abandon.

"We got ya covered," Hopalong Cassidy remarked. Roy Rogers, undaunted, took cover behind a chair, while the stagecoach trotted hastily over to the couch and tried to get into my lap.

Stuart and Robert had now taken cover also, one in the dining room doorway, the other in the angle of the fireplace. They were shooting across the room, taking careful aim and exposing themselves rashly before leaping back into hiding.

Jannie sat down in the middle of the floor and began to take off her sandals. "Something in my shoe," she told me. "Wait a minute, boys, till I get my shoe fixed."

"Get into a safe place," Laurie shouted at her, "you want to get killed, woman?"

"Bang," Jannie said, aiming her water pistol at him. "Bang," she said, at Stuart, and "Bang" at Robert. "I killed you all three," she said. "Now I can fix my shoe."

Laurie began to inch out from behind the chair until he was standing free of it. “Reach,” he said suddenly. “Drop them guns.”

Obediently, Stuart and Robert dropped their guns and raised their hands. Laurie walked over, gun ready, and frisked them both. Then he shot them. They both fell, dying fearfully. Robert raised himself on one elbow and said, “Joe, Joe.”

“What, Joe?” Laurie said, turning.

“Get the guys that did this, Joe,” Robert said.

“I shore will, Joe,” Laurie said. He turned thoughtfully and shot Jannie, who looked up, surprised. “I said I was fixing my *shoe*,” she said irritably.

“Y’got it anyway,” Laurie said.

“Okay,” said Jannie. She fell obligingly over onto her side and went on putting on her shoe that way.

“Well,” I said, applauding again, “this has certainly been an exciting—”

“Listen,” Laurie said earnestly, “this is only our *practice*. You’re only seeing the *practice*, so far.”

“We’re going to do a real play when we finish our *practice*,” Stuart confirmed.

“Reach,” Laurie said to him.

“I won’t,” Stuart said pettishly. “Why do *I* always have to be the guy that reaches?”

“Keep them hands up,” Laurie ordered. Robert stole up behind him and put a gun into his back. “*You* reach,” Robert said.

Laurie dropped his gun and Stuart picked it up. Robert shot Stuart and Laurie and they both fell groaning.

“Who’s the good guy,” Stuart asked suddenly. “I forget.”

“I’m Gene Autry,” Laurie said.

“I’m Roy Rogers,” Robert said.

"*I*'m the good guy, then," Stuart said with satisfaction. "Reach."

Stuart shot Robert and Laurie

"Listen," Laurie said from the floor, "we don't *die* right. We ought to roll more."

"Sometimes we ought to get dragged by our horses," Robert added.

"Reach!" Jannie said suddenly. Stunned, Gene Autry, Roy Rogers, and Hopalong Cassidy turned; Jannie had them all covered with her water pistol.

"It's a *dame*," Stuart said.

"A cowgirl," Robert amplified.

"It's Jesse James," Laurie said. "Now you must shoot us all, Jan."

"Bang, bang, bang," Jannie said, and the heroes fell, rolled, groaned, and were even dragged a little by their horses.

While they were still groaning I stole away, back into the kitchen, where I poured four glasses full of fruit juice and put cookies on a plate. When I came back into the living room the actors were dusting themselves off.

"That was a great show," I said.

"We'll do a *real* one tomorrow," Laurie said. Then his face fell. "I forgot," he said.

I thought briefly and comfortably of the quiet mornings, the long lovely afternoons, the early bedtimes. "Well," I said, with immense heartiness, "it will be summer again before we all know it."

"A what?" said Jannie.

"What *for?*" said Laurie.

Everyone always says the third baby is the easiest one to have, and now I know why. It's the easiest because it's the funniest, because you've been there twice, and you know. You know, for instance, how you’re going to look in a maternity dress about the seventh month, and you know how to release the footbrake on a baby carriage without fumbling amateurishly, and you know how to tie your shoes before and do knee-chests after, and while you’re not exactly casual, you’re a little bit off-hand about the whole thing. Sentimental people keep insisting that women go on to have a third baby because they love babies, and cynical people seem to maintain that a woman with two healthy, active children around the house will do *any*thing for ten quiet days in the hospital; my own position is somewhere between the two, but I acknowledge that it leans toward the latter.

Because it *was* my third I was spared a lot of unnecessary discomfort. No one sent us any dainty pink sweaters, for instance. We received only one pair of booties, and those were a pair of rosebud-covered white ones that someone had sent Laurie when he was born and which I had given, still in their original pink tissue paper, to a friend when *her* first child was born; she had subsequently sent them to her cousin in Texas for a second baby and the cousin sent them back East on the occasion of a mutual friend’s twins; the mutual friend gave them to me, with a card saying “Love to Baby” and the pink tissue paper hardly ruffled. I set them carefully aside, because I knew someone who was having a baby in June.

I borrowed back my baby carriage from my next-door neighbor, took the crib down out of the attic, washed my way through the chest of baby shirts and woolen shawls, briefed the incumbent children far enough ahead of time, and spent a loving and painstaking month packing my suitcase. This time I knew exactly what I was taking with me to the hospital, but assembling it took time and eventually required an emergency trip to the nearest metropolis. I packed it, though, finally: a yellow nightgown trimmed with lace, a white nightgown that tied at the throat with a blue bow, two of the fanciest bed-jackets I could find — that was what I went to the city for —— and then, two pounds of homemade fudge, as many mystery stories as I could cram in, and a bag of apples. Almost at the last minute I added a box of pralines, a bottle of expensive cologne, and my toothbrush. I have heard of people who take their own satin sheets to the hospital, but that has always seemed to me a waste of good suitcase space.

My doctor was very pleasant and my friends were very thoughtful; for the last two weeks before I went to the hospital almost everyone I know called me almost once a day and said “Haven’t you gone *yet?*” My mother- and father-in-law settled on a weekend to visit us when, according to the best astronomical figuring, I should have had a two-week-old baby ready to show them; they arrived, were entertained with some restraint on my part, and left, eyeing me with disfavor and some suspicion. My mother sent me a telegram from California saying “Is everything all right? Shall I come? Where is baby?” My children were sullen, my husband was embarrassed.

Everything was, as I say, perfectly normal, up to and including the frightful moment when I leaped out of bed at two in the morning as though there had been a pea under the mattress; when I turned on the light my husband said sleepily, “Having baby?”

“I really don’t know,” I said nervously. I was looking for the clock, which I hide at night so that in the morning when the alarm rings I will have to wake up looking for it. It was hard to find without the alarm ringing.

“Shall I wake up?” my husband asked without any sign of pleased anticipation.

“I can’t find the *clock*,” I said.

“Clock?” my husband said. “Clock. Wake me five minutes apart.”

I unlocked the suitcase, took out a mystery story, and sat down in the armchair with a blanket over me. After a few minutes, Ninki, who usually sleeps on the foot of Laurie's bed, wandered in and settled down on a corner of the blanket by my feet. She slept as peacefully as my husband did most of the night, except that now and then she raised her head to regard me with a look of silent contempt.

Because the hospital is five miles from our house I had an uneasy feeling that I ought to allow plenty of time, particularly since neither of us had ever learned to drive and consequently I had to call our local taxi to take me to the hospital. At seven-thirty I called my doctor and we chatted agreeably for a few minutes, and I said I would just give the children their breakfast and wash up the dishes and then run over to the hospital, and he said that would be just fine and he'd plan to meet me later, then; the unspoken conviction between us was that I ought to be back in the fields before sundown.

I went into the kitchen and proceeded methodically to work, humming cheerfully and stopping occasionally to grab the back of a chair and hold my breath. My husband told me later that he found his cup and saucer (the one with "Father" written on it) in the oven, but I am inclined to believe that he was too upset to be a completely reliable informant. My own recollection is of doing everything the way I have a thousand times before — school-morning short cuts so familiar that I am hardly aware, usually, of doing them at all. The frying pan, for instance. My single immediate objective was a cup of coffee, and I decided to heat up the coffee left from the night before, rather than taking the time to make fresh; it seemed brilliantly logical to heat it in the frying pan because anyone knows that a broad shallow container will heat liquid faster than a tall narrow one like the coffeepot. I will not try to deny, however, that it *looked* funny.

By the time the children came down everything seemed to be moving along handsomely; Laurie grimly got two glasses and filled them with fruit juice for Jannie and himself. He offered me one, but I had no desire to eat, or in fact to do anything which might upset my precarious balance between two and three children, or to interrupt my morning's work for more than coffee, which I was still doggedly making in the frying pan. My husband came downstairs, sat in his usual place, said good-morning to the children, accepted the glass of fruit juice Laurie poured for him, and asked me brightly, "How do you feel?"

"Splendid," I said, making an enormous smile for all of them. "I'm doing wonderfully well."

"Good," he said. "How soon do you think we ought to leave?"

"Around noon, probably," I said. "Everything is fine, really."

My husband asked politely, "May I help you with breakfast?"

"No, indeed," I said. I stopped to catch my breath and smiled reassuringly. "I feel *so* well," I said.

"Would you be offended," he said, still very politely, "if I took this egg out of my glass?"

"Certainly not," I said. "I'm sorry; I can't think how it got there."

"It's nothing at all," my husband said. "I was just thirsty."

They were all staring at me oddly, and I kept giving them my reassuring smile; I *did* feel spendid; my months of waiting were nearly over, my careful preparations had finally been brought to a purpose, tomorrow I would be wearing my yellow nightgown. "I'm *so* pleased," I said.

I was slightly dizzy, perhaps. And there *were* pains, but they were authentic ones, not the feeble imitations I had been dreaming up the past few weeks. I patted Laurie on the head. "Well," I said, in the tone I had used perhaps five hundred times in the last months, "Well, do we want a little boy or a little boy?"

"Won't you sit down?" my husband said. He had the air of a man who expects that an explanation will somehow be given him for a series of extraordinary events in which he is unwillingly involved. “I think you ought to sit down,” he added urgently.

It was about then that I realized that he was right. I ought to sit down. As a matter of fact, I ought to go to the hospital right now, immediately. I dropped my reassuring smile and the fork I had been carrying around with me.

“I’d better hurry,” I said inadequately.

My husband called the taxi and brought down my suitcase. The children were going to stay with friends, and one of the things we had planned to do was drop them off on our way to the hospital; now, however, I felt vitally that I had not the time. I began to talk fast.

“You’ll have to take care of the children,” I told my husband. “See that …” I stopped. I remember thinking with incredible clarity and speed. “See that they finish their breakfast,” I said. Pajamas on the line, I thought, school, cats, toothbrushes. Milkman. Overalls to be mended, laundry. “I ought to make a list,” I said vaguely. “Leave a note for the milkman tomorrow night. Soap, too. We need soap.”

“Yes, dear,” my husband kept saying. “Yes dear yes dear.”

The taxi arrived and suddenly I was saying goodbye to the children. “See you later,” Laurie said casually. “Have a good time.”

“Bring me a present,” Jannie added.

“Don’t worry about a thing,” my husband said.

“Now, don’t you worry,” I told him. “There’s nothing to worry about.”

“Everything will be *fine*,” he said. “Don’t worry.”

I waited for a good moment and then scrambled into the taxi without grace; I did not dare risk my reassuring smile on the taxi driver but I nodded to him briskly.

“I’ll be with you in an hour,” my husband said nervously. “And don’t worry.”

“Everything will be *fine*,” I said. “Don’t worry.”

“Nothing to worry about,” the taxi driver said to my husband, and we started off, my husband standing on the lawn wringing his hands and the taxi tacking insanely from side to side of the road to avoid even the slightest bump.

I sat very still in the back seat, trying not to breathe. I had one arm lovingly around my suitcase, which held my yellow nightgown, and I tried to light a cigarette without using any muscles except those in my hands and my neck and still not let go of my suitcase.

“Going to be a beautiful day,” I said to the taxi driver at last. We had a twenty-minute trip ahead of us, at least — much longer, if he continued his zig-zag path. “Pretty warm for this time of year.”

“Pretty warm yesterday, too,” the taxi driver said.

“It *was* warm yesterday,” I conceded, and stopped to catch my breath. The driver, who was obviously avoiding looking at me in the mirror, said a little bit hysterically, “Probably be warm tomorrow, too.”

I waited for a minute, and then I was able to say, dubiously, “I don’t know as it will stay warm *that* long. Might cool off by tomorrow.”

“Well,” the taxi driver said, “it was sure warm *yesterday*.”

“Yesterday?” I said. “Yes, that was a warm day.”

“Going to be nice today, too,” the driver said. I clutched my suitcase tighter and made some small sound — more like a yelp than anything else — and the taxi veered madly off to the left and then began to pick up speed with enthusiasm.

“Very warm indeed,” the driver babbled, leaning forward against the wheel. “Warmest day I ever saw for the time of year. Usually this time of year it's colder. Yesterday it was *terribly*—"

"It was not," I said. "It was freezing. I can see the tower of the hospital."

"I remember thinking how warm it was," the driver said. He turned into the hospital drive. "It was so warm I noticed it right away. 'This is a warm day,' I thought; that's how warm it was."

We pulled up with a magnificent flourish at the hospital entrance, and the driver skittered out of the front seat and came around and opened the door and took my arm.

"My wife had five," he said. "I'll take the suitcase, Miss. Five and never a minute's trouble with any of them."

He rushed me in through the door and up to the desk. "Here," he said to the desk clerk. "Pay me later," he said to me, and fled.

"Name?" the desk clerk said to me politely, her pencil poised.

"Name," I said vaguely. I remembered, and told her.

"Age?" she asked. "Sex? Occupation?"

"Writer," I said.

"Housewife," she said.

"Writer," I said.

"I'll just put down housewife," she said. "Doctor? How many children?"

"Two," I said. "Up to now."

"Normal pregnancy?" she said. "Blood test? X-ray?"

"Look—" I said.

"Husband's name?" she said. "Address? Occupation?"

"Just put down housewife," I said. "I don't remember *his* name, really."

"Legitimate?"

"What?" I said.

"Is your husband the father of this child? Do you *have* a husband?"

"Please," I said plaintively, "can I go on upstairs?"

“Well, *really*,” she said, and sniffed. “You’re *only* having a baby.”

She waved delicately to a nurse, who took me by the same arm everybody else had been using that morning, and in the elevator this nurse was very nice. She asked me twice how I was feeling and said “maternity?” to me inquiringly as we left the elevator; I was carrying my own suitcase by then.

Two more nurses joined us upstairs; we made light conversation while I got into the hospital nightgown. The nurses had all been to some occupational party the night before and one of them had been simply a riot; she was still being a riot while I undressed, because every now and then one of the other two nurses would turn around to me and say, “Isn’t she a riot, honestly?”

I made a few remarks, just to show that I too was lighthearted and not at all nervous; I commented laughingly on the hospital nightgown, and asked with amusement tinged with foreboding what the apparatus was that they were wheeling in on the tray.

My doctor arrived about half an hour later; he had obviously had three cups of coffee and a good cigar; he patted me on the shoulder and said, “How do we feel?”

“Pretty well,” I said, with an uneasy giggle that ended in a squawk. “How long do you suppose it will be before—”

“We don’t need to worry about *that* for a while yet,” the doctor said. He laughed pleasantly, and nodded to the nurses. They all bore down on me at once. One of them smoothed my pillow, one of them held my hand, and the third one stroked my forehead and said, “After all, you’re *only* having a baby.”

“Call me if you want me,” the doctor said to the nurses as he left, “I’ll be downstairs in the coffee shop.”

“*I’ll* call you if I need you,” I told him ominously, and one of the nurses said in a honeyed voice, “Now, look, we don’t want our husband to get all worried.”

I opened one eye; my husband was sitting, suddenly, beside the bed. He looked as though he were trying not to scream. “They *told* me to come in here,” he said. “I was trying to find the waiting room.”

“Other end of the hall,” I told him grimly. I pounded on the bell and the nurse came running. “Get him out of here,” I said, waving my head at my husband.

“They *told* me—” my husband began, looking miserably at the nurse.

“It’s allllll right,” the nurse said. She began to stroke my forehead again. “Hubby belongs right here.”

“Either he goes or I go,” I said.

The door slammed open and the doctor came in. “Heard you were here,” he said jovially, shaking my husband’s hand. “Look a little pale.”

My husband smiled weakly.

“Never lost a father yet,” the doctor said, and slapped him on the back. He turned to me. “How do we feel?” he said.

“Terrible,” I said, and the doctor laughed again. “Just on my way downstairs,” he said to my husband. “Come along?”

No one seemed actually to go or come that morning; I would open my eyes and they were there, open my eyes again and they were gone. This time, when I opened my eyes, a pleasant-faced nurse was standing beside me; she was swabbing my arm with a piece of cotton. Although I am ordinarily timid about hypodermics I welcomed this one with what was almost a genuine echo of my old reassuring smile. “Well, well,” I said to the nurse. “Sure glad to see *you*.”

“Sissy,” she said distinctly, and jabbed me in the arm.

"How soon will this wear off?" I asked her with deep suspicion; I am always afraid with nurses that they feel that the psychological effect of a hypodermic is enough, and that I am actually being innoculated with some useless, although probably harmless, concoction.

"You won't even notice," she said enigmatically, and left.

The hypodermic hit me suddenly, and I began to giggle about five minutes after she left. I was alone in the room, lying there giggling to myself, when I opened my eyes and there was a woman standing beside the bed. She was human, not a nurse; she was wearing a baggy blue bathrobe. "I'm across the hall," she said. "I been hearing you."

"I was laughing," I said, with vast dignity.

"I heard you," she said. "Tomorrow it might be me, maybe."

"You here for a baby?"

"Someday," she said gloomily. "I was here two weeks ago, I was having pains. I come in the morning and that night they said to me, 'Go home, wait a while longer.' So I went home, and I come again three days later, I was having pains. And they said to me, 'Go home, wait a while longer.' And so yesterday I come again, I was having pains. So far they let me stay."

"That's too bad," I said.

"I got my mother there," she said. "She takes care of everything and sees the meals made, but she's beginning to think I got her there with false pretenses."

"That's too bad," I said. I began to pound the wall with my fists.

"Stop that," she said. "Somebody'll hear you. This is my third. The first two — nothing."

"This is *my* third," I said. "I don't care who hears me."

"My kids," she said. "Every time I come home they say to me, 'Where's the baby?' My mother, too. My husband, he keeps driving me over and driving me back."

"They kept telling me the third was the easiest," I said. I began to giggle again.

"There you go," she said. "Laughing your head off. I wish *I* had something to laugh at."

She waved her hand at me and turned and went mournfully through the door. I opened my same weary eye and my husband was sitting comfortably in his chair. "I said," he said saying loudly, "I said, 'Do you mind if I read?'" He had the *New York Times* on his knee.

"Look," I said, "do I have anything to read? Here I am, with nothing to do and no one to talk to and you sit there and read the *New York Times* right in front of me and here I am, with nothing—"

"How do we feel?" the doctor asked. He was suddenly much taller than before, and the walls of the room were rocking distinctly.

"Doctor," I said, and I believe that my voice was a little louder than I intended it should be, "you better give me—"

He patted me on the hand and it was my husband instead of the doctor. "Stop yelling," he said.

"I'm *not* yelling," I said. "I don't like this any more. I've changed my mind, I don't want any baby, I want to go home and forget the whole thing."

"I know *just* how you feel," he said.

My only answer was a word which certainly I knew that I *knew*, although I had never honestly expected to hear it spoken in my own ladylike voice.

"Stop yelling," my husband said urgently. "*Please* stop saying that."

I had the idea that I was perfectly conscious, and I looked at him with dignity. "Who is doing this?" I asked. "You or me?"

"It's all right," the doctor said. "We're on our way." The walls were moving along on either side of me and the woman in the blue bathrobe was waving from a doorway.

"She loved me for the dangers I had passed," I said to the doctor, "and I loved her that she did pity them."

"It's all right, I tell you," the doctor said. "Hold your breath."

"Did he finish his *New York Times?*"

"Hours ago," the doctor said.

"What's he reading now?" I asked.

"The *Tribune*," the doctor said. "Hold your breath."

It was so unbelievably bright that I closed my eyes. "Such a lovely time," I said to the doctor. "Thank you so much for asking me, I can't tell you how I've enjoyed it. Next time you must come to our—"

"It's a girl," the doctor said.

"Sarah," I said politely, as though I were introducing them. I still thought I was perfectly conscious, and then I was. My husband was sitting beside the bed, smiling cheerfully.

"What happened to *you?*" I asked him. "No *Wall Street Journal?*"

"It's a girl," he said.

"I know," I said. "I was there."

I was in a pleasant, clean room. There was no doubt that it was all over; I could see my feet under the bedspread.

"It's a girl," I said to my husband.

The door opened and the doctor came in. "Well," he said. "How do we feel?"

"Fine," I said. "It's a girl."

"I know," he said.

The door was still open and a face peered around it. My husband, the doctor, and I, all turned happily to look. It was the woman in the blue bathrobe.

"Had it yet?" I asked her.

"No," she said. "You?"

"Yep," I said. "You going home again?"

"Listen," she said. "I been thinking. Home, the kids all yelling and my mother looking sad like she's disappointed in me. Like I did something. My husband, every time he sees me jump he reaches for the car keys. My sister, she calls me every day and if I answer the phone she hangs up. Here, I get three meals a day I don't cook, I know all the nurses, and I meet a lot of people going in and out. I figure I'd be a *fool* to go home. What was it, girl or boy?"

"Girl," I said.

"Girl," she said. "They say the third's the easiest."

Two

I BELIEVE THAT all women, but especially housewives, tend to think in lists; I have always believed, against all opposition, that women think in logical sequence, but it was not until I came to empty the pockets of my light summer coat that year that I realized how thoroughly the housekeeping mind falls into the list pattern, how basically the idea of a series of items, following one another docilely, forms the only possible reasonable approach to life if you have to live it with a home and a husband and children, none of whom would dream of following one another docilely. What started me thinking about it was the little slips of paper I found in the pockets of my light summer coat, one beginning “cereal, shoes to shop, bread, cheese, peanut butter, evening paper, doz doughnuts, CALL PICTURE.” I showed this list to my husband, and he read it twice and said it didn’t make any sense. When I told him that it made perfect sense because it followed my route up one side of the main street of our town and down the other side — I have to buy the cereal at a special store, because that’s the only one which carries the kind the children like — he said then what did CALL PICTURE mean? and when I explained that it meant I must call the picture-framer before I started out and was in big letters because if I took the list out in the store and found I had forgotten to call the picture-framer I would then have to stop in and see him, he sniffed and said if he managed his filing cabinet the way I managed my shopping…. The other list I found in my summer coat pocket started out “summer coat to clnrs.”

The fact that I hadn’t *taken* my summer coat to the cleaners (oh, those first fall days, with the sad sharpness in the air and the leaves bright so that our road is a line of color, and the feeling of storing-in against the winter, and the pumpkins) does not materially affect my conviction that the kind of progress from one thing to another which makes up a list is deeply logical, if ineffectual. Say to my next-door neighbor that you admire her new kitchen linoleum, and she will tell you, “Do you like it, really? I wanted to get white instead of blue, but it gets dirty so quickly, and then of course John always did like blue best, but of course the cannister set and the kitchen table are lighter blue, and it would have meant replacing *them*, but then the curtains …” From here she may go off onto any of several tangents (I am assuming, of course, that she is not interrupted by my telling of my own experiences, or John’s saying how about bringing out some crackers and cheese for everybody, or a child crying somewhere upstairs), such as the dirt detour; she may give you a list of things which *do* get dirty (“… a black linoleum, and do you know it showed every single track …”) or things which do *not* get dirty (“… and even though it was really a pale yellow it just wiped off …”), or she may become interested in kitchen fixtures (“… and she had the *prettiest* curtains, but they were sort of odd, I thought, in a *kitchen;* they were …”) or bathroom fixtures (“… and they had the same tiles in the bathroom, only these were pink, and the curtains *there* …”) or even John’s likes and dislikes (“… but of course he won’t eat anything with garlic in it, so I have to take all the recipes I get and put in …”).

I think that may be why my summer coat never got to the cleaners. You can start from any given point on a list and go off in all directions at once, the world being as full as it is, and even though a list is a greatly satisfying thing to have, it is extraordinarily difficult to keep it focussed on the subject at hand. Right at this point, for instance, I was thinking about demitasse cups. I personally prefer a double-sized coffee cup, but with those tiny cups coffee is served so graciously (I see a list here, going on into tiny spoons, and after-dinner liqueurs, and me in a long gown at the table, and everyone speaking wittily, and the children sweetly asleep in the nursery with an efficient Nanny on guard) — so easily (this list includes a maid and a butler to wash the cups and polish the tiny spoons) and so elegantly (years ago my mother promised me a silver coffee service, and then there's always the coffee table we inherited from Great-Aunt Martha, and if my husband would just get to work and sand it down and varnish it …) that, infected as I am by the constant desire to change everything, I may give in to the demitasse, after all. What persuaded me to think about demitasse cups at all was a statement made recently by one of my close friends, who said that she personally did not like our big cups for dinner coffee, but preferred a demitasse because she liked her coffee scalding hot. That, of course, sent me off onto several tangents on *her* housekeeping; she is a *very* good friend, and I would not for the world mention to her that the last time we visited there, there was no soap in the bathroom. I am terribly fond of her, but it *is* true that her guest room windows do not open. She is a grand girl, and if she likes her coffee in small cups at my house, she shall have it that way, in spite of the fact that the last time we dined there I found a spider in the salad.

Perhaps — following still another list — if we did have demitasse cups, our after-dinner hour, which is complicated by the presence of children coming out of bathtubs, and children with pressing problems in elementary reading, and dishes on the table waiting to be washed, and dogs and cats clamoring for their supper — perhaps our after-dinner hour would somehow become imperceptibly more gracious; perhaps the children, seeing us endlessly refilling our demitasse cups, would tiptoe thoughtfully away from the dining room door. Perhaps if we had demitasse cups a local couple, who have no children and have exhibited a vast distaste for our hospitality, would come to call. Perhaps, as a matter of fact, if we had demitasse cups, we could overlook the fact that the vast distaste of the local couple was provoked by our short-tempered reception of their resentment of our children. We *should* live more graciously, after all.

Then, naturally, there is the question of the cups themselves. I am immediately tempted to buy them just as cheaply as possible (*there's* a list for you, the prices of things) and have thought of the five and ten ("… and I got the *sweetest* little cups right there, can you imagine, and even though the cups and saucers came separately I didn't really pay much *more* …") but dismissed the idea through pride ("… and everyone could *tell* because of course those *same* patterns …"). I shall have to go off and purchase them in some big store where I have a charge account ("… a charge account? Let me just tell you what happened to *me* when …") and I suspect that I will end up after a day of shopping with four cheap flowered demitasse cups and a set of dishes (I have *so* been needing dishes) and a set of glassware which will be wonderful for the children to use when they have company for breakfast, and while I am in that department I think I ought to look at electric mixers because it is only four months to my birthday.

I tabulated recently a conversation, or double-listing, between two women, one of them me. The conversation began, civilly enough, with a compliment from me about my friend's new slipcover, which she had made herself. We then went rapidly through slipcovers (custom-made, prices of) the value of a sewing machine, the clothes children wore to school, and children's shoes (prices of). She then remarked that she hated to repeat cute things her children had said, but she just *had* to tell me what her daughter said the other day. I retaliated with a really clever story about Jannie. She said that prices were awful, weren't they; the conversation could have ended right there, with both of us crying, but fortunately one of our husbands stepped in with a remark about how we *had* really planned to play bridge, hadn't we? because if we *had*, here were the cards dealt and the chairs ready. We sat down, and she told me about how angry her husband had been the last time we played bridge, because she had reneged twice, and I told her a little sad story about how my husband had opened once with two hearts and I had said two spades and he said three diamonds and there I sat with the king, jack, seven of diamonds and … well, *she* told *me* about these people they used to know, and *I* told *her* about these people *we* used to know, and then she said, well, the way some people bring up their children, and I told her about the bad manners of the children of these friends of ours, and she said well, of course, progressive education, and my husband said were we going to play bridge or weren't we? So then she said that she loved my new blouse and I said I wished I could make things for myself, and she said the stores were awful, weren't they. I told her about how a salesclerk was so rude I walked out without buying anything, and she said that the butcher in our mutual grocery was really terribly mean today about the hamburger. I said that even hamburger was almost out of our range these days and she told me about how prices are up at least two cents a pound since practically yesterday. I told her that I understood that the main reason they had given up school lunches was the cost, and she said that it really cost less to make lunch at home and send it, the way things were these days. I said the only trouble was, Laurie preferred sandwiches made with cold meat, and she said had I tried this new spread made with olives. When I said no, she said that she had also tried a new cake mix and it was marvelous, but of course you really *needed* an electric mixer, and I said my birthday was only four months off. My husband bid three hearts in a loud voice. I bid three spades, and said that I envied her the cookies she made, that my children preferred to stop off for cookies at her house because our cookies were all store-bought. She said shyly that she had made a new kind of lemon meringue tart to serve after our bridge game and my husband said oh, were we playing bridge? Her husband then bid four hearts, she bid four no trump, and I said that I was planning to get a set of demitasse cups.

We played the hand in six spades, and made it easily, but it turns out that if I *am* going to get an electric mixer I shall have to shop around and get a really good one; she has a friend who used hers once and it fell apart. Of course she got a new one right away from the manufacturers, but my husband believed that if his partner had led anything except the ace of hearts … I took the recipe for the lemon meringue tarts, and when I got home I made a new list, which began “lemons, demitasse cups, summer coat to cleaners …”

That summer coat was a good one; I had worn it my last two years in college and every summer since. With three small children I perceived clearly what I had suspected when I had only one child, and half-believed when I had only two children — that parents must automatically resign themselves to wearing every article of their own clothing at least two years beyond its normal life expectancy. During the long summers — which are hotter, by the way, than they used to be when I was a child, just as the winters are colder — I can get along nicely on my summer coat and my few surviving cotton dresses, but the winter is another thing; unless I find someone who can fix the pockets of my old fur coat I shall not even be able to carry a handkerchief any more, unless I pin it to the front of me the way I do with Jannie. However, mending a fur coat is so ridiculous in the middle of summer that I have a little list, in my top dresser drawer, which has been there for — I think — two years. “Mend fr coat,” it says.

By the time I woke up on a summer morning — the alarm having misfired again, for the third time in a week — it was already too hot to move. I lay in bed for a few minutes, wanting to get up but unable to exert the necessary energy. From the girls' room, small voices rose in song, and I listened happily, thinking how pleasant it was to hear a brother and two sisters playing affectionately together; then, suddenly, the words of the song penetrated into my hot mind, and I was out of bed in one leap and racing down the hall. "Baby ate a spider, Baby ate a spider," was what they were singing.

Three innocent little faces were turned to me as I opened the door. Laurie, in his cowboy-print pajamas, was sitting on top of the dresser beating time with a coat hanger. Jannie, in pink pajama pants and her best organdy party dress, was sitting on her bed. Sally peered at me curiously through the bars of her crib and grinned, showing her four teeth.

"What did you eat?" I demanded. "What do you have in your mouth?"

Laurie shouted triumphantly. "A spider," he said. "She ate a spider."

I forced the baby's mouth open; it was empty. "Did she *swallow* it?"

"Why?" Jannie asked, wide-eyed. "Will it make her sick?"

"*Jannie* gave it to her," Laurie said.

"*Laurie* found it," Jannie said.

"But she ate it herself," Laurie said hastily.

I went wearily back into my own room, resisted the strong temptation to get back into bed, and began to dress. The conversation from the children indicated that they, too, were what might be called dressing.

"Put it on Baby," Laurie remarked.

"It's too little," Jannie objected.

"That's all right," Laurie said. "Put it on her anyway."

"She can wear my bluuuuuuuue shirt," Jannie said.

“*That* shirt’s no good,” Laurie said.

“It is so,” Jannie said.

“It is not,” Laurie said.

“It is so,” Jannie said.

“It is not,” Laurie said.

“Children,” I called, my voice a little louder than it usually is at only nine in the morning. “Please stop squabbling and get dressed.”

“*Laurie* started it,” Jannie called back.

“*Jannie* started it,” Laurie called.

Hastily I pushed the comb through my hair and hurried down the hall; hurrying made me hotter. I lifted Sally out of her crib and set her on Jannie’s bed to dress her, and Laurie and Jannie immediately abandoned their dressing and came to sit on the bed and watch. I changed Sally with the casual speed that comes to mothers of three, decided against putting anything more than a diaper on her, and started downstairs with her under my arm. Behind me Jannie lifted her voice tearfully.

“I can’t find my shooooooes,” she howled.

Laurie began to chuckle maliciously. I saw that he was putting Jannie’s red sandals on his own feet, reflected briefly and bitterly on the theory that seven-year-olds have good days and bad days, and said briskly, “Just for that, you can put Jannie’s shoes on *her* feet, and buckle them for her, too.”

I knew immediately what he was going to do, and, with speed, I made a strong tactical retreat downstairs before I could see him do it. In the kitchen it was hotter than ever, and I set Sally in her highchair and began opening windows and doors to get some air. The bright sunlight reassured me; by ten o’clock breakfast would be done with, I would have had my coffee; I might even feel like taking the children swimming, or on a picnic. Acting with all the alertness and vivid grace which I usually bring to the breakfast hour, I filled the coffeepot and set it on the stove, filled Sally's bottle and put it on to heat, and then looked around for Phoebe. Phoebe was our household help, and, being a local girl, she possessed all the native Vermonter's independence of thought and action; she was supposed by me to arrive every morning by eight o'clock and frequently arrived, having clearly established her emancipated state, by nine. This morning there was no sign of her, not even in her favorite spot for mornings when I get up late, which is out on the side porch playing solitaire. I began to set the table irritably.

Laurie came bounding heavily down the stairs, with Jannie's infuriated wail following him.

"Where's Phoebe?" he demanded.

"Not here yet," I said briefly, because I could not trust myself to speak fully. "Dime if you set the table."

Laurie began to sing loudly, and rattled the silverware vigorously. As his singing grew louder, a suspicion grew in me. "Did you brush your teeth?" I asked him.

He sang more sweetly still. "Did you brush your *teeth?*" I said.

The phone rang. Because I was on the wrong side of the table, and hampered by the chairs, Laurie beat me to it by a full five feet.

"Hello?" he said politely, as he has been taught. "This is Laurence." His eyes circled meaningfully around to me and he looked sorrowful. "No," he said sadly, "she's not up yet. She's still asleep."

"Young man," I said ominously, and he backed away so I could not reach the phone. "I'll tell her when she wakes up," he said, and hung up hastily. "I knew you wouldn't want to talk to *her*," he said. "She always talks so long, and you're so busy with breakfast and everything."

"Who?" I asked.

"I'll write it down for you," Laurie said. He took the telephone pad and pencil and began, with his laborious printing. The coffee boiled over, and I fled back into the kitchen. I turned off the coffee, gave Sally her bottle — she is learning to drink her milk from a cup, but insists also upon having her bottle, full, for no better apparent reason than as a weapon with which to brain anyone foolish enough to bring a head near her — and began to break eggs into a bowl. Jannie came downstairs with a clatter, her shoes, as I had known inevitably they would be, on the wrong feet.

"Where's Phoebe?" she said.

"She didn't come today," Laurie said. "Mommy's *terrible* mad. Mommy's probably going to kill her."

"Laurie," I said, but they had already started, "Mommy's going to kill Phoebe, Mommy's going to kill Phoebe."

My husband came downstairs without that spring in his step which is usually associated with daddies coming down to a good nourishing breakfast with their kiddies; he came into the kitchen and glanced around. "Where's Phoebe?" he said.

"Not here," I said.

"Mommy's going to kill Phoebe," the children chanted.

"You'll really *have* to fire that girl," my husband observed. "Good morning, children."

"*Good* morning, Daddy," Jannie said sweetly.

"*Good* morning, Dad," Laurie said manfully.

I turned around. Jannie was balancing the fruit juice glasses one on top of another. Laurie was making a train of knives and forks. Sally finished with her bottle abruptly and threw it on the floor.

"It's hot," my husband remarked. He sat down at the table, rescued a knife and fork from Laurie and a glass of fruit juice from Jannie. "Why do you let the children play with things on the table?” he asked. “Don’t they have enough toys of their own?”

I did not feel equal to answering. I put the eggs, the toast, and the coffee on the table and sat down; I could tell by looking that my coffee was going to be too hot and it was perfectly clear that the toast was burned.

“What’s this junk?” Laurie said, regarding his plate.

“Once,” Jannie observed, through a mouthful of egg, “once there was a little boy and he had no mother or father and he ran out into the middle of the street.”

“What happened to him?” Laurie asked with interest.

“He was eaten by a truck,” Jannie said demurely.

“*That’s* no good,” Laurie said.

“It is too,” Jannie said.

“It is not,” Laurie said.

The phone rang. I was cornered behind Sally’s highchair and Laurie beat me again. “This is Laurence,” we could hear him saying precisely. “Who is calling, please?”

He came into the kitchen and addressed his father. “It’s Mr. Feeley,” he said. “He wants to know can you play poker tonight.”

My husband avoided looking at me. “Tell him I’ll call him back,” he said.

“Once there was a little boy,” Jannie said, “and he had no mother or father.”

“What happened to him?” I asked dutifully, Laurie being still on the phone.

“He was eaten by a bear,” Jannie said. “Can I have some candy when I finish my breakfast?”

Each of the children had a toy filled with candy which sat on the table; they were little glass airplanes, and the candy inside was the sort usually used for cake decoration, tiny little colored balls of sugar. This candy enchanted Jannie, although Laurie was cynically aware that the whole amount contained in the airplane was hardly worth one chocolate-covered pepperment.

"If you eat every single bite of your breakfast," I said, "you may have some of your candy."

"Once there was a little boy," Jannie said, shoving her egg around the plate with the handle of her fork, "and he had no mother or father."

"What happened to him?" Laurie said, sliding into his chair. "He says call back before two," he remarked confidentially to his father.

"He was eaten by a elephant," Jannie said. "Look, no more breakfast."

I lifted her plate and, with a spoon, gathered the egg off the table and put it back onto the plate. "Every bite," I said firmly, "or no candy."

"Once there was a little boy," Jannie said mournfully, "and he had no mother or father."

She waited for a minute, but no one spoke; Laurie was engaged with his toast, I was trying to get Sally's spoon out of her mouth, and my husband was counting the money in his wallet.

"'Once there was a little boy,'" Jannie said loudly, "'and he had no mother or father,' I said."

"What happened to him?" Laurie asked resignedly.

Jannie giggled. "He was eaten by a bicycle," she said.

"Through," Laurie announced suddenly. "See?" He turned his plate upside down, his milk cup upside down on top of that, and balanced his fruit juice glass on top of the whole thing.

"Laurence," his father said absently, "your napkin is on the floor."

Laurie snatched his airplane full of candy, and retired. I picked his napkin up off the floor, unloaded the milk cup and the fruit juice glass, caught Jannie's plate just as it was sliding off the edge of the table, rescued the spoon from Sally, and said "More coffee?" to my husband.

He looked deeply into his cup. "Yes, please," he said.

Breakfast was nearly over.

Laurie had emptied his candies into a small bowl, and was stirring them around vigorously. "Look," he said, coming around to Jannie's side of the table, "Look, whirlpools."

"I want my candy," Jannie said immediately.

"Look, whirlpools," Laurie said to his father. "Whirlpools," he said to me. An idea struck him suddenly and he took a handful of the candies and put them on the tray of Sally's highchair; they rolled back and forth and Sally regarded them dubiously.

"Eat, Sally," Laurie said. "Eat, eat, eat, eat, eat, eat, eat, eat …"

"Laurence," I said feverishly.

"Okay, okay," Laurie said. "Look, Sally. Candy."

He pointed to the small candies and Sally tried experimentally to pick one up. Her fingers were not well enough controlled to take hold of it, and she began to giggle, chasing the candies around the highchair tray.

"Listen," Laurie shouted, "Phoebe's coming."

"Phoebe's coming," Jannie agreed loudly. She began to struggle, and Laurie at the same time tried to gather his airplane and candy together preparatory for a dash at the door. Jannie teetered backward in her chair, Laurie crashed into her, and they both went over, Jannie's plate, with egg, moving gracefully off the table after them.

"Can I have my candy now?" Jannie asked me, looking up hopefully from the floor. "*Laurie* did it."

"Phoebe," Laurie was shouting from the front door, "Mommy's going to *kill* you, and Daddy says—"

The phone rang. This time I made it first, and, breathing hard, I lifted the receiver and said "Hello?"

"Hello?" said a high thin voice. "May I please speak to Laurence?"

Phoebe was the last, for a long, long time, of my adjuvants. Not that I can't *use* help around the house, but I am, not to put too fine a point on it, the person to whom the almost unemployable slack-jawed mother's helper gravitates as to a natural home. I have never in my life made any pretense at being an efficient housekeeper; I can make a fair gingerbread and I know a thing or two about onion soup, but beyond the most rudimentary sweepings and dustings I am not capable. Not for me the turned sheet, the dated preserve, the fitted homemade slipcover or the well-ironed shirt. Nor do I stack up particularly well in the hired girl department; in our town the employer (obviously a staunch New England type who because of a broken leg or some incurable malady has found it necessary to "get help") is expected to "work along," to check dirt, to remain, at all times, level-headed.

That is why I always end up with people like Phoebe. If she could make chowder or raised doughnuts she would, in our town, have a home of her own. If she had a natural gift for getting things clean, or an instinctive ability at getting three rebellious children into bed, she would be gainfully employed in our nearest big town. If she knew how to do anything right at all, she would not be working for me.

Take Hope, for instance. I always get hold of these people because they answer an ad I put in the paper, and someone apparently read it to Hope. I wanted to phrase the ad in some cute irresistible fashion such as "I am almost helpless around a house. I honestly don't know a *thing* about housework. Isn't there some kind girl who wants to help me, at a moderate salary?" Instead, at a dollar for ten words for three days, what I usually say is "Houseworker wanted. Good ref. Mod. sal. Children. Meals. Laundry. Cleaning."

I always hire the first person who comes, usually without remembering to check on the good ref. This is not only because I am extremely gullible, but at least partially because I am openly terrified of anyone who looks me straight in the eye and speaks emphatically, and these women, looking for jobs at mod. sal. and with no serious intentions whatsoever about Meals. Laundry. Cleaning. alway use a voice of great clarity and strength when talking to me. I am usually not able to say anything at all, or else what I do say comes out entirely wrong, and modest disclaimers turn out to be flat denials — a statement to the effect that no one can cook for my husband except me because he has odd ideas about food turns out to say that I intend to do all the cooking myself, in spite of what my ad said, with the rider that I have a crazy husband who lives exclusively on bread and water.

The only person, by the way, whom I ever escaped in a situation like that was a gentlewoman of about two hundred years who came one day in answer to one of my usual ads; I tried to conduct the interview with gravity, and she answered all my timid questions with modesty and restraint until I mentioned, in the laughing voice that I reserve for controversial subjects, that dishes were a problem in a family the size of ours, particularly, I added, washing them.

"Dishes," she said eagerly, "now, I *love* dishes."

"I suppose you collect them?" I asked, for want of anything better to say.

"Washing dishes," she said. "Now, washing dishes I can't stop. If I don't watch myself—" she cackled delightedly " — I just go on washing dishes

over and over and over and over and over and over and over again, all day long. All day *long*, now," and she cackled again.

I told her I would let her know about the job, and after she had left I telephoned the number she gave me and left a message that I had just had word that my mother was coming to live with me and so I wouldn't need anyone to help around the house.

I passed up that nice old lady, who was essentially agreeable and had at least one cleanly virtue, to hire Hope. Hope disliked washing dishes, but she did them. She wore neat house dresses, although she had a weakness for high-heeled, ankle-strap black sandals around the house. She did not quarrel with my cooking for my husband, although, as it turned out, it was unnecessary; Hope spent most of her time in the kitchen making biscuits which were light and pleasant, and cheese soufflés, and chocolate cakes, and fried chicken. I even checked her good ref. The old lady to whom I spoke was enthusiastic in her praise. "She's a *good* girl," the old lady said insistently — perhaps I feel now, *too* insistently. "You don't need to worry about Hope any, she's a *good* girl. Don't you pay any attention to what you may *hear* — that Hope is a *good* girl."

The only trouble with Hope was that she disappeared at the end of the first week, taking with her her salary, ten dollars she had borrowed from me, and my overshoes. Two days after Hope disappeared I answered a ring at the door, and found standing there a lady of unequivocal firmness and a most suspicious eye. "Is Hope here?" she asked me.

"She is not," I said shortly, not overanxious to dwell lengthily upon the subject of Hope.

"I'm her parole officer," the woman said. "If you know where she is it's your duty to tell me."

"She's got my overshoes, wherever she is," I said, and tried to close the front door, but the parole officer put her shoulder against the frame and said, "It's your civic duty as a citizen to report this matter." After I had told her all about Hope and my overshoes I pointed out that the ten dollars was relatively unimportant but that with this constant wet weather it was hard going without anything on my feet, and asked nervously what chance there was of getting them back.

"*We*'ll get them," she said enigmatically, "they can't get far without stealing a car."

A week later I was invited to the local jail to see Hope, who gave me back my overshoes with an apology for having kept them so long, asked kindly after the children, the cats, and the dog, remarked parenthetically that she had never really gotten to know my husband, and asked me to go five thousand dollars bail for her.

I told her civilly enough that these constant ads in the paper made such a drain on my pocketbook that I had really nothing left for more than household expenses, and asked nicely what she was in for. It turned out to be grand larceny; my overshoes, she said, she had never regarded as anything but a loan; it was a difficulty with a former employer's fur coat which worried her now. I shook hands cordially with the jailer's wife, declined a piece of fresh-made sponge cake, and departed. I sent a carton of cigarettes and some magazines to the jail for Hope about a month later, and got back an earnest letter saying she would be sure to come back to work for us when she got out, and could we wait three years?

Between the time I last saw Hope and the time I got her letter, Amelia had come and gone. Amelia had been recommended to me by a neighbor, with the specific statement that Amelia was not an intelligent girl, but she was able, my neighbor was confident, to do simple household tasks. Amelia washed dishes, but not very clean. She arrived every morning on foot, by a process which required that she inquire at every house in the neighborhood each day before she found ours. She never tried to borrow my overshoes, which I was keeping anyway in the only closet in the house which locked, and I sincerely believe that after working for us for two days she was still unable to find her way from the kitchen to the front door without falling over the furniture.

Like Hope, Amelia had but one major failing. The second day she was with us — which turned out, coincidentally, to be the last — she made cookies, spending all one joyous afternoon in the kitchen, droning happily to herself, fidgeting, cluttering, measuring.

At dinner, dessert arrived with Amelia's giggle and a flourish. She set the plate of cookies down in front of my husband, and my husband, who is a nervous man, glanced down at them and dropped his coffee cup. "Sinner," the cookies announced in bold pink icing, "Sinner, repent."

Phoebe did not stay with us much longer than Amelia had. She was accustomed to arriving mornings on a motorcycle, but after two weeks her mother called one morning to say that there had been an American Legion convention in a nearby city and that Phoebe was now in Kansas City. It was terribly hot all that summer, and I kept thinking about poor old Phoebe in Kansas City on her motorcycle. Perhaps I privately envied the motorcycle, it being a species of abandoned travel with which I am respectably unfamiliar; perhaps the notion of wild noisy motion appealed to Laurie. He asked me one morning later that summer, "Why don't we have a car?" I was stirring chocolate pudding — a talent of the late Phoebe's — at the stove, and he was painting at the kitchen table. Jannie was laboriously dressing her doll on the floor, singing quietly to herself while she stuffed the doll's arms brutally into one of the baby's nightgowns.

“Why don’t we have a car?” I repeated absently. “I suppose because no one around here can drive.”

“If we had a car,” Laurie said, in the tone which I was beginning to recognize as one all seven-year-old boys use to their mothers, as of one explaining a relatively uncomplicated situation to a sort of foolish creature, apt to become sentimental and impertinent unless firmly held in check, “if we had a car, we could ride around.”

“But no one around here can drive,” I said.

“And we could go anywhere we wanted,” Laurie said. “And we wouldn’t have to walk, or drive with other people, or take taxis.”

“Who would drive us?”

“I could sit in the front seat,” Laurie said, “and Jannie and Sally could sit in the back seat.” He thought. “And Daddy could ride on the running board.”

“What would I be doing?” I asked. “Driving?”

“I want to ride in the front,” Jannie said, lifting her head to scowl at her brother. “I want to ride in the front and Laurie in back with Baby.”

“I’m going to ride in the front,” Laurie said. “I’m older.”

“But I’m a girl,” Jannie said, undeniably.

“But who would *drive?*” I said.

“Listen,” Laurie said to me, a thin edge of contempt in his voice, “can’t you drive a *car?*”

“No, I cannot.”

“Can Daddy?”

“No.”

“Can’t *either* of you drive?”

“No.”

Laurie put his paint brush down and looked at me for a long minute. “Then what *can* you do?” he asked.

“Well,” I said, “I can make chocolate pudding, and I can wash dishes, and I can …”

“*Any*body can do that,” Laurie said. “What *I* mean is, can’t you drive a *car?*”

“No,” I said sharply, “I cannot drive a car. And I do not, furthermore, intend to learn. And I also do not want to hear one more—”

“If we had a car,” Jannie said, “I could ride in the front and Laurie could ride in the back with Baby.”

“I’m older,” Laurie said mechanically. “*You* ride in back.”

“I’m a girl,” Jannie said.

“Why not let Baby ride in front?” I asked in spite of myself. “She’s younger. And she’s a girl.”

“But if Laurie and I rode in back we would fight,” Jannie said.

“That’s true,” I said. “So why not—” but the chocolate pudding thickened and I had to stop talking.

Jannie began to sing one of her morning songs. “On earth, what are you doing,” she sang softly, “on earth, what are you doing? I am going splickety-splot. On earth, what are you doing, on earth, what are you doing? I am going thumpety-thump. We do dig and it does rain.” While she sang she rocked her doll, Laurie painted amiably, and I hummed to myself while I poured the pudding into dishes and wondered whether I could get away with chicken soup again for lunch today.

Jannie began her song for the third time, and Laurie set his page aside and asked absently, “Why did you say we don’t have a car?”

“We don’t have a car,” I said wearily, “because both Daddy and I would rather roller-skate.”

“Can Daddy drive?” Jannie asked. “Daddy can do anything, can’t he?”

I hesitated, not at the moment able to find an answer, and Laurie said, “If we had a car you could take us for rides.”

“Now listen to me, both of you,” I began with great firmness, but at that moment the baby woke up and as I started upstairs I heard Laurie asking dreamily, “Jannie, what would you do if a snake came and ate you?”

In our family a conversation such as this one about the car does not end, ever. At dinner that night Laurie remarked to his father, “Mommy is going to get a car and drive it around.”

“And I’m going to ride in front,” Jannie said.

“*I*’m going to ride in front,” Laurie said. “I’m—”

“I’m a girl,” Jannie said.

My husband regarded me with mild surprise. “A car?” he said, perplexed. “You mean, drive me if I wanted to go for a haircut? And I wouldn’t have to—”

“Wait,” I said, “wait, wait.”

“I’m going to ride in *front*,” Laurie said.

“I’m a—”

“*I* am going to ride in front,” my husband said flatly.

The man from the driving school was named Eric, and he was about eighteen years old and undisguisedly amused at meeting anyone who could not drive a car. When I told him sharply that in his business he must meet quite a few people who could not drive a car he laughed and said that usually people my age did not try to learn new tricks. I eyed the dual-control car he had parked in our driveway and said falsely that I might surprise him by learning faster than he expected. He patted me on the shoulder and said, “That’s my girl.”

Laurie and Jannie and my husband holding the baby stood on the front porch cheering and waving as I rode off with Eric, crushed into a corner of the seat to avoid touching any of the dual controls, and desperately afraid that if I did the car would go out of control and rocket madly off the road, no doubt killing other innocent people and very probably ending my driving lessons. Laurie and Jannie and my husband holding the baby were again on the front porch cheering, two hours later, when I came back with Eric, dismayed and bewildered and not prepared to take levelly any childish prattle about how we would drive around when we had a car.

I took ten lessons from Eric, including lessons in stopping and starting, making a U turn — that was how I got the dent in the back of the car, but Eric said they were insured against that kind of thing — making right turns and left turns, shifting gears, backing and filling, allemande left, and reeling and writhing and fainting in coils. He neglected to teach me how to turn on the lights and what to do when a funny little noise started somewhere inside. Every time I got out of his car in front of my own house, weak-kneed and with my hands stiffened into a permanent grasp on a steering wheel, I was greeted with cheers and friendly criticism by my faithful family. I completely captivated one of Laurie’s friends — a young gentleman from Cub Scouts whose mother and father both know how to drive, and have for years — by running smack into the stone wall at the foot of our garden, something no one else has so far been able to do, since the wall is set approximately seven feet from the driveway and is clearly visible. Evenings, I studied a little book Eric had sold me, which told in graphic detail what to do in case the car skidded out of control, what to do in case the steering wheel came off in my hands (from this I got the vivid impression of running the car like a bobsled, and steering by leaning from side to side), and how to bandage a compound fracture.

My test, which I shall always believe was supposed to be a test of whether or not I could drive a car, I passed seemingly without effort, and with only one bad moment when, told to stop completely halfway up a hill which may well have been Mount Everest, I realized that the head inquisitor assumed with infinite amusement that I would be able to start again. He was a very patient man, and waited for several minutes, tapping his fingers gently against the window while I scoured my mind for Eric's directions on starting a car on a hill. ("Swing your wheel sharp? Turn down your lights? Keep one foot on the clutch and one foot on the brake and one foot on the starter …?") "Well?" said the inquisitor, looking at me evilly.

I gestured competently with one hand, keeping the other one locked to the wheel in some obscure belief that only my grip on the wheel kept the car from rolling back down the hill. "State law," I said carelessly. "Child coming, can't start."

He glanced at me briefly and then craned his neck out of the window to see where a boy about twenty was sauntering down the sidewalk. I had hoped to distract his attention, and did, but I then discovered that it is not possible to be surreptitious about starting a stalled car on a hill. I firmly believe that the inquisitor gave me a license only because he was sure I could never start a car and so could never become a substantial menace on the highways.

Meanwhile, it had been decided who was to ride in front (Baby), I had learned to drive, the lessons had been paid for, and I had a little piece of official paper saying that I knew how to drive. We lacked only a car. This was adjusted by a gentleman who, saying he acted only from pure friendship, sold us one of *his* cars. He said he was very reluctant to part with it, particularly at that price, he said it was a better car than any of the new ones on the market, he praised its spark plugs and its birdlike appetite for oil.

“The cigarette lighter doesn’t work,” I pointed out in a spirit of pure critical inquiry.

“Neither does the clock,” said my husband.

“And the fender is sort of caved in,” I added.

“Tell you what I’ll do,” the man said. “I’ll pay for the license plates.”

“Better get that cigarette lighter fixed right away,” my husband told me, as we surveyed our new car. “And the clock. Best to be on the safe side.”

“I’ll have to find a place to get them fixed,” I said.

“Can’t be too careful,” my husband said.

I got into the car and reasoned out how to start it and drove with great caution, in the middle of the road, to a garage that could be reached without a left turn, and there I talked for quite a while with a young man covered with grease and oil who had “Tony” written across the front of him in big red letters. “Got a nice car there,” he said, after I had told him we had just bought it, and what we paid for it, and had added trustingly that I had just learned to drive and had never before owned a car and knew nothing about cars or motors or, as a matter of fact, driving. “You’re even going to have to tell me what gas to use,” I added laughingly.

Tony nodded soberly. “But you got a real nice car there,” he insisted, “for the price you paid, you couldn’t get a better one. Needs a little attention, of course.” He laughed. “Wouldn’t be a car if it didn’t,” he told me.

“Yes, I know,” I said. “The cigarette lighter—”

“You take that clutch, for instance,” Tony said. He opened the door and pushed the pedal up and down reflectively. “Now I guess you don’t know anything about the clutch, do you?” he asked. I shook my head, and he went on, “Well, it’s a funny thing about the clutch. You go along for maybe one, two thousand miles and then all of a sudden …” He shrugged expressively. “You got a repair job costs you maybe two, three hundred dollars. Always better to get the clutch fixed in time, saves you money, expense, wear and tear.”

“You mean I have to get something fixed?”

He shrugged again. “You don’t *need* to, of course,” he said. “But you got to look at it this way. You got small children, you’re driving them around in the car, you’re not going to take chances with *them*.”

Nervously I agreed that I was not going to take chances with my small children.

“Well, then,” said Tony. “Now brakes are important, too.” He pushed the brake pedal down and shook his head sadly. “That guy sold you this car,” he said.

“Is this going to be very expensive?” I asked.

“Well, now,” Tony said, and laughed. “But let’s look it over and see just exactly what you need. No sense getting something you don’t *need*,” he said jovially.

From then on, as nearly as I can remember, it was wheel alignment and something called camber or clamber or clabber, and wheel work was always expensive because every single car in the world except the make and model I owned had little adjustable pegs which could be fixed for next to nothing, but when Tony had to work with nonadjustable pegs, well, peg work was always expensive. Body work, too, would always set you back plenty, but it was the lives of my children I was taking in my hands if I let the fenders go.

“You got to regard this as an *investment*,” Tony said earnestly. “Now, I wouldn’t be treating you fair if I let those spark plugs go, for instance. You’d say I played you a pretty dirty trick if you had to come back a month from now for a big repair bill, you'd say to me, 'Tony, why didn't you fix those spark plugs a long time ago before I had to pay this big repair bill?' You see, it's an investment *now* so's it won't cost you so much *later*. Now take the muffler."

"Muffler," I said. Tony pointed to something under the car which I could not see.

"You see that?" he said. "I guess you didn't notice it before or you would of called it to my attention sooner. Lucky thing I saw it in time, I wasn't looking for anything like *that*."

"What would have happened?" I asked him nervously.

He shook his head. "Can't ever tell," he said. "*Nothing* might have happened — for a while. And then one day you're going up a hill, car full of children …" He shook his head again. "And the brake lining," he said. "*And* the ignition system."

I then made one of the bigger mistakes of my life. "How are the tires?" I asked.

Tony laughed. "You call those *tires?*" he demanded. "Why, let me tell you, one day I saw a guy, had his two little children with him, and I said to him—"

Two weeks later I had my car back and we had managed to borrow enough extra money to pay the bill, upon which Tony had presumably retired to a little home in the hills to grow hollyhocks. The car looked and acted almost exactly the same except that the tank full of gas I had left in it was down almost to nothing. Tony said that was because they had to drive it in and out of the garage so many times.

I took everybody, including the dog, for a ride, and we went around the block four or five times, congratulating one another upon our new mobility.

I discovered that my former usual attitude of timid acquiescence was not consistent with someone who could drive a car, so I fell gradually into a new personality, swashbuckling and brazen, with a cigarette usually hanging out of one corner of my mouth because I had to keep both hands on the wheel. We began to make plans for driving across the country to visit Grandma and Grandpa in California.

Some time later, while I, cigarette in the corner of my mouth, was stirring butterscotch pudding at the stove, and Laurie was glueing a model airplane at the kitchen table and Jannie was making double marshmallow chocolate ice cream pineapple coffee cake at *her* stove, Laurie raised his head and asked, “We’ve got a car now, haven’t we?”

“We have,” I said. “Why?”

“Why’d we get a car?” Laurie asked. “We never had one before.”

“Daddy still walks for his haircut,” Jannie said to her stove.

“That’s because he’s *scared* to get in the car,” Laurie said.

“You know what I wish?” Jannie said. “I wish we had a airplane.”

“Hey,” Laurie said, interested. “*That* would be good. I could ride on the wing and Baby—”

“*I* could ride on the wing,” Jannie said immediately. “I’ m—”

“And what would *I* be doing?” I asked in a deadly voice.

They both turned and looked at me, their sweet trusting little faces confident.

At this time, Laurie was seven and a half, Jannie was four and a half, and Sally was one and a half. We had been in our big old house for four years, and space which had at one time seemed vast had contracted into little more than enough to hold us and the children and the cats and the dog. We had a car, and we had taken to telling one another that we couldn’t imagine how we had ever got along without it. One of the left-hand pillars had begun to tremble during storms, and it was necessary to have it reenforced.

It was when Jannie was very nearly five that the question of her name became desperately important. When she was born her father wanted to name her Jean and I wanted to name her Anne, and we compromised upon an arbitrary Joanne, although I frequently call her Anne and her father very often calls her Jean. Her brother calls her Honey, Sis, and Dopey, Sally calls her Nannie, and she calls herself, variously, Jean, Jane, Anne, Linda, Barbara, Estelle, Josephine, Geraldine, Sarah, Sally, Laura, Margaret, Marilyn, Susan, and — imposingly — Mrs. Ellenoy. The second Mrs. Ellenoy.

The *former* Mrs. Ellenoy — I have this straight from my daughter — was a lovely woman, mother of seven daughters, all named Martha, and she and Mr. Ellenoy used to be very angry with one another, until one day they grew so *very* angry that they up and killed each other with swords. As a result my daughter is the new Mrs. Ellenoy and has inherited all the Marthas as stepdaughters. When she is not named Jean, Linda, Barbara, Sally, and so on, but is being Mrs. Ellenoy, her daughters are allowed to assume these names, so that there is a constant bewildering shifting of names among them, and it is sometimes very difficult to remember whether you are addressing Janey Ellenoy or a small girl with seven daughters named Martha.

Since there is enough confusion in our house anyway, no one worries excessively about anyone else’s name. Laurie has recently taken a flat stand on being called Laurie, and insists upon being addressed as either Laurence or Sir. Sally was named Sarah when she started, got shortened to Sally, and immediately got into trouble with Sally Ellenoy, so now we call the one Baby and the other Sallyellenoy. Baby is unmistakable, as is Dog for the dog, since *his* name is Toby and Baby renamed him Bowowby and Laurence renamed him Trigger and Mrs. Ellenoy generally calls him Child. The two cats look exactly alike, so we call them Kitty, generally. I myself use two names, a maiden name professionally and a married name, and my husband, who is addressed in all variants of father from Pappy to Da, now answers to almost anything, even — being a man not easily thrown off balance — Mr. Ellenoy.

In places where we have specific locations, such as our beds, or the dinner table, it is easy enough for us to address one another by facing the place we want. Equally, particular questions may be identified and caught by the person they most concern, so that something like "Did you know the bank called about that overdraft?" or "Didn't I tell you to change into a clean dress?" or "Do you want to go outside *again?*" or "Did she eat up all her nice cereal?" can easily be answered by the correct character, without all the trouble of trying to remember a name, or the rudeness of pointing. It is only on such a general question as "Well, who hasn't washed for dinner?" that the bitter matter of identification comes up.

I know what they all *look* like, of course. The dog has four feet and is far larger than the cats, who operate as a two-part unit anyway. The boy is dirty and wears a disgraceful pair of blue jeans. The father looks worried and a little bit overwhelmed. The older daughter is larger than the younger daughter, although there is an uncanny shifting of identity there, since the smaller wears the clothes the larger wore a short while before, and they both have blond curls and blue eyes. But as to trying to remember, for instance, which two out of three have already had chicken pox and which one was innoculated for whooping cough and whether any given one of them got all three prescribed injections or one of them got nine, and, worst, which of the

Ellenoy girls got spanked for breaking Laurence’s six-shooter and who told on her, I go all to pieces.

For example: I glanced out of the kitchen window one Sunday morning and found my older daughter up to her knees in a mud puddle. “Joanne,” I said sharply, rapping on the glass in traditional manner with my wedding ring. She turned and smiled and I dried my hands on the dish towel and made for the back door. “What are you doing in that mud?”

My daughter looked at me, amused. “*This* is Mrs. Ellenoy,” she said. “*I*’m over there.” And she pointed.

One trouble about all this is that it is extraordinarily easy to be taken in by any particular statement.

“Joanne,” I said, addressing the empty air where she was pointing, “get out of that mud puddle this minute.”

“Get out at once,” Mrs. Ellenoy added emphatically. “Joanne, I’m ashamed of you.” She turned to me. “I don’t know what we’re going to do with her,” she said. “Joanne,” she added again, “you heard your mother. Get out of that mud puddle right now.” She nodded reassuringly at me. “She’ll be right in,” she said. “I’ll stay out here and wait for her.”

I went back inside, talking to myself, and after a minute Mrs. Ellenoy poked her head in through the kitchen door. “Martha’s out here,” she said, “and she won’t stop crying till you give her a cookie.”

“I’m not giving a cookie to any little girl covered with mud,” I said.

“*Martha*’s not covered with mud,” Mrs. Ellenoy said reasonably. “That was bad Anne. Martha’s been playing quietly under the apple tree all this time.”

There was the frightful moment in the restaurant when all seven Ellenoy girls tried to climb onto Mrs. Ellenoy’s lap just as the waitress was putting down a plate of soup. “You *can’t* get into my lap now, can’t you see I’m having my lunch?" Mrs. Ellenoy said crossly, and the waitress gave me a startled look and retreated, backing directly into Laurence's spurs. There was the black morning the census taker spent at our house, since she arrived before I was dressed and my daughter entertained her until I came down. There was the uncomfortable incident when my daughter trotted in to me and said, "There's a lady outside named Mrs. Harper and she wants to know will you give her a dollar?" and I replied absently, "Tell Mrs. Harper she may take the penny off my desk and not to bother me any more." My daughter told Mrs. Harper and Mrs. Harper went away furious and a little frightened, and I was entered on the P.-T.A. books as refusing to pay my dues.

Or there was this most touching incident which has really exposed my husband; as I say, he is a man not easily thrown off balance.

I glanced into the study the other morning and found my older daughter settling herself on the couch next to her father, who was reading the paper. She had *The Wizard of Oz* under her arm and as I passed by, smiling fondly, she asked her father, "Will you read for a minute to me?" In my subsequent wanderings through the house I frequently passed the study door and heard the comfortable drone of my husband's voice plowing his way toward the Emerald City. Finally, looking in and seeing him still reading aloud, but alone, I said in surprise, "Still reading?"

"I'm reading to Marilyn till Jean gets back," he said, not looking up from the book.

I went outdoors to where my daughter was sitting drawing pictures under the apple tree and said conversationally, "Dad's still reading to Marilyn."

"I know," said my daughter, nodding. "I got too restless so I left."

We played a game of croquet and picked some flowers for the house and ordered the groceries and my husband was still reading.

After a while my daughter went back into the study, said softly, “Move over, Marilyn,” and settled down to hear the rest of the book.

“Dad was reading out loud to himself all morning,” my son observed as he sat down at the dinner table that evening.

“No, I wasn’t,” said my husband. “I was reading to Marilyn.”

“I thought you were reading to yourself,” Laurie said.

“Marilyn doesn’t brush her teeth,” Mrs. Ellenoy said. “*None* of my girls brush their teeth,” she added wistfully, “but all of them were dancing this afternoon. All the girls were dancing in the garden. There was Martha, and Sallyellenoy and Janey and Linda and Margaret—”

“You know what I wish?” Laurie demanded of his father. “I wish I was in Texas right now on a horse.”

“ — and Estelle and Barbara and Josephine and they were all dancing,” Mrs. Ellenoy continued. “And all us Ellenoys, we were dancing too.”

“*Did* you call the bank?” my husband said, raising his voice to be heard.

“All dancing,” said Mrs. Ellenoy happily, “all the girls were dancing.”

“Mommy,” said Sally, thumping crazily on her dish with her spoon, “Daddy, Nannie, Kitty, Mommy, Okay, Goodbye, cookie?”

Jannie sang softly, in a minor counterpoint, “Sally’s bottom is dry as a fly, so goodbye, my peekaboo Sally.”

Sally had consumed her chicken and her potatoes and was eating her peas one by one with her fingers, Jannie was daintily making designs in her potatoes with the back of her spoon, Laurie waved a chicken leg at his father and said vigorously, “say, *listen*, you know what’s funny?” I was remembering the time the waitress backed into Laurie’s spurs; sooner or later, I suppose, there must be in every mother’s life the inevitable moment when she has to take two small children shopping in one big store. Although I keep telling myself that Laurie and Jannie are not more undisciplined, less poised, than any other two children of their age, I could not, for anything in the world, take them into public view again. Jannie had needed shoes, and Laurie some kind of trousers, made of any material on the order of sheet iron, to wear to school, where apparently the second-graders amuse themselves during the long weary days by cutting holes in one another's clothes with scissors. I felt, erroneously, that it was preferable to buy Jannie's shoes and Laurie's pants in a large department store in the nearest city, rather than relying so entirely upon our small local stores, and it seemed to me that I should have the children with me to try things on. I *have* tried buying shoes for children with an outline of the child's foot traced on paper, but it is never completely satisfactory, aside from the pleasure the child gets out of having his foot traced.

It was a Wednesday morning when I assembled the children, Laurie having been kept home from school because I had a faint idea that Wednesday was the day when the stores were least crowded. I have no idea what persuaded me that the stores were going to be least crowded on Wednesday, although, as it turned out, it hardly mattered, since my children proved to be able to assemble a crowd at any given time on any given day.

We all looked very nice when we started out. Jannie was wearing her best dark red coat, with high blue stockings and a blue beret. Laurie was wearing his suit, which was a little too small for him, his dark blue tie, his spurs, and two pearl-handled revolvers, although I took a firm stand on his not loading them with caps. I was wearing a gray fur coat and the low-heeled shoes which I ordinarily wear around the house, but which I chose to wear shopping this day because low heels seemed more practical for the broken field running I expected to be doing. I had also, with rare good sense, stripped for action in that I carried absolutely nothing — no pocketbook, no gloves, no hat. I assumed, and correctly, that I was going to need all the hands I could get. I had my money in a little purse in my pocket, which I kept feeling nervously to make sure it was still there. I had left simple instructions for my husband on care of Sally ("if she cries, ignore her, unless she seems to be crying because she's in trouble — you'll be sure to recognize the difference — or else she might be crying because she's dropped her little suitcase out of the crib and wants you to pick it up, but be *sure* not to let her have the doll in the blue dress because its arm is broken and if she wants a drink make her take the half-glass of milk in the left-hand lower corner of the refrigerator because that's what she left from breakfast and if she goes in the playpen—") and he had given each of the older children a dime.

We sailed off in fine style, as far as the front door, where Jannie flatly declined to move further unless allowed to take along her doll carriage and doll. There was a violent argument; I took the always-losing position of "Either the doll stays home or you do," and Laurie swung on the knob of the front door saying "Come *on*, let's *go*." We got the doll carriage into a bus, finally, and all the way into town Jannie bent over it, crooning to her doll about how no one was going to leave sweet dolly at home while Jannie had anything to say about it; Laurie shot people from the bus window with his pearl-handled revolvers. I made rapid and inaccurate mental calculations about the probable price of lunch and the cost of transporting the doll carriage in taxis. Fortunately, my shopping list was simple: J. shoes; L. pants, and if I *did* happen to be anywhere near a suit department I might take a look at dark suits, the simple kind they don't seem to make any more.

"Move over," Jannie said to me, "you're sitting on Linda."

"*Linda*'s not coming?" I said incredulously.

"Certainly she's coming," Jannie said, "and you're sitting on her."

"You and your old girls," Laurie said, drawing in his head and pointing his gun. "There, I shot her."

A crisis was averted at that moment because the bus stopped in front of the department store where I fondly believed they had shoes in Jannie's size and pants in Laurie's strength and suits in my shade of darkness. We got out of the bus, apologizing, and reached the sidewalk without trouble — quite an accomplishment, with the doll carriage, Linda, and Laurie, who remembered his manners at the last minute, and ran back from the sidewalk to hold the door for me after I had already gotten out, leaving Jannie alone and disconsolate, so that she started sadly down the street alone pushing her carriage, with the crowd separating to make a path for her, and one or two old ladies turning to smile and tell one another that she was sweet, and cute, and adorable.

By the time Laurie and I, shouting, had caught up, Jannie and the doll carriage were almost inextricably caught in a revolving door.

I think, every time I step into a department store with my children, surely, I think, it *is* possible to take children shopping, otherwise, the ten thousand mothers and children surrounding us at this moment are either figments of my imagination, which is perfectly possible, or else actors paid by the store to make itself look busy, which is also perfectly possible, but impractical considering the amount of trade I am likely to bring in with Laurie and Jannie; it *must* be, I keep telling myself, a simple and wholesome business, to buy one's children clothes. Doll carriage, revolvers, and all, we got onto the escalator, a machine which I am absolutely convinced is intent upon trapping small unwary feet or, preferably, well-shod maternal feet, and I said, "Careful, children, please."

"Watch your feet, Linda," Jannie said repeatedly as we went from the first to the second floor, "watch your feet, Marilyn. Susan, watch your *feet*."

I was carrying the doll carriage by then, under my arm; when I recognized the third, and boy's floor, I said briskly, "All right, we get off here." Doll carriage under my arm, I alighted and used my free hand to swing Jannie off the escalator. Laurie disembarked with a theatrical gesture which found me leaping backward to catch him before he went along with the escalator to whatever submerged and awful depths it departs; "What's the matter with *you?*" Laurie demanded irritably, "scared or something?"

"Linda," Jannie said anxiously, "watch your step getting off the escalator. Susan, be careful. Linda, jump now; Barbara, help Linda; Marilyn, wait for your turn; Margaret—"

"Jannie," I said, "please stop. They can get off by themselves." I was beginning to be aware of a familiar and dreadful feeling: that of being stared at by hordes of people — salesladies, floorwalkers, mothers, immaculate children, and perhaps truant officers. "Come on," I said nervously, and added just in time, "my dears."

I put the doll carriage down and Jannie settled herself behind it, hands on the bar, alert and ready to start. "Linda," she said softly, "all girls, get in line behind me, please."

"We going to get *clothes?*" Laurie demanded, looking about him with vast contempt. "I thought you said *lunch*."

"A pair of pants for you, dear," I said sweetly. I was tacking the "dear" onto every sentence I spoke for fear someone should hear me. At this moment, just as our procession was ready to get under way, a large, red-faced man in a rumpled brown suit accosted us. "Madam?" he said inquiringly to me.

He was not a floorwalker, he was certainly not a salesclerk; he might just possibly have been some cowboy hero in mufti — although in that case he would probably have addressed himself to my son, where he would be assured of at least some comprehension — and he was not, I discovered by feeling at my pocket, a thief. “This little boy buying clothes?” he asked me, gesturing grandly toward Laurie.

“He is,” I said. “Aren’t we, dear?” to Laurie.

“Well, Madam,” the man went on, smiling alternately at me and — with some tentative geniality — at Laurie, “I represent the Real Western Rancho Clothes for Boys Company. We are meeting boys shopping here, talking to them and to their mothers, trying to find out what boys *really* like in clothes. For instance,” he went on, obviously gaining courage as Laurie and I — not being notoriously quick thinkers — only stared blankly at him, “for instance, here is a boy, I can tell right away, who is lively and full of fun and a real Western Rancho type, right out there with the cowhands at chow time—” he squatted down by Laurie and looked Laurie straight in the eye, — “and this critter here *needs* real cow-punching duds. Why, I bet this hombre knows a good suit of clothes when he sees it, don’t you pardner?” He gave Laurie’s shoulder a friendly shake. “What’s this?” he demanded, “your shooting iron?”

Laurie stepped back. “It’s a gun,” he said. “You think it was a squirrel or something?”

The man laughed commercially, and I said in warning, “Laurie,” and added, “dear.” “Bright boy,” the man said to me. “Now, come along, pardner, and let this here coyote take your picture.”

“Do what?” said Laurie.

The man laughed again, and tried to give Laurie a little tug over to where another, unhappy-looking man, this one in an ill-fitting cowboy hat, was standing behind a camera, looking as though he would have been more at ease sitting on a corral fence in front of a dry martini; “You’re next, Pancho,” the man in the brown suit said insistently to Laurie.

“Hey,” Laurie said, holding back. I could tell that he had not yet decided upon his final attitude toward this, but I could have told the man a thing or two about getting a firm grip on a boy’s arm (never *below* the elbow). Jannie, who had wandered off down the aisles, pushing her doll carriage and indicating to Linda, Marilyn, Susan, and the rest various interesting sights they passed, now turned and called to me from the other end of the store, “Mommy, Linda wants you to get her this cowboy hat.”

“*Cut* it out,” Laurie said, pulling away easily.

“That gun loaded?” said the man, grinning. “You aim to shoot, stranger?”

“What?” said Laurie.

The man looked up at me. “He have TV yet?” he asked.

“Yes,” I said, “but—”

“Well, what we waiting for, fella?” said the man. “Put your picture in the paper,” he said. “All the girls’ll see it.”

Laurie froze. “Girls?” he said. “What girls?”

“Don’t you have a girl friend?” the man said.

“I’m a married man,” Laurie said.

“*Laurie*,” I said.

“Mommy.” The doll carriage smacked against the backs of my knees. “Mommy,” Jannie said, “I called you and called you and Linda called you too and you didn’t answer me. Who’s that man talking to Laurie?”

She went over close to the man and stared curiously into his face. “Who’re you?” she asked. “Does Mommy know you’re talking to Laurie?”

“M’sister,” Laurie said; perhaps it was the last shred of courtesy left in him, or perhaps he was just terribly afraid that this stranger might think Jannie a girl friend.

“Well,” said the man, “and is this little sister? Do you pull her hair?” he asked Laurie.

“*My* hair?” said Jannie, and laughed shortly. “And this,” she added, “is Linda, and this is Marilyn, and this is Susan, and this is Barbara, and this is — Margaret? Where is Margaret?”

“Margaret?” said the man in the brown suit.

“Margaret,” Jannie said sharply. She stamped her foot. “Margaret,” she said, “you come here at once. How dare you run away like that? You ought to be spanked right now and here. You bad, bad, bad, bad—”

“Jannie,” I said helplessly, “please don’t scold her. She’s so little.”

“The more reason she should stay with Linda,” Jannie said.

The man in the brown suit, who had been steadily backing away, now rose to his feet and looked long at Laurie and long at Jannie and then, inscrutably, at me. As he turned away, Jannie said, “You can take *my* picture if you want to, and Linda’s and Marilyn’s and everybody’s but Margaret.”

A large lady accompanied by a young boy swept past me and grabbed the stranger by the arm. “You the man taking pictures in the paper?” she asked. “Look, you the man?”

“I always wear Western Rancho clothes,” said the little boy anxiously; he was wearing a pale blue gabardine suit, with a darker blue shirt and a dark red figured tie, neatly knotted. His shoes were polished, his tie pin glittered. His nails, I could see, were clean, as were his ears. He was wearing a neat cap, which he took off when he addressed the man in the brown suit. I glanced at Laurie; he was staring with his mouth open.

“Hello, boy,” Jannie said. She turned to Laurie. “Boy?” she whispered, “or girl?”

“Huh,” said Laurie.

"Madam," said the man in the brown suit, "here is a boy, I can tell right away, who is lively and full of fun and a real Western Rancho type, right out there with—"

"In all the papers?" said the woman; she was removing a spot from the boy's face with the corner of her handkerchief.

"Look," said Laurie loudly, "he got dirty, poor thing."

With a certain obscure pride in my son I took him by the back of the collar and hauled him purposefully toward the department where they had pants in his size; I pushed the doll carriage with my other hand while Jannie shepherded Linda, Marilyn, and the rest, with loud, laughing directions. I was also carrying Jannie's beret and her coat — they could not be set on top of the carriage without disturbing sweet dolly — and Laurie's suit jacket, and my own coat. My voice was getting shrill, but I was still doggedly adding "dear" to every sentence.

Once I got Laurie into the department where I wanted him, there was small trouble in getting him to choose a pair of pants. He also chose a gabardine suit much like the one the boy with his picture in the paper had been wearing, priced at $59.95, a complete suit of space cadet armor, priced at $47.00, a very odd fur hat which for some reason he admired, and which would have cost me $7.50, a shaggy suede jacket which was called a Buffalo Bill jacket, and which was priced modestly at $32.50, pants to match $17.00. I one by one eliminated these articles, on the grounds that they were too heavy, too furry, too shaggy, or too expensive. I proffered a bright red bow tie, priced at sixty-nine cents, as a substitute. After some argument, during the course of which I told him he could buy anything he wanted with his father's dime, he was persuaded to take the bow tie or nothing, and the salesman remarked in an aside to me, "*I* don't think these fads will last." Jannie had amused herself during this time by trying on one fur hat after another, to the extreme bewilderment of Linda, Marilyn, and the rest. She also fell into conversation with a harmless old lady who was trying to find a birthday gift for her nephew and who had great difficulty resisting Jannie's invitation to come shopping with us and Mommy would buy her a pair of shoes.

I added the package with the bow tie and two pairs of corduroy pants to the doll carriage, Jannie's coat and beret, Laurie's suit jacket, and my own coat. Fortunately Jannie's shoes were on the same floor; we could not conceivably get into an elevator, and I was most reluctant to get back onto the escalator. In the shoe department, Jannie sat herself down, ranged her girls about her, and, folding her hands peaceably, announced that she intended to have a pair of shiny black shoes with high-heels and pretty straps and sparkles and no toes.

"Shoes for the kiddies?" said the shoe clerk brightly, setting his little stool down before us.

"Just me and my girls," Jannie said. "We all want shoes."

The clerk did not hear this because I was telling him loudly that we wanted something in a solid brown oxford with a good sole. I knew I was going to have to reach a compromise somewhere along this line, and I thought I would start from rock bottom and so, going up, have more bargaining power. When the clerk brought the brown oxford Jannie dismissed it after a brief glance. "That's for my brother," she said, "bring something for *me*."

During the excruciating process of Jannie's buying herself a pair of shoes, Laurie amused himself by counting the number of boxes the clerk brought out, Jannie held steadfastly to the high-heeled black sandal, and I grew very tense and began saying things like "How will you go to *school* without shoes because you are certainly *not* going to have any *shoes* until you start behaving like a little *lady* …"

We reached a tearful compromise on a pair of black patent leather shoes, completely impractical, but better, I reassured myself, than the black sandals with the high heels. Jannie remarked, as we left the shoe department, "I'm glad you're not my mommy. My mommy always buys me the shoes I want, and if *you* were my mommy I would run away."

"Those are the worst shoes I ever saw in all my life," Laurie told her.

"They're beautiful," said Jannie. "All my girls have shoes just like them."

I had added the package with the shoes to my other portage.

"Let's have *lunch*," Laurie said.

I looked at the clock with the faint unconscious hope common to all mothers that time will somehow have passed magically away and the next time you look it will be bedtime. It was ten minutes to twelve; a good eight hours to go before the nightly miracle, but a legitimate time for lunch.

"Well, children," I said, smiling sweetly and falsely around the table in the restaurant, "well, now we're going to remember our company manners, aren't we?"

Jannie looked bright and alert, and said sweetly, "Can we have two desserts?"

"Perhaps, dears," I said with that same sweet smile, "if we eat allllll our lunch."

Waitresses always take a very long time when you are waiting at a restaurant table with children. I would prefer not to believe that this is due entirely to the general appearance and deportment of my children at the table. At any rate, we had been sitting — me with my hands neatly folded, Laurie with his elbows on the table, and Jannie sliding down in her chair so that her chin rested comfortably on the edge of the table — waiting, I say, for perhaps ten minutes, while waitresses scurried busily past, serving the tables on either side of us, bringing extra pats of butter, stopping to chat merrily, hovering solicitously over customers who could not make up their minds.

"When is she going to *come?*" Laurie demanded.

"I want my lunch," Jannie amplified. She reached out and gave a sharp slap against one of Laurie's elbows, so that his head crashed down and his chin cracked on the table. "Keep your elbows off the table," she said admonishingly.

"Now, children," I said in my gentle voice, scowling fiercely at Jannie, "now, children, remember we intended to use our very best manners."

"Well, *she*—" Laurie began righteously.

"He had his elbows on the table," Jannie said. "Mommy dearest, Laurie was putting his old elbows on the table, Mommy dear."

"*Listen*," Laurie said, "*she* went and—"

"Darlings," I said, my voice more sugary, if possible, than before, "let us remember that *other* people are trying to eat *their* lunches, too, and we—"

"What?" Laurie said to Jannie, who was whispering earnestly in his direction.

"Nothing," Jannie said, looking attentively at me. "We *are* being good children, Mommy dearest. We *are* letting other people eat their lunch."

"That's right, dear," I said to her, "*my* children are such good—"

"Why are you talking funny like that?" Laurie asked me, interested, just as the waitress showed up beside us. "You sound like a cat."

He and Jannie both began to laugh loudly. "She sounds like a cat," Jannie told the waitress.

"You wanna order?" the waitress said to me.

"I want spaghetti," Jannie said immediately.

"*I* want spaghetti," Laurie said.

"Let me see." I consulted the menu. "Omelette?" I said to Laurie. And, to Jannie, "Vegetable plate?"

"No," Jannie said, "spaghetti."

"No spaghetti today," the waitress said. She sighed deeply, fussing with her hair. "Ony what's onna menu," she said.

"Chicken salad?" I said. "Liver?"

"Liver," Laurie said, and made a noisy gesture of distaste. "Liver-biver-shiver-tiver-wiver-niver—"

"Liver-liver-liver," said Jannie.

"Children," I said, recollecting myself in time, so that it came out gentle. "We must *not* take up all this time deciding."

"I decided," Laurie said. "Spaghetti."

Jannie switched sides abruptly. "Vegetable plate," she said. "Mommy dear."

"Justa minute," the waitress said, and departed.

Two unpleasant-looking women wearing flowered hats got up ostentatiously from the next table and moved to a table across the room. "Look here," I said, my voice just loud enough to carry across our own table, "one more word out of either of you and *you*—" eyeing Laurie " — will find yourself being spanked right here in public where everyone will laugh at you and *you*—" eyeing Jannie " — will find yourself being spanked somewhere in private where *no* one can hear you. And right now Jannie is going to have a vegetable plate for lunch and Laurie is going to have a chicken salad and I am going to have spaghetti — I mean, a club sandwich. Now does anyone have anything to say?"

They stared at me numbly. Laurie scowled, and showed his teeth, and was quiet. Jannie's face moved, the corners of her mouth turned down, her great blue eyes filled with tears, and she took a deep breath. "Just one howl out of you," I said sweetly, "and all your girls get shut outdoors tonight." She closed her mouth, and blinked.

Laurie made a move as though to reach for his gun. "That man can still take your picture, you know," I said. He put both hands back on the table.

"Ha, ha," Jannie said bitterly to me, "*you*'ve only got one head."

"Put your foot in here," Laurie told me, extending his water glass.

The waitress reappeared. "Kids made up their minds?" she said.

"Vegetable plate," said Jannie meekly.

"Chicken salad," Laurie said politely. "And two cups of coffee, please."

"Two glasses of milk," I told her. "And I will have a club sandwich."

"And Linda will have spaghetti," Jannie said, "and Marilyn will have spaghetti, and Susan will have spaghetti …"

"Jannie," I said sharply.

"And Margaret," Jannie whispered, "Margaret has to have the vegetable plate."

If I gave up any idea of my dark suit, all we still had to do was manage the escalator going down and get ourselves into a bus and out again at home. I sighed. "I wonder how Daddy and Sally are getting along," I said.

It was at that moment that the waitress approached our table with the plate of soup and the seven little Ellenoys backed her into those spurs.

We are all of us, in our family, very fond of puzzles. I do double-crostics and read mystery stories, my husband does baseball box scores and figures out batting averages, and says he knows the odds against drawing a fourth ace, Laurie is addicted to the kind of puzzle which begins "There are fifty-four items in this picture beginning with the letter C," Jannie does children's jigsaws, and Sally can put together an intricate little arrangement of rings and bars which has had the rest of us stopped for two months. We are none of us, however, capable of solving the puzzles we work up for ourselves in the oddly diffuse patterns of our several lives, and along with such family brain-teasers as "Why is there a pair of roll-erskates in Mommy's desk?" and "What is *really* in the back of Laurie's closet?" and "Why doesn't Daddy wear the nice shirts Jannie picked out for Father's Day?" we are all of us still wondering nervously about what might be called the Great Grippe Mystery. As a matter of fact, I should be extremely grateful if anyone could solve it for us, because we are certainly very short of blankets, and it is annoying not to have *any* kind of an answer. Here, in rough outline, is our puzzle:

Our house is, as I have said, large, and the second floor has four bedrooms and a bathroom, all opening out onto a long narrow hall which we have made even narrower by lining it with bookcases so that every inch of hall which is not doorway is books. As is the case with most houses, both the front door and the back door are downstairs on the first floor. The front bedroom, which is my husband's and mine, is the largest and lightest, and has a double bed. The room next down the hall belongs to the girls, and contains a crib and a single, short bed. Laurie's room, across the hall, has a double-decker bed and he sleeps on the top half. The guest room, at the end of the hall, has a double bed. The double bed in our room is made up with white sheets and cases, the baby's crib has pink linen, and Jannie's bed has yellow. Laurie's bed has green linen, and the guest room has blue. The bottom half of Laurie's bed is never made up, unless company is going to use it immediately, because the dog traditionally spends a large part of his time there and regards it as his bed. There is no bed table on the distaff side of the double bed in our room. One side of the bed in the guest room is pushed against the wall. No one can fit into the baby's crib except the baby; the ladder to the top half of Laurie's double-decker is very shaky and stands in a corner of the room; the children reach the top half of the bed by climbing up over the footboard. All three of the children are accustomed to having a glass of apple juice, to which they are addicted, by their bedsides at night. Laurie uses a green glass, Jannie uses a red glass, Sally uses one of those little flowered cheese glasses, and my husband uses an aluminum tumbler because he has broken so many ordinary glasses trying to find them in the dark.

I do not take cough drops or cough medicine in any form.

The baby customarily sleeps with half a dozen cloth books, an armless doll, and a small cardboard suitcase which holds the remnants of half a dozen decks of cards. Jannie is very partial to a pink baby blanket, which has shrunk from many washings. The girls' room is very warm, the guest room moderately so; our room is chilly, and Laurie's room is quite cold. We are all of us, including the dog, notoriously easy and heavy sleepers; my husband never eats coffee cake.

My husband caught the grippe first, on a Friday, and snarled and shivered and complained until I prevailed upon him to go to bed. By Friday night both Laurie and Sally were feverish, and on Saturday Jannie and I began to cough and sniffle. In our family we take ill in different manners; my husband is extremely annoyed at the whole procedure and is convinced that his being sick is somebody's fault, Laurie tends to become a little light-headed and strew handkerchiefs around his room, Jannie coughs and coughs and coughs, Sally turns bright red, and I suffer in stoical silence, so long as everyone knows clearly that I am sick. We are each of us privately convinced that our own ailment is far more severe than anyone else's. At any rate, on Saturday night I put all the children into their beds, gave each of them half an aspirin and the usual fruit juice, covered them warmly, and then settled my husband down for the night with his tumbler of water and his cigarettes and matches and ashtray; he had decided to sleep in the guest room because it was warmer. At about ten o'clock I checked to see that all the children were covered and asleep and that Toby was in his place on the bottom half of the double-decker. I then took two sleeping pills and went to sleep in my own bed in my own room. Because my husband was in the guest room I slept on his side of the bed, next to the bed table. I put my cigarettes and matches on the end table next to the ashtray, along with a small glass of brandy, which I find more efficacious than cough medicine.

I woke up some time later to find Jannie standing beside the bed. "Can't sleep," she said. "Want to come in *your* bed."

"Come along," I said. "Bring your own pillow."

She went and got her pillow and her small pink blanket and her glass of fruit juice, which she put on the floor next to the bed, since she had got the side without any end table. She put her pillow down, rolled herself in her pink blanket, and fell asleep. I went back to sleep, but sometime later Sally came in, asking sleepily, "Where's Jannie?"

"She's here," I said. "Are you coming in bed with us?"

"Yes," said Sally.

"Go and get your pillow, then," I said.

She returned with her pillow, her books, her doll, her suitcase, and her fruit juice, which she put on the floor next to Jannie's. Then she crowded in comfortably next to Jannie and fell asleep. Eventually the pressure of the two of them began to force me uneasily toward the edge of the bed, so I rolled out wearily, took my pillow and my small glass of brandy and my cigarettes and matches and my ashtray and went into the guest room, where my husband was asleep. I pushed at him and he snarled, but he finally moved over to the side next to the wall, and I put my cigarettes and matches and my brandy and my ashtray on the end table next to *his* cigarettes and matches and ashtray and tumbler of water and put my pillow on the bed and fell asleep. Shortly after this he woke me and asked me to let him get out of the bed, since it was too hot in that room to sleep and he was going back to his own bed. He took his pillow and his cigarettes and matches and his ashtray and his aluminum glass of water and went padding off down the hall. In a few minutes Laurie came into the guest room where I had just fallen asleep again; he was carrying his pillow and his glass of fruit juice. "Too cold in my room," he said, and I moved out of the way and let him get into the bed on the side next to the wall. After a few minutes the dog came in, whining nervously, and came up onto the bed and curled himself up around Laurie and I had to get out or be smothered. I gathered together what of my possessions I could, and made my way into my own room, where my husband was asleep with Jannie on one side and the baby on the other. Jannie woke up when I came in and said, "Own bed," so I helped her carry her pillow and her fruit juice and her pink blanket back to her own bed.

The minute Jannie got out of our bed the baby rolled over and turned sideways, so there was no room for me. I could not get into the crib and I could not climb into the top half of the double-decker, so since the dog was in the guest room I went and took the blanket off the crib and got into the bottom half of the double-decker, setting my brandy and my cigarettes and matches and my ashtray on the floor next to the bed. Shortly after that Jannie, who apparently felt left out, came in with her pillow and her pink blanket and her fruit juice and got up into the top half of the double-decker, leaving her fruit juice on the floor next to my brandy.

At about six in the morning the dog wanted to get out, or else he wanted his bed back, because he came and stood next to me and howled. I got up and went downstairs, sneezing, and let him out, and then decided that since it had been so cold anyway in the bottom half of the double-decker I might as well stay downstairs and heat up some coffee and have that much warmth, at least. While I was waiting for the coffee to heat Jannie came to the top of the stairs and asked if I would bring *her* something hot, and I heard Laurie stirring in the guest room, so I heated some milk and put it into a jug and decided that while I was at it I might just as well give everybody something hot so I set out enough cups for everyone and brought out a coffee cake and put it on the tray and added some onion rolls for my husband, who does not eat coffee cake. When I brought the tray upstairs Laurie and Jannie were both in the guest room, giggling, so I set the tray down in there and heard Sally talking from our room in the front. I went to get her and she was sitting up in the bed talking to her father, who was only very slightly awake. “Play card?” she was asking brightly, and she opened her suitcase and dealt him, onto the pillow next to his nose, four diamonds to the ace jack and the seven of clubs.

I asked my husband if he would like some coffee, and he said it was terribly cold. I suggested that he come down into the guest room, where it was warmer. He and the baby followed me down to the guest room, and my husband and Laurie got into the bed and the rest of us sat on the foot of the bed and I poured the coffee and the hot milk and gave the children coffee cake and my husband the onion rolls. Jannie decided to take her milk and coffee cake back into her own bed, and since she had mislaid her pillow she took one from the guest room bed. Sally of course followed her, going first back into our room to pick up *her* pillow. My husband fell asleep again while I was pouring his coffee, and Laurie set his hot milk precariously on the headboard of the bed and asked me to get his pillow from wherever it was, so I went into the double-decker and got him the pillow from the top, which turned out to be Jannie’s, and her pink blanket was with it. I took my coffee cake and my coffee into my own bed and had just settled down when Laurie came in to say cloudily that Daddy had kicked him out of bed and could he stay in here. I said of course and he said he would get a pillow and he came back in a minute with the one from the bottom half of the double-decker which was mine. He went to sleep right away, and then the baby came in to get her books and her suitcase and decided to stay with her milk and her coffee cake, so I left and went into the guest room and made my husband move over and sat *there* and had my coffee. Meanwhile Jannie had moved into the top half of the double-decker, looking for her pillow, and had taken instead the pillow from Sally’s bed and my glass of brandy and had settled down there to listen to Laurie’s radio. I went downstairs to let the dog in and he came upstairs and got into his bed on the bottom half of the double-decker, and while I was gone my husband had moved back over onto the accessible side of the guest room bed so I went into Jannie’s bed, which is rather too short, and I brought a pillow from the guest room, and my coffee.

At about nine o’clock the Sunday papers came and I went down to get them, and at about nine-thirty everyone woke up. My husband had moved back into his own bed when Laurie and Sally vacated it for their own beds, Laurie driving Jannie into the guest room when he took back the top half of the double-decker, and my husband woke up at nine-thirty and found himself wrapped in Jannie’s pink blanket, sleeping on Laurie’s green pillow and with a piece of coffee cake and Sally’s fruit juice glass, not to mention the four diamonds to the ace jack and the seven of clubs. Laurie, in the top half of the double-decker, had my glass of brandy and my cigarettes and matches and the baby's pink pillow. The dog had my white pillow and my ashtray. Jannie in the guest room had one white pillow and one blue pillow and two glasses of fruit juice and my husband's cigarettes and matches and ashtray and Laurie's hot milk, besides her own hot milk and coffee cake and her father's onion rolls. The baby in her crib had her father's aluminum tumbler of water and her suitcase and books and doll and a blue pillow from the guest room, but no blanket.

The puzzle is, of course, what became of the blanket from Sally's bed? I took it off her crib and put it on the bottom half of the double-decker, but the dog did not have it when he woke up, and neither did any of the other beds. It was a blue-patterned patchwork quilt, and has not been seen since, and I would most particularly like to know where it got to. As I say, we are very short of blankets.

With colder weather setting in, and school once more in sight, I took out the somewhat worn pair of red overalls which had had "Laurie" embroidered on them and crossed out, and "Jannie" embroidered underneath; I now crossed out the "Jannie" and embroidered "Sally" on them. They were a little thin in the seat, and the bottoms of the legs were frayed, but the sentiment was there. Sally also inherited hundreds of pullover shirts and thousands of unmatched socks. Laurie got a leather jacket, Jannie took to carrying a pocketbook, Ninki's third litter of kittens turned out to include one without a tail, and the family of a friend of Jannie's eagerly seized upon this one as a particularly delightful pet. Jannie entered a kind of private kindergarten, which consisted entirely of little girls and which met mornings in the home of a retired grade-school teacher; Jannie began to skip instead of walk and giggled unendurably with her friends. By the end of the first two weeks of school the mother of Jannie's friend called up indignantly to tell me that the kitten had suddenly begun to grow a tail, had grown half a tail and stopped, and that they now had a kitten with a half-tail, which they did not regard as a particularly delightful pet, and she strongly implied that we had deliberately misled them into believing that they were getting a kitten which would be permanently without a tail.

Sally at this time gave up any notion of being a cooperative member of a family, named herself "Tiger" and settled down to an unceasing, and seemingly endless, war against clothes, toothbrushes, all green vegetables, and bed. Her main weapon was chewing gum, which she stole out of Laurie's pockets and with which she could perform miracles of construction on her own hair, books, and, once, her father's typewriter.

I estimated that since we had moved into this house I had used up more than five hundred packages of chocolate pudding. A new school bus was proposed, to be put into service the next school year; the younger Harvey boy, who had been in high school when we moved into town, was to be the driver. Most reluctantly, with a great deal of hesitation and judicious packing and unpacking, and some vast confusion with white shirts, my husband made ready for a major trip to New York.

It was a solemn parting at the station; our two older children stood close to us, and Sally sat, rocking, on a luggage cart. Laurie had said "Where's the *train?*" four times, and Sally had indicated seven times that she planned to accompany her father. My husband had said perhaps eleven times that he was sure everything would be all right while he was gone, and I cannot remember how many times I must have said that he was not to worry about *us;* we would be fine. The train was fifteen minutes late, which gave us all time to repeat ourselves, and to make various other completely reasonable remarks like "Boy, I bet *you* wouldn't stand on those tracks when the train comes," (Laurie, to Jannie) and "Are you sure you packed those warm socks?" (me, to my husband) and "Suppose the train doesn't *ever* come?" (Jannie, to her father).

"Old Mother Hubbid went to the cubbid," Sally said loudly and insistently.

"Boy," Laurie said to his father, "I sure wish that *train* would come. Let's go home," he said to me abruptly, "*he* can get on a train by hisself."

There was a general nervous stirring among the people on the platform; I had begun a stern remark to Laurie about how we had come here to say goodbye to Daddy, after all, but everyone began to say "Here it comes, here it comes," and Sally bounced up and down, shouting, and Jannie and Laurie both moved forward so that I had to grab quickly for the backs of their jackets. "Well," my husband said to me.

"Goodbye, goodbye," I said. My husband, running, turned and waved. The children all waved back enthusiastically and called "Goodbye, goodbye," and I hung on to the backs of their jackets. Sternly repressing a pang of honest envy, I watched the train move off and my husband waving at the window. "Well, children," I said at last, "home we go."

"Has Daddy gone?" Sally asked.

"All gone," Laurie said.

I shepherded them into the car, prevented Sally from climbing right on out the window on the other side, and began to pull on my gloves. "Old Mother Hubbid," Sally said, "went—"

"Hubbid, hubbid, hubbid," Laurie said. "What's so special about Mother Hubbid?"

"*I* was talking," Sally said with dignity. "Old—"

"Can't you ever talk about anything else in the *world?*"

“Can we have a popsicle?” Jannie asked, hanging over the back seat behind my head, “because Daddy’s gone away, can we have a popsicle or a piece of bubble gum or a lollipop or a frozen custard or a popsicle? Because Daddy’s gone away?”

“We’re going directly home for dinner,” I said. “Chocolate pudding for dessert.”

“No chocolate pudding for *Dad*,” Laurie said mournfully.

In honor of Daddy’s departure we also had hot dogs and baked beans; I fed the children first and then, fighting down as unworthy the thought of my husband dining, no doubt, on roast beef and caviar in that haunt of iniquity and high living, the railroad dining car, I had my dinner on a tray, eating my hot dog absent-mindedly and reading a mystery story. The house was very quiet after the children were asleep, and I remembered suddenly, without at all wanting to, that our nearest neighbors had gone to Florida for the winter. I went to bed early, taking along my mystery story and the cat, and fell asleep with the light on. Several times during the night I awoke nervously, because the cat was restless, and although it was uncomfortable sleeping with the light on, I was reluctant to turn it off; there was a distinct ominous creaking in the hall just outside my door and I was growing increasingly positive that I smelled smoke. At any rate, I woke up in the morning cross and uncooperative, to find that it was seven-thirty instead of seven (had that ominous creaking been the alarm I had forgotten to set?) and that what looked and sounded like rain outside the window was, actually, rain. I leaped out of bed, slammed the window shut, turned off the light, opened the door and yelled, “Isn’t anybody *up?*” There was a swift, answering disturbance, as of several children hastily dropping coloring books and crayons, and moving purposefully toward school clothes. My teeth not brushed (first things first, I kept telling myself), I hurried to the kitchen, set water on to boil for oatmeal, filled the fruit juice glasses, and — first things first — plugged in the coffeepot. By the time Jannie reached the kitchen I had the bowls and spoons out; I gave her a quick appraising glance and said, “Take off that necklace. Those are your best shoes and it’s raining. Put on a sweater instead of that blouse. Brush your teeth.” And, beyond her to Sally, “Shoes on wrong feet. And I put out a pair of decent overalls for you last night, not a sunsuit. And you’ve got to wear socks.” I put back my head and shouted, “Laurie!”

After a minute he called back “I’m getting dressed.”

“Sally,” I said, “go and wake your brother.”

“It’s cold,” Jannie said. She shivered elaborately. “It’s *terribly* cold.”

“If you had on a sweater instead of a silk blouse—” I said. “Sally, wake your *brother*.”

“I’m *cold*,” Sally said.

“Awake,” Laurie said, appearing in the kitchen doorway in his pajamas. “Hey, it’s cold.”

It began to occur to me that it *was* cold; I had been moving so fast up to now that I had not noticed the faint undefinable chill on everything I touched — the spoons, the cereal box, the backs of the chairs. I looked at Laurie, and Laurie looked at me, and then he said, nodding, “Yup. I sure bet it is.”

I went into the living room, Laurie following me, Jannie following him, and Sally padding on behind, murmuring, “To get her poor doggie something to eat.” The thermostat in the living room was set at seventy-two, the thermometer below it read sixty-one. I looked at Laurie again and he nodded reassuringly. Gingerly I turned the thermostat up to seventy-five, to eighty, and, not breathing, we all listened. There was no answering roar from the cellar; the furnace was off.

I am not of a mechanical turn of mind. I am wholeheartedly afraid of fuses and motorcycles and floor plugs and lightning rods and electric drills and large animals and most particularly of furnaces. Laboriously, over the space of years of married life, my husband has taught me to use such hazardous appliances as a toaster and an electric coffeepot, but no one is ever going to get me to go down cellar and fool around with a furnace. I had a fairly clear notion that the best way to get the house warm again was to march firmly to a little door in the monster's side and press the third little button from the left; my husband and the furnace man, working together, had once shown this to me, their voices rising shrilly as they explained it over and over; *no* furnace, my husband had said, touching his forehead with the tips of his fingers, has ever exploded because some woman pressed the third little button from the left, *no* furnace. "Lady," the furnace man had said, twisting his hands together, "suppose some day you *got* to start the furnace, and no one's around, say, and you *got* to start it—"

Rising to heights of heroism far beyond my usual abilities, I strode responsibly to the cellar door, the children crowding along behind me. "The furnace seems to be off," I said to Laurie. "I'll just run down and start it up again."

"Yeah," Laurie said. "You go right on down." He regarded me without optimism.

I set my hand on the cellar doorknob. "But something might be broken," I said. (Was it the *third* little button from the left? The second? The right?) "I don't want to turn it on if it's broken," I said to Laurie. "I wouldn't like to do it any damage."

"It might be out of gas," Jannie suggested.

I turned to her gratefully. "That's right," I said. "Now I think of it, it would be very dangerous to turn it on if there's no oil. It grinds the parts together," I told Laurie, who nodded gravely. "I better call the man," I said.

Anyway, we were quite late. *Very* late, as a matter of fact; it was eight-thirty before I had gotten all the shoes tied, all the oatmeal consumed, the hair combed, the teeth brushed, the lunch boxes filled, the homework collected, the jackets on, the rubbers located, and had sneaked in a cup of coffee for myself. I lined the children out into the car, checking like an electric eye for handkerchiefs and contraband, and succeeded in rooting out and confiscating a small plastic telephone and two pieces of bubble gum from Sally and a large ring set with a glittering ruby from Jannie. I shut the car door behind them, raced around to the other side to catch Sally going out the opposite window, counted again to make sure I had three of them, and sat down in the driver's seat with a little sigh.

"If you got *up* earlier," Jannie said critically, "we wouldn't have to hurry so."

I opened my mouth to answer, reflected in time that the poor dears were at present fatherless, and said with great moderation, "Well, at least we're in plenty of time *now*." I pressed the starter.

Jannie giggled. "In Laurie's school he sits with the girls because he's so *pretty*."

"*Hey*, now, you—"

"Children," I said, "do be still." I pressed the starter. "After all," I said, with a light little laugh, "Jannie only teases Laurie because she knows he minds it; suppose *you* try keeping your temper, Laurie, and see how quickly she—" I pressed the starter.

"Old Mother *Hubbid*," Sally swept into the silence, "*she* went to the cubbid to get her dog something to eat, and when *she* started to get breakfast *she* had oatmeal." She began to laugh wildly. "Oatmeal," she repeated helplessly, "oatmeal."

I pressed the starter and pulled out the choke.

“Won’t the star cart?” Jannie asked. Laurie began to shriek with laughter and after a bewildered minute Jannie joined in. “Old Mother *Hubbid*—” Sally began.

I pressed the starter and pulled out the choke and began to bang both hands on the steering wheel.

“Why don’t you get out and crank it?” Laurie asked, howling.

“Why don’t you get yourself a horse or something?” Jannie asked.

“Old Mother—”

“Just flooded it,” I said, my voice level and restrained and even faintly amused. “Silly old car,” I said affectionately, and gave a vicious kick at the clutch.

“Hey,” Laurie said, suddenly no longer entertained, “we gonna be *late?*”

“Certainly not. Just tell the teacher that the car—”

“I told her that the *last* time,” Laurie said. His voice became panicky. “And she said,” he went on, “if I’m not in my sneakers by quarter of nine they’ll get a substitute at left tackle and—”

“*Why* won’t it start?” Jannie asked insistently. “What’s the matter with the car?”

Fatherless or not, I raised my voice. “Never *mind,*” I said. I have been patient with my car through many of its moods, and there is little that we do not know about each other by now, the car and I. It knows perfectly, for instance, that I am made extremely nervous by a kind of low moaning sound it makes when it is unhappy, and I know clearly that if it has come into my car’s obscure mind not to start, no siren’s tricks of mine can make it. “Sell the filthy thing for fifty cents,” I said nastily, and climbed out and went into the house, mumbling to myself, and dialed our village taxi.

"Again?" Mr. Williams said when I told him. "You figure it's the battery again?"

"The children," I said, "have just seven minutes to get to school."

"Well, they won't make it," he said. "Time I get up there and back again. But I figure it ain't going to shock the teachers none, them being late again." He giggled, and I hung up.

I saw Laurie and Jannie off to school in the taxi, stowing away lunch boxes and books, and cautioning Jannie firmly against getting out at the graded school instead of her kindergarten; I asked Mr. Williams to pick Jannie up at twelve and Laurie at three, and said I would pay him later, it being nearly nine o'clock by now. Then — first things first — I came back into the house and shut Sally into her room with her blocks and took up the telephone; since my teeth were chattering I called first of all the number of K. B. Anderson, Plumbing and Heating, and got Mrs. Anderson, who answered the phone mornings in the office. I told her who I was, and all about how our furnace had gone out, and asked could Mr. Anderson please come right over?

"Well," she said, "not *this* morning. He won't be back till dinner-time and then this afternoon he's got to put in a heater over to Sawyer's. Tomorrow, maybe."

"But we have no heat and the children—"

"Maybe not even tomorrow, though, now I think of it," she went on. "On account of that plumber's convention up to Waterville tonight. And you know what *they* are."

I agreed with haste that I did indeed know what they were, and said anxiously that it was getting colder here, and the children —

"Whyn't you try young Dick Sampson over on Bridge Street?" she asked. "*He* used to do some plumbing afore he was married."

“Sampson?”

“No, it’s not Bridge Street at all. I don’t know what made me think it *was*. He *used* to be on Bridge Street, but then he took over that television repair service.”

“So he won’t be going to the plumber’s convention?” I asked politely.

“Not *him*,” she said with satisfaction. “He married one of the Wiley girls, *that’s* why I thought first of Bridge Street. Mildred, I’d say it was.”

“But the furnace—”

“East Main,” she said. “Knew it would come to me. Or you might even try to get ahold of Bill England. There’s one might know what to do, or any of the Hope boys.”

“Thanks very much,” I said. As I hung up, staring hopelessly at the names I had jotted down (I knew the Hope boys, and I would as soon have frozen to death) it occurred to me that among all the friends I had in town I might locate one with a husband who was not afraid to go down into our cellar and look at our furnace. Nancy, I thought; she and Cliff had once come over and helped us put down a rug. I dialed Nancy and she answered and I asked her how she was and she asked me how *I* was and I told her about my husband’s being out of town and she told me about the new chairs they were getting for the porch and I said how I had meant to call her and she said it had been so long since we got together and I said we must have a bridge game sometime next week and she said she would call me and I said I’d get in touch with her and I was just about to hang up when I remembered and said oh, look, there was something I meant to ask her. So I told her the furnace was off and I didn’t know how to start it and she said why didn’t I call Anderson?

“There’s a plumber’s convention,” I said.

“Again? But when William dropped the hairbrush down the drain and I called Anderson, Mrs. Anderson said there was a plumber’s convention *then*. And that was only about six weeks ago because my mother—”

“But do you think that Cliff —?”

“He’d love to,” she assured me. “I’ll send him over just as soon as he gets home. He’ll be *glad* to do it.”

We decided we would certainly get in touch with one another very soon, and hung up. I called Eddie at the garage and asked him to come and get my car again, and he sighed and said did I think it was still going to be the fan belt this time? I washed the breakfast dishes and made the beds, and it occurred to me that when Eddie came for the car I might ask *him* to go down cellar and start the furnace, him being a mechanic and all, but when he finally did come for the car, I was on the phone; Nancy had called back to say she was sorry, it wasn’t a plumber’s convention, it was an oil burner convention, and she had done Mr. Anderson an injustice. So we agreed that we would have a bridge game real soon, and by that time Eddie had disappeared with my car. At lunchtime the taxi brought Jannie home from school and I recalled with abrupt clarity that I had meant to stop on my way that morning and pick up a loaf of bread. I gave Jannie and Sally crackers and peanut butter for lunch, and while they were murmuring sadly in the kitchen I went to the phone and called my friend Carol. She asked how I was and I asked how she was and she told me about the bad cold her boy had been having and I told her about my husband’s being out of town and she said we must get together some evening soon. I said I would call her, and meanwhile would she mind picking up a loaf of bread for me when she went down to the store? Because something had gone wrong with my car. She said sympathetically that you certainly needed a car out on our road, didn’t you, and did I mind being alone in our big house at night? I said no, oh, no, I was never nervous, and could she also get me a can of tunafish? I felt urgently that there was something I had forgotten, but had no time to stop and think because she was saying was there anything else? It was no trouble at all. So I told her that would be plenty, thanks, and it was so nice of her, and we must surely get together some time real soon.

I put Sally to bed for her nap, settled Jannie with puzzles and books to rest in Laurie's room, made myself some crackers and peanut butter, and sat down again with my mystery story. About two o'clock the small persistent nagging which had stayed with me since I spoke to Carol suddenly resolved itself when I discovered that the motive for the murder in my book had been a large inheritance. Money, I thought. Hadn't my husband given me a check to cash this morning?

The check was in my pocketbook, along with three quarters and a penny. Although Carol would hardly press me for the price of a loaf of bread and a can of tunafish, today was Tuesday and the laundryman was due. The check was surely too large for him to cash, but if I let the laundry bill go for a week, there was Mr. Williams to be paid for the taxis. If I told Mr. Williams I would pay him tomorrow, I could pay Carol for the loaf of bread and the can of tunafish. But tomorrow was Wednesday and that meant that before school Laurie and Jannie would each need thirty-five cents for milk money and my mind stopped dully before the problem of dividing three quarters into two thirty-five-centses. I was debating shelving the whole matter and going back to bed when there was a knock at the back door, and when I opened it, there was Mr. Anderson. "Missus said I should come right over," he explained. "Said you had no heat for the kids."

"The furnace is off," I said, to clarify the situation. "It's down cellar." Mr. Anderson — perhaps because of his pressing social obligations — operates always on a strictly cash basis; there is a rumor about him, implicitly believed by me, that if he is not paid immediately he goes right back downstairs and breaks the furnace again. “I hope you can fix it,” I said weakly as Mr. Anderson disappeared down the cellar stairs, conversing cheerily as he went; by the time he had begun a sort of rhythmic banging on the boiler I was in Laurie’s room, my back carefully turned to Jannie, examining his wallet, which contained eleven cents — not even enough to solve the milk money problem. I had been hoping for the five dollars his grandparents had sent him for a football, and would have kicked myself when I remembered that I had personally driven him into town so he could spend it on model cars. His bank, however, was on the dresser.

“What you doing?” Jannie asked from the bed. She put down a piece of puzzle to watch me.

“Looking for something,” I said truthfully.

“Oh,” Jannie said. “Is it there?”

“Yep,” I said.

By the time Mr. Anderson came stamping back upstairs I was sitting cheerfully at the dining room table, running my fingers richly through a heap of nickels and dimes. “Just needed starting up, is all,” Mr. Anderson said, frowning dubiously at the ornamental cow which is Laurie’s bank and at the table knife I had been using to pry my way into it; “Could of done it yourself.”

I laughed lightly, as befits a lady who would rather rob a bank than touch a furnace, and said, “And what do I owe you, Mr. Anderson?”

“Dollar’ll do it,” he said, and watched wide-eyed while I carefully counted out a dollar in nickels and dimes and swept it off the table and poured it into his hand. “*There* you are,” I said. “I hope you don’t mind change.”

"Well, thanks," Mr. Anderson said. He closed his big hand around the money and carried it that way to the back door, and I followed him, talking with animation about how glad I was that there had been nothing really *wrong* with the furnace, and didn't it look like it might stop raining, after all. Mr. Anderson got into his truck, jingling, and drove off down the driveway without looking back, and I went back to my heap of money and began to set it out in piles of nickels and dimes, humming to myself. I could hardly leave the bank entirely empty, in case Laurie picked it up and expected it to rattle, so I reluctantly returned half a dozen nickels to it. That, it turned out, left me enough to pay the laundryman, but for the garbage man, whom I had completely forgotten, I had to resort to Jannie, who was quite poor, and, with Sally's meagre collection of pennies, left me with forty-three cents in pennies and my original three quarters. Carol came with my loaf of bread and my can of tunafish and resolutely declined to take the pennies, because if she took them home she would only have to put them in *her* penny bank. I had to let the taxi go without paying Mr. Williams, since by that time I had put all the banks carefully back in place and I felt that it might look suspicious to Laurie if I tried paying the taxi fare in pennies. While I was making the creamed tunafish for supper Cliff came to fix the furnace, and I told him that Mr. Anderson had already come, but would he mind getting the top off this jar of mayonnaise? He hit it with a table knife and held it under hot water and tried it in the door jamb and I said I would make a vinegar dressing instead and he said oh, yes, Nancy thought I might like to come over for some bridge tonight; they could get a fourth.

I was about to accept with pleasure when I recalled that our baby-sitter's toll has gone up to forty cents an hour, and since I *had* to have milk money I could afford to play only forty-eight cents worth of bridge, or barely one rubber. So I said, smiling bravely, that I thought I had better stay at home with my fatherless children. Eddie brought my car back about seven; "Carburetor," he said briefly, wiping the steering wheel with a greasy sleeve before getting out. "All set now."

My husband called that night and asked how was everything going, and I said well, the car had broken down and the furnace had gone out and I had run out of money and no one could get the top off the mayonnaise. He asked had he better come right home? and I said of course not, everything was fine *now*, except for the mayonnaise. He was just back from having dinner with friends, he said, and was on his way to a poker game.

I went to bed about ten and lay awake for two hours listening to a funny noise going on somewhere in the cellar or the attic or maybe it was only someone prowling around outside. When I woke up the next morning the sun was out and the children were laughing in the kitchen and I lay in bed for a minute thinking of how a day full of troubles and annoyances, like yesterday, always brought a fine day like today, and I must be sure to remember this in future. Cheerfully I made cream of wheat for breakfast, filled the lunchboxes, brushed the hair, tied the shoes, gathered the books, and got everyone shepherded into the car by twenty after eight. "Well, well," I said, "we're in plenty of time *this* morning."

"Laurie sits with the girls, Laurie sits with the girrrrrrrls."

"Now you *listen*—"

"Old Mother *Hubbid*—"

"Children," I said, a smile in my voice, "let's not be cross with one another on such a beautiful day. Let's all be *happy*, and *glad* the *sun* is out. Let's everyone *smile*."

I pressed the starter.

"Cubbid."

I pressed the starter again.

The indefinable sense of harvest entered the house, of apples to be stored away, of Christmas in the perceptible future. A fever of activity seized me, and I painted the girls' bookcase yellow. The lawn furniture came indoors and I began wondering if the snowsuits could go another winter. One day I brought Jannie home a little silk scarf, blue and pink check, and she accepted it with pleasure, remarking that she would surely, surely wear it to school the next day. She wore it tied fashionably around her neck, in a trim bow, and I pointed it out to her father, who said it looked very nice indeed. The next day she had threaded her little scarf casually through the top buttonhole of her jacket; the day after that she tied it loosely around her hair in back. Wondering, I went off and got myself a little purple scarf. I spent fifteen minutes trying to tie it loosely around my hair in back and it made me look like a chorus girl dressed as a rabbit. I gave my purple scarf to Jannie, and she tied it to her pink and blue one, and wore the two together as a belt around the top of her skirt, from which she had removed the shoulder-straps. The next day she had one tied around her wrist and the other neatly folded on her dresser. Timidly I offered her two more, one gold and one green, and the next day Sally came to breakfast with her hair tied into a topknot with the green one; Jannie was wearing the gold one in *her* hair. I pointed this out to her father, and he said it looked very nice indeed. Emboldened, I came to Jannie with a little white scarf I had bought and asked her to tie up my hair for me and she brought a chair and hairbrush and worked over me for quite a while, fussing and murmuring and clucking her tongue. Finally she got down and came around and looked at me from the front and sighed and said "Well, go show Daddy." I went and showed Daddy and he looked at me for a long minute and then looked at Jannie, and

Jannie shrugged and my husband said to me, “Whatever happened to that nice blue dress you used to wear? The one I liked?”

I gave the little white scarf to Jannie and went off sullenly and spent the rest of the day mothproofing bathing suits.

Laurie came home from school at about that time with a frightful little ditty which began “Salami was a dancer who danced before the king, and every time she danced she didn’t wear a thing …” Jannie learned it immediately and they chanted it in chorus. Sally laboriously learned to sing “Jingle Bells.”

Two days before his eighth birthday, Laurie rode his bike around a bend, directly into the path of a car. I can remember with extraordinary clarity that one of the people in the crowd which gathered handed me a lighted cigarette, I can remember saying reasonably that we all ought not to be standing in the middle of the road like this, I can remember the high step up into the ambulance. When they told us at the hospital, late that night, that everything was going to be all right, we came home and I finished drying the breakfast dishes. Laurie woke up in the hospital the next morning, with no memory of anything that had happened since breakfast two days before, and he was so upset by the thought that he had ridden in an ambulance and not known about it that the ambulance had to be engaged again to bring him home two weeks later, with the sirens screaming and an extremely proud Jannie sitting beside him and traffic separating on either side.

We put him, of course, into our bedroom; my mother always used to put sick children into the “big” bed, and I have still that half-remembered feeling that it is one of the signs of being *really* sick, sick enough to stay home from school. My mother, however, never had to cope with anything more complex than my brother’s broken arm: I had under my wavering care this active patient with concussion, a broken hand, and various patched-up cuts and bruises; who was not, under doctor's orders, to excite himself, to move his arm; who was not, most particularly, to raise his head or try to turn over; and who was not, it was clearly evident, going to pay any attention to anything the doctor said.

"Now I'm home I can have whatever I want," Laurie announced immediately I arrived in the room with the tray of orange juice, plain toast, and chicken soup which my mother before me believed was the proper basic treatment for an invalid; he cast a disapproving eye at the tray, and said, "Doc said I could have *real* food."

"The most important thing," I told him, "is for you to keep yourself quiet, and warm, and not excited. That dog, for instance."

Toby buried his huge head under the pillow and tried to pretend that he was invisible. "What dog?" said Laurie.

"And," I went on with great firmness, patting Toby absently on the shoulder, "you are absolutely not to lift your head and you are absolutely not to move without help and if you do—"

"I got to go back to the hospital," Laurie said. He wiggled comfortably into the hollow under Toby's chin. "It wasn't so bad there," he said. "*Food* was good, anyway."

"Jannie and Sally are not allowed in this room. No visitors at all for at least a week."

Shax moved softly into the doorway, looked at me and then speculatively at Laurie, and then walked sedately across the room and went up onto the bed, where he settled down without haste next to Laurie's feet, purring. Laurie grinned at me. "Jannie's already *been* here," he said. "She was telling me one of her stories while you were downstairs fixing that junk on the tray, and Sally brought me her teddy bear."

I sighed.

"It's under the covers somewhere," Laurie said. "Doc said you would tell me all about it, all about what happened."

"We won't think about it."

"Doc said I was hit by a car."

"So you were."

"I don't remember." Laurie was accusing. "Seems as though I'd remember *some*thing about it."

"I think it's just as well," I said. "Better to remember pleasant things than sad ones."

"What's so sad about *this?*"

"Keep your head down." I settled back in the armchair and took up my book. "You go to sleep; I'll sit right here."

Laurie closed his eyes obediently, but Toby wriggled and Laurie laughed. "Listen," he said, "tell me about it."

"There's nothing you don't already know," I said. "It's all over, after all."

"Was there a lot of blood?"

"Laurie, surely—"

"*Was* there?"

"There was some," I said reluctantly.

"On the road?"

"Yes. Keep your head down."

"Gee," Laurie said luxuriously. "And the cops — did the cops come? Doc said the cops called him."

"Officer Harrison was there, and he took charge of everything. It was Sunday and he was home cutting his lawn and he came right over when he heard — when it happened."

"When he heard the crash," Laurie said. "Gee, what a noise it must of made."

“Keep your *head* down.”

“How many cops?”

“Officer Harrison, and Mr. Lanza, and two or three others I didn’t know. I called the State police station and thanked them a few days ago. They were very happy to hear that you were so much better.”

“Doc said you fainted.”

“I did *not*.” I sat up indignantly.

“Did Daddy faint?”

“Certainly not.”

“Did Jannie faint?”

“I sent Jannie and Sally down to the Olsons’,” I said. “They don’t know very much about it.”

“I won’t tell them,” Laurie said reassuringly. “What about my bike — is it all right?”

“Well,” I said, “no, it isn’t. As a matter of fact, it’s broken.”

“I *bet* it is,” said Laurie, with relish. “Boy, did that bike ever get smacked — I bet it’s in a million pieces.”

“Keep your head down.”

“Hey, what about my clothes?” Laurie said, remembering. “I woke up in the hospital and I had on a nightgown; what about my clothes?”

“Since you’re feeling so well,” I said, remembering, “I might as well point out that even though I was quite worried about you, I was positively ashamed when they undressed you at the hospital. I distinctly remember telling you to put on clean clothes that morning, and whatever may be said for your shirt, your underwear—”

“They undressed me at the hospital? Who?”

“The nurse. And when I saw that underwear—”

“The *nurse? She* undressed me?”

“Keep your head *down*.”

“Oh, brother,” said Laurie. He thought, while Toby, his head on the pillow, breathed heavily and happily, and Shax stirred, lifted his head, and curled up more comfortably. “Where are my clothes now?” Laurie asked finally.

“Your shoes are put neatly — *neatly* — under the chair in your room. That underwear has been sent to the laundry, and your socks and blue jeans, too.” I hesitated. “Your shirt was thrown out,” I said.

“Why?” Laurie demanded. “*Why* was my shirt thrown out?”

“It was torn,” I said.

“Torn? You mean it was covered with blood or something?”

“No,” I said. “It was torn. Cut.”

“Cut?”

“Keep your head down. They cut it off you at the hospital.”

“They did?” Laurie said, his eyes shining. “They had to *cut* it off?”

“Well, they *preferred* to.”

“Where is it?”

“I told you, it was thrown out. They gave me your clothes at the hospital and told me the shirt was thrown out.”

Laurie asked accusingly, “You didn’t keep that shirt? All covered with blood and you didn’t *keep* it?”

“Why should I keep it?”

“Which one was it? The green checked one?”

“That was the one you took off in the morning. You put on the new shirt with the baseball picture.”

“*That* one? My new one?”

“There are plenty of others,” I said, making a mental note about never going near those baseball shirts again. “How about you go to sleep now?”

"That good baseball shirt? And you went and threw it out?"

"You couldn't have worn it again."

"Who wants to *wear* it?" said Laurie. "What else happened?"

"Well," I said, "Brooklyn lost the pennant that same afternoon."

"I heard the Series in the hospital," Laurie said. "What a robbery."

"Would you like to go to sleep now?"

"I bet Dad was nearly crazy," Laurie said.

"Not at all," I said, "he was—"

"Losing the last day like that. Gee," Laurie said, squeezing down between Toby and Shax, "it's not bad being home."

A month later, with satisfaction only secondary to Laurie's, I took him back to school to pick up his books so he could try to catch up on his work. "Remember," I told him in the car before we went into the school, "thank the teacher and the kids for the nice basket they sent you."

"Yeah," Laurie said. He had chosen ten in the morning as the ideal moment to present himself at school.

"And don't forget to thank the teacher for her flowers."

"Yeah."

"And tell her I'll help you at home with arithmetic."

"Come *on*," Laurie said.

We entered the classroom in triumph; Laurie threw open the door and stood for a moment in the doorway before advancing with a swagger Cyrano might have envied. "I'm back," he said into the quiet of the spelling lesson.

"Thank you *so* much for the flowers," I told the teacher. "Laurie appreciated them *so* much."

Laurie sat on one of the front desks, holding his hand with the traction splint prominently displayed. All the third-grade girls gathered around him, and the boys sat on the floor and on nearby desks. “ — And I guess there were five hundred people there,” he was saying, “they came tearing in from all over. And the street — you oughta seen the street — *covered* with blood —”

“I’ll go over his arithmetic with him,” I told the teacher.

“He was doing splendidly,” she said absently, her eyes on Laurie.

“ — And my good shirt, they had to *cut* it off me, ten doctors, and there was so much blood on it they had to throw it away because it was all cut to pieces and bloody. And I went in an ambulance with the sireens and boy! did *we* travel. Boy!”

“And will he need to go over his reading?”

“Excuse me,” said Laurie’s teacher. Unwillingly, she moved closer to the spellbinder, her hand still reassuringly on my arm. “And my mother fainted,” he was saying, “and my *father* …”

Three

SOMETIMES, IN MY capacity as mother, I find myself sitting open-mouthed and terrified before my own children, little individual creatures moving solidly along in their own paths and yet in some mysterious manner vividly reminiscent of a past which my husband and I know we have never communicated to them; I remember the little shock of familiarity I felt when I first saw Jannie skip down the front walk, and the sense of lost years slipping past, unrealized, when Laurie came home chanting "O U T spells out, and out you go, down to the bottom of the deep blue sea with a dirty dishrag turned inside *out*," although there was a heated family discussion about the second line of "Ibbitty, Bibbitty, Sibbitty, Sab," because Laurie believed that it went "Ibbitty, bibbitty, conoso," and *I* said it was "conothco," and my husband said it was "Ibbitty, bibbitty, canarsie," and it reminded me of the little idiocy which went "Laurie bumbaurie tiliaurie gosaurie," although my husband said that *that* one ended "gotaurie." Sally discovered in herself the ability to chant that most basic and most jeering of childhood tunes, the "*da*, da, da-*da*, da," or "*I* know a *se*cret," melody; Laurie began collecting pictures of baseball players, which came enclosed in packages of bubble gum; in my day they used to be in packages of licorice. The candy cigarette turned up, and the chocolate apple; they no longer give away baseball bats with pairs of new shoes, but Buster Brown still grins with his dog from the soles. A whole section of forgotten past came back, for instance, one evening when Laurie remarked joyfully that a house near the school had a ghost in it and none of the kids from school would walk past it, although one intrepid adventurer named Oliver maintained that he had been inside and had of course seen the ghost, and "Boy," Laurie said with reminiscent pleasure, "was *he* scared!"

My husband and I looked at one another; in my case it was a house on the next block — the one next to the vacant lot — and the boy who said he had been inside was named Andy Young (how is it that I have not forgotten Andy Young in all these years?) and my husband remembered that there was a shack at the back of the school yard which had a ghost in it and that one Louie Fair had been inside. In all cases the punchline of the story was precisely, "Boy, was *he* scared!" My husband and I found ourselves repeating the same amused platitudes about boys who went into haunted houses that our parents had used to us, Laurie retorted that *every*one knew this house was haunted and he bet *we* wouldn't go inside, and there was a familiar split-second hesitation before my husband and I answered, in chorus, that *certainly* we would go inside, if it were not that the house belonged to someone else who would presumably resent our entering without permission. Laurie said Boy, he bet a ghost was sure a scarey thing to see, and his father offered to compose a document demonstrating that our house was haunted if Laurie would take copies of this document and distribute them, like handbills, around the neighborhood. Laurie agreed with delight, and the conversation closed, in traditional style, with the flat statement that Laurie was not to go into the haunted house under any circumstances since it was a) someone else's property and b) if abandoned, probably dangerous, with broken glass and falling beams. Point c) was not mentioned, but I personally have always believed in ghosts; I taught Laurie later a small charm against evil spirits, disguising it as a nursery rhyme. The handbill was duly composed and Laurie set out with it, although along the way he fell in with evil spirits against whom his charm was powerless and played two innings of softball; when his father asked him later about the handbill he said that Mrs. Wright, down the road, had read it and thought it was very clever and asked Laurie if he had written it himself. Mrs. Collins had not had time to read it right then but said she would send over a plate of cookies later. By the time school started again in the fall, gang warfare had taken over the fourth grade and the ghost was allowed to languish in his haunted house, untroubled again by Oliver, although I daresay that when someday Laurie's son remarks that a friend of *his* has explored a haunted house, Oliver's name will come, freely and with nostalgia, to Laurie's mind.

The opening of school that fall found Sally, scorning the overalls which now read LAURIE JANNIE SALLY, preparing to enter upon nursery school. Jannie's girls had all retired abruptly to a ranch in Texas, from which they very rarely wrote illegible letters to their mother, but Sally now had a house of her own, located approximately and damply in the middle of the river near *our* house; we all heard a great deal about this retreat of Sally's, in which a number of small children Sally's age lived in utter happiness upon lollipops and corn on the cob. Sally visited there, she explained, at night after the rest of us were asleep, and when she was particularly angry with any of us she shouted furiously, "*You* can't come to *my* house!"

Sally had at this time entered with complete abandon into a form-fitting fairyland; I saw her sometimes as wandering perpetually in a misty odd world, where familiar shapes merged and changed as she passed and occasionally a brother or a sister or a parent, stepping from behind a tree, might briefly interrupt her journey; with the exception of Jannie, who slept in the same room and had no refuge from Sally's bedroom stories, I spent more time with Sally than with anyone else, and began to find that a large part of my daily activity was accompanied by Sally's tuneful and unceasing conversation; part song, part story, part uncomplimentary editorial comment. Around the house, my head deep in a pillowcase or the oven, my eyes focussed on that supernatural neatness which the housewife sees somehow shadowing her familiar furniture, it was largely possible to disregard, or not-quite-hear, Sally, but in the car I was entirely what I believe is called a captive audience. We traveled far afield that fall, Sally and I, up and down familiar and unfamiliar roads, going perhaps after pumpkins, or taking a side road because for a minute it looked unusually yellow to Sally, or just going the longest way around because it took us over a covered bridge crossing Sally's river and people living nearby owned a baby goat. "In my river," Sally remarked once, chillingly, "we sleep in wet beds, and we hear our mothers calling us," — giving me a sudden terrifying picture of my own face, leaning over the water, wavering, and my voice far away and echoing; "The water is probably *extremely* cold," I told her, and shivered. "In the river," Sally said, "no one ever comes except *us*." We drove upon occasion, Sally and I, up and down Murphy's Hill, which was every bit as steep going up as it was going down and led only to a kind of plateau neatly edged with trees; in the fall these trees presented an appearance sufficiently startling to make a trip up (and of course down) Murphy's Hill a rewarding experience even beyond its roller coaster aspects; the vines on the trunks of these trees turned red early, and the trees stayed green late, and a row of straight, youthful green trees with bright red trunks was a sight I have never seen *except* at the top of Murphy's Hill.

Sally habitually rode standing on her head in the back seat, and gave every sign of regarding me as perhaps an additional fixture to the car, a sort of extension of the steering wheel; her conversation included me casually, and my comments became a sort of counterpoint to which she attended when it was necessary, perhaps, to find a rhyme, or perfect a rhythm; we found ourselves one day on a back road, turning a corner suddenly into a herd of cows.

"Do you know who I am?" Sally was singing, on her head in the back seat, "DO YOU KNOW WHO I AM?"

The cows were wandering vaguely — very much, I suppose, in the manner of cows unsupervised and not in the least pleased about it; they crowded the road and moved in all directions at once. "I'm a rat and you're a fish," Sally sang, "and now you know who I am."

"Do turn yourself rightside up," I said. "The road is covered with cows and I can't see out the back window."

There was nothing to do, of course, but stop the car and wait until some avenue opened itself through the cows. I am earnestly afraid of all large animals; I closed the car windows tight and cringed in my seat, entirely convinced that a cow was going to try to climb onto, or into, the car. "Look at all the cows," I said to Sally with a sort of wild gaiety; I did not, after all, want to communicate to a small child my fears, which might possibly be unfounded; "I guess you never saw *this* many cows before."

"*These* are not cows," Sally said. "*These* are giants."

"See how they stop and look at us," I remarked airily, moving over into the center of the front seat. "I suppose *they* wonder what *we* are." I grinned back convulsively at a bovine face next to the window. "Nice cow," I said.

"Lots and lots and *lots* of giants, and when *I* see giants I know their mothers are coming to eat me."

This corresponded so nearly to my own apprehensions that, wildly disregarding the probable suicidal result of frightening a herd of cows into a stampede, I slammed my hand down onto the horn and my foot onto the gas pedal. The cows backed away and turned, lumbering against one another, and finally determined unanimously on one direction, which was down the road ahead of us; running, so that with Sally calling encouragement from a rear window and me leaning on the horn, we found ourselves in the odd position of chasing a herd of cows swiftly down a country road. “Run, giants, run,” Sally shouted out the window. I made a broad screaming turn onto a side road and pulled up, panting and listening to the thunder of hooves as the cows made off into the distance. “Golly,” I said.

“Giants are very nice sometimes,” Sally remarked, turning herself upside down, “and sometimes giants are not very nice and sometimes giants are very nice and sometimes giants are—”

It was the day of Sally’s fingers, I think, when we went to get the apples. There was a farm not far away where they sold an honest frost-bitten apple and had a speckled hen in a cage, and Sally and I made it, that fall, one of our regular stopping-off places; Sally was always given an apple to eat, and I always admired the speckled hen, and we came home with the car full of apples and their rich scent; on this day Sally had amused herself by counting the fingers on her left hand, which came out six, and the fingers in her glove, which came out five, and she was deeply involved in the problem of accommodating her fingers into the glove, which had unreasonably fit perfectly until now; the road was narrow and winding, and I was humming to myself and watching the way the sun came through the colored trees. We moved without any recognition of danger onto a scene of fire; I realized as we came around a corner that there had been a vague sense of activity and noise ahead, but as I slowed down the wild approach of the fire engine sounded behind me and I had no choice but to pull my car quickly over into the ditch as the engine rushed by. So there we sat, Sally and I, in the car, unable to turn and go back the way we had come, surely unable to go forward, and — I, at least — most unwilling to stay where we were. “Is it a giant?” Sally asked uncertainly, coming over into the front seat to look out, “is it a giant, or what?”

“It’s a fire,” I said. “That farmhouse is burning.”

“Why?” Sally asked.

I thought fleetingly that perhaps this would be a good time to warn Sally against playing with matches, but my moment had passed; “It looks like a giant to *me*,” she said. “Are we going to stay here?”

“Until the road ahead is clear,” I said. “We’ve got to wait till those other cars get out of the way, because we can’t turn around.”

“Then I will have another apple,” Sally said. She returned to the back seat, found an apple, and stood herself up on her head. “I am going to sing an apple song,” she said.

We had to stay there for over an hour; it was quite a fire. Had the farmer whose home was burning been of a philosophical turn — which I am fairly sure he was not — and believed that he was due for at least one fire during his lifetime and was having it now, he might have taken great consolation in the way this one came off; his livestock, I learned from brief bulletins from the firemen, was safe, his children securely at school, his wife and farmhands unharmed, his insurance invulnerable, and as we arrived they had been carrying out his television set. The sound country policy of letting the burning house go and trying to save the buildings nearby was being put into practice; the fire hose stretched nicely to Sally’s river, and although the house and barn, which were close to one another and both hopelessly lost, flamed ominously, the firemen were successfully soaking down the other outbuildings and the one or two neighboring houses. There was not even a wind.

“I’m a sweetie,” Sally sang, “I’m a honey, I’m a poppa-corn, I’m a potato chip, all my days for you.”

My principal feeling, beyond the primitive terror of the fire itself, was of embarrassment. I was deeply concerned lest these people assume that we, my daughter and I, had come curiously to watch their fire. I wanted very much to catch hold of one of the firemen and explain that we were here entirely by accident, like the fire itself; we had been passing by, I would tell him, on our way home from buying apples, and had been caught by chance on this road; we did not ordinarily race fire engines to fires, I would go on, but in this case, what with the narrow road …

“Aren’t they through *yet?*” Sally demanded over my shoulder.

“Almost,” I said. “The fire engine is getting ready to leave.”

“We shouldn’t of stayed *this* long,” Sally said.

I pulled out of the ditch, and waved cheerily to the farmer’s wife as we went by. We reached home to find the rest of our family waiting restlessly for dinner.

“We got apples,” I said to my husband, “and we saw—”

“*Giants*.” Sally swung wildly on her father’s arm, “*Giants*.” She nodded.

“Giants?” my husband asked me, staring.

“There was a big giant party and they were cooking marshmallows,” Sally said. She caught Jannie in a long ominous look. “*Giant* marshmallows.” Her voice dropped to a compelling whisper. “And the giants were all stamping around and the *mother* giant sat there and watched them, and the mother giant said ‘Wait till those other cars get out of the way and then we can go home.’ And I had ninety-seven apples. And we came over the river and the mother giant went in and got drowned dead.” There was a short, respectful silence.

Finally Laurie inquired of his father, “Who was Aristides the Just?”

“Friend of your mother’s,” my husband said absently. “Apple pie?” he said hopefully to me.

"I got to do a report," Laurie said.

"Y'know something?" Jannie asked me. She glanced around at her younger sister and then went on in a low voice, "I don't believe it when Sally tells about giants. Do you?"

"Certainly not," I said. "She's just making it up." And recognized clearly that there was no ring of conviction whatever in my voice. "My goodness," I said heartily, "who's afraid of *giants?*"

During that fall the conflict of individual cultures in our family became explicit, and uncontrollable. My husband and I, a little frayed after a number of years spent — it seems — almost entirely in the society of small children, had managed to build up little sets of foibles which we were reluctant to sacrifice. Laurie had developed opinions which could only be called decided. Sally had not so far seen any reason for doubting that anything could be achieved if you just made enough noise about it. Jannie, who had never in her life doubted anything she said herself although no parental pronouncements sounded to her entirely impartial or, no matter how emphatic, reasonable, entered first grade that fall and came into contact with the public school system.

Now, I have nothing against the public school system as it is presently organized, once you allow the humor of its basic assumption about how it is possible to teach things to children, and my experiences with Laurie have convinced me that the schools are well enough, and my children are well enough, and it is only any chance combination of these two which is apt to become explosive. Laurie succeeded in fighting his way to the fourth grade without showing any noticeable signs of contact with education, but Jannie brought up against the school an impact which must have been felt in the very bedrock of learning, and which certainly put a crack in the family hearthstone.

I had been warned that when a little girl goes to school she prefers to wear dresses and pigtails, but Jannie thought she would rather wear shorts the first day, and an old baseball hat of Laurie's. I struggled out of bed on the morning which was to see Jannie off to school for the first time and combed my hair and dressed myself with the idea of appearing before teachers and other mothers, escorting my daughter, but Jannie told me at breakfast, "If I am going to go to school at *all*, I think I would prefer to go by myself."

After five busy years I no longer attempted to argue with Jannie before breakfast; I nodded and slipped my shoes off under the breakfast table. "You don't mind my coming to the door to wave goodbye to you, I suppose?" I asked, and Jannie, considering, said, "If you don't cry or something."

"Do I have to take *her* to school?" Laurie demanded. "On the bus and all?"

Laurie regarded the new school bus as his personal and exclusive conveyance. "She's got to go to school," I said. "They don't let children grow up and not go to school."

Laurie, regarding his sister, laughed bitterly, and Jannie said, "I believe I'll sit in the other end of the bus from Laurie. I don't care for unpolite boys."

"Do I have to hold her hand?" Laurie asked.

"Certainly you do not," Jannie said. "I prefer to go by myself, thank you. If I am going to school at *all*, that is."

The notion that she might, upon consideration, decide not to go to school at all, was enough for me. "Will you be careful?" I asked.

"Once," Jannie remarked exclusively to Sally, "I had a friend named Susan, and Susan went to the horse racing and she betted on a horse named

Susan, and the horse fell through the side of the track and all the horses went to see if he was all right and he had broken the gate and all the men got away and the horses couldn't catch them to bring them back."

"Ah," said Sally intelligently. "*You* can't come to *my* house."

I had no trouble not crying when Jannie left; after all these years during which I have seen one child or another go off to one place or another and managed to control myself except during major crises like Cub Scout award meetings and nursery school Dancing Days — after all these years my goodbye kiss and my wave from the front window no longer exhibit more than the mildest apprehension. Jannie climbed stoutly into the school bus, her brother behind her pretending unsuccessfully that she was just some girl who happened to get on at the same stop he did, and I saw Jannie's head move down the bus to a seat at the end. "Sister's gone to school," I said to Sally.

"Ah," said Sally. "And will she come home again?"

Laurie reported, when he came home at three o'clock, that although he looked for her, and waited at the bus, and even, with some faint vestige of fraternal feeling, asked a couple kids if they had seen his sister, Jannie had not got on the bus, and at four o'clock I was driving back and forth between our house and the school for the sixth time when I saw Jannie wandering and singing along the side of the road. I stopped the car next to her and leaped out, babbling, and she took my hand amiably and said, "I think school will be all right for me, after all."

"Where have you *been?*" I said.

"I followed my teacher home," Jannie said. "I wanted to see where she lived."

At the end of her second week in first grade Jannie remarked one evening at the dinner table, "Mrs. Skinner says paper napkins are vulgar."

Mrs. Skinner is the first grade teacher, and it had already, by then, begun to get through to the rest of us that Mrs. Skinner's opinions, relayed through Jannie, were inclined to be vehement, positive, and perhaps even a shade on the critical side. "Mrs. Skinner," Jannie went on, eyeing her brother, "says little boys are made of snails."

"Who's little?" Laurie demanded, stung. "Seems to me—"

"I *beg* your humble pardon," said Jannie— "I beg your humble pardon" is another Skinnerism— "I beg your *humble* pardon, but Mrs. Skinner says that boys any size are made of snails and little girls like Sally and me—"

"Sally and I," said Laurie.

"I *beg* your humble pardon. — like Sally and me are dainty and sweet."

"Huh," said Laurie eloquently.

"And now I think of it, what's so vulgar about paper napkins?" I wanted to know.

"Mrs. Skinner," Jannie said gently, "doesn't care if you *use* paper napkins. Mrs. Skinner will let you use paper napkins if you *want* to. But then you're just *vulgar*, is all."

"Some people," Laurie remarked, addressing his plate, "Some people just think they know everything, I really do believe. Some people just think they know *every*thing."

"Jannie and me are dainty and sweet, *are*n't we, Jannie?" Sally gestured with her fork, scattering green peas generously onto the table. "And Laurie is full of snails."

"Children, be quiet," my husband said firmly. "Mother and I want to talk." He addressed me through a profound silence. "Did you sew the button on my shirt?" he inquired.

"Water with the meal," Jannie murmured, "is unsanitary."

We had been exposed to Mrs. Skinner from about the third day of school, when Jannie came home with a mimeographed sheet of paper containing her instructions for conduct in the first grade; she was not, I noted from the paper, to come to school with dirty fingernails, broken shoelaces, or odorous lunches. She was to wear dresses or skirts. (“Mrs. Skinner says girls wearing pants are vulgar.”) Her hair was to be cut short or braided, her socks matching, and no pins were to be in evidence. (“How about a dental plate for that missing front tooth?” I asked impolitely, and Jannie smiled at me with sweet tolerance.) She was not to wear jewelry (vulgar) or earmuffs. If she intended to visit anyone after school, or to sniffle moderately (immoderate or obtrusive sniffling was not countenanced) or to require a container of milk with her lunch, she was to bring a note. If her shoes needed soling, or she squinted at the blackboard, or created a disturbance during Songtime, Mrs. Skinner would send a note back. No parent was, under any circumstances whatsoever, for any reason up to and including absolute national emergency, to visit the classroom at any time except — Mrs. Skinner’s unwilling bow to the school authorities and their tyranny — during Parent’s Visiting Week. Children were not encouraged to discuss their home life at school.

“Mrs. Skinner says,” Jannie remarked as her father read the mimeographed notice for the third apoplectic time, “that men who smoke are vulgar, especially cigars.”

It did not take us very long to find out that Mrs. Skinner thought that raised voices, dining in restaurants, and playing cards were all vulgar. Jannie took to keeping care of her own socks and she bathed every night, and once a week, while we were out carousing at our regular bridge game, she washed her hair inefficiently. “A girl,” she told me, “who does not keep herself clean is unwomanly.”

"Talking about being clean is vulgar," I told her nastily.

"Clean talk," said Jannie, "is womanly."

"I beg your *humble* pardon," I said.

"Granted," said Jannie.

"This is unbearable," I said to my husband, after Jannie had set out her clean dress for tomorrow with her clean socks, and had cleaned her fingernails and gone to bed, "this is positively vulgar — I mean unbearable."

"What's so vulgar about keeping your hands in your pockets, is what *I* want to know?" my husband said unhappily, looking up from a book catalogue. "I *have* to put my hands in my pockets *some*times; I keep my cigarettes and my wallet and my handkerchief—"

"Smoking is unsanitary anyway," I said.

"Cats give you colds," Jannie remarked the next afternoon when she came home from school; she dropped her jacket into the center of the hall floor and made an ostentatious large circle around poor old Shax, who raised his head and stared at her with honest surprise. "Cats give you colds and dogs give you mange."

"Now, *look*, young lady," I said sternly, "you go right out and pick up your jacket and apologize to Shax. You haven't had a cold since—"

"I *beg* your humble pardon. Mrs. Skinner says cats give you colds."

"Cats do *not*—"

"It's vulgar to contradict."

During a fairly stormy dinner, during which Laurie fled the table in a blind fury, shouting, "What the *hell* do I have to be womanly *for?*" Jannie succeeded in eliminating string beans (unsanitary), coffee (unhealthy), and the clearing of the table by the lady of the house (vulgar). She told her father while I was bringing in the dessert and setting a tray to take upstairs to Laurie that we must really get a housekeeper.

“Who is going to pay for this housekeeper?” her father asked, the way he always asks me.

“Speaking of money is vulgar,” Jannie said.

Sally, who demonstrated the far-reaching arm of Mrs.

Skinner by preserving an awed silence when her sister spoke, and by even making some abortive attempts to keep herself clean, said now, “*I*’m dainty, aren’t I? Can I have more dessert?”

“‘May,’ dear,” Jannie said. “*We* say ‘*May* I have more dessert.’” She implied pointedly by her tone that her father and mother habitually and vulgarly used “can,” as we do. “Dear Mother,” she went on— “Dear Mother” is, I hardly need point out, Mrs. Skinner’s presumable manner of addressing *her* mother— “I need two buttons sewed on my jacket before tomorrow. Mrs. Skinner says that if you thread the needle for me I can do them as well as *you* do.”

“You may tell Mrs. Skinner,” I said tensely, “that I have quite enough to do with the dinner dishes and drawing your—” I hesitated, deleting a vulgar word “ — bath, without sitting down to teach you to sew. You may tell Mrs. Skinner that if she is so—” I deleted again “ — womanly *she* can teach you to sew. And furthermore—”

“A lady who does not know how to sew nicely is—”

My husband and I flipped a coin — secretly, because money is vulgar and gambling is unwomanly and our expressed opinions were, to say the least, unsanitary — to decide which of us would stop by during Parent’s Visiting Week and beard Mrs. Skinner. My husband lost, but I had to promise to stand right outside the door while he was talking to Mrs. Skinner and rush in if he were cornered.

The morning his father was to attend school Jannie looked him over carefully. “I told you a million times that standing with your hands in your pockets is *vulgar*,” she said. “And even though you’re made of snails you don’t have to—”

“Show it,” my husband said miserably. “I suppose it’s this tie.”

“The tie’s all *right*,” Jannie said without conviction, and sighed. “I wish you’d sort of give up Parent’s Day this month,” she said. “I’m going to have a real spell of faintness waiting for you in the car.”

I stood outside the door of the first grade room, with a clear view of the health chart on the front blackboard and the row of trim geraniums on the window sill, and I heard Mrs. Skinner saying clearly, in a voice which carried beautifully across the empty desks and out into the hall, but in a voice also not raised and not in the least, I am sorry to say, vulgar, “Your little Joanne is a charming child, charming. So refined.” She lowered her voice slightly. “*You* know, sir, that there are children in every class, and from every walk of life, mind you, who are coarse. Who are even unclean.”

“Vulgar, I suppose,” my husband said.

“Precisely.” I could almost hear Mrs. Skinner glowing with satisfaction. “Vulgar, precisely the word I was hesitating to use. But little Joanne …” her voice died off tenderly.

“How about your own children?” my husband asked.

“They are many of them unbelievably charming, of course,” Mrs. Skinner said, “but of course from every walk of life …”

“No,” my husband said, “your *own* children. Children you’ ve — well — *had* yourself.”

“I regret to say,” Mrs. Skinner said with a soft wistfulness, “that we have not been blessed—”

“Not having children is unwomanly,” my husband said, “in a woman.”

“True, true,” Mrs. Skinner said, and sighed again. “My spells of faintness,” she said; “my unfortunate weak limbs … but,” she added brightly, “you did not want to hear about *my* troubles, sir. We were speaking of your little Joanne — such a charming child.”

“However,” my husband said relentlessly, “I presume that had you been blessed with little charmers of your own they would have caught colds from cats?”

“I beg your pardon?”

“I beg your *humble* pardon,” my husband said. “Is Jannie doing all right in her school work?”

“She is excellent in cleanliness — I don’t believe I ever saw a child so conscientious about her nails; her imaginative qualities are unusually good, and so is her general gracefulness. Her singing voice, however …”

“How about spelling? Arithmetic?”

“I beg your *humble* pardon?”

“Granted,” said my husband.

I tiptoed away at this point, and joined Jannie in the car. While she fidgeted nervously I smoked a cigarette with abandon, dropping ashes on the car seat. After about half an hour my husband came out of the school building; he had his hands in his pockets and he was whistling. “Well?” I asked him as he got into the car, “what happened?”

“Were you all *right?*” Jannie said urgently, “did you *do* anything?”

He untied his tie and draped it over the mirror, took a cigar out of his pocket and put it rakishly into the side of his mouth, and then he turned and grinned at us.

“Curiosity,” he said, “is unwomanly.”

The dinner table is, in our house, always the family village green, with the big salt and pepper shakers and the plastic table mats silent if appalled witnesses to the intricate weavings of our several dining personalities: Jannie's place is always set left-handed, my husband and I use oversized coffee cups, and Sally requires at least three paper napkins; the dinner, which is cooked by me, tends to be largely upon Sally's level and liberally adorned with chili sauce by Laurie. That night at dinner, Jannie was silent and oppressed. When Laurie pointed out virtuously that she had not touched her dinner, she barely raised her eyes. When Sally observed that Jannie was an impulent girl she did not turn her head, when her father offered her the band from his cigar she gazed sadly upon the ceiling.

"Jannie is invited to Helen's birthday party on Saturday," I informed the table brightly.

"How about I read you ten chapters in your Oz book?" Laurie asked.

"Jannie can be the new mother," Sally said largely, "and Mommy and I will just be the babies and Laurie is the queen and Daddy is a herd of rabbits."

"You may put an ice cube down my back," my husband said earnestly to Jannie.

"Thank you," Jannie said wanly. "I don't feel much like being happy now, thank you."

"Perhaps if I were to lend you my lapel watch?" I suggested.

"I could even read you *twelve* chapters—"

"*You* can come to *my* house."

"*I* think," Laurie observed critically, "if anyone should *ask* me, *I* think she's getting *spots*."

Two weeks later, when Jannie was well over the measles and we were only waiting for Laurie and Sally to catch it, I ventured timidly — again at the dinner table — to point out that her nails were dirty.

"What of it?" demanded Jannie, rendered reckless by two lovely weeks of illness. "You think *I* care?"

"What's your name?" Sally asked her.

"Puddentane," Jannie said.

"Where do you live?"

"Down the lane," said Jannie.

"You must keep your nails clean," I said gently, "even if—"

"What's your name?" Sally asked Laurie.

"Laurence," said Laurie.

"Pudden*tane*," Sally said. "When I ask you 'What's your name?' you must say 'Puddentane.' Now what's your name?"

"Laurence."

"Puddentane," Sally shouted, "you bad bad webbis."

"*You* bad bad webbis."

"I am *not* a webbis, *I* said puddentane; I *always* say puddentane. What's *your* name?" she said plaintively to her father.

"Puddentane," he said diplomatically.

"Where do you live?"

"Did you call the health officer?" my husband said to me.

"You bad bad webbis," Sally said reproachfully to Laurie.

"Can I please leave my potato and my meat and my beans?" Jannie asked me. "I don't feel really well *yet*, you know, and I'll eat my bread and butter."

"Eat three mouthfuls of everything," I said. "If they're going to catch it," I told my husband, "there's nothing *we* can do."

"Penicillin?" he said vaguely.

"*That's* no good against measles," Laurie said.

“If I had been addressing you, young man,” his father began, “I can assure you that I would have—”

“I couldn’t overhelp hearing,” Laurie said meekly.

“What’s your name?”

“What it comes down to,” I said, “is that they might as well have it now as—” I broke off abruptly with a squawk as Sally poked me vigorously with her fork.

“I said ‘What’s your name?’” Sally reminded me.

“She’s too young to have a fork,” my husband said. “Little girls should be seen and not heard,” he told Sally.

“You bad bad webbis,” Sally said gratuitously to her brother.

“If Sally came down with a high fever,” my husband said dreamily, “and Laurie came down with a high fever and—”

“Why don’t we get a new outside?” Sally asked. “This morning, it was raining and raining.” She thought. “And there was a lion on the front porch,” she said.

“Really?” said Jannie. “Really, was there a lion on the front porch?”

“Cernly,” Sally said.

Laurie put down his fork and turned to his father. “What is long and hard and wears shoes?” he asked. “Bet you a dime you can’t guess it.”

His father said tentatively, “A horse?”

Laurie guffawed. “Make it twenty cents,” he said.

“Surely there was a lion on the front porch,” Sally said to Jannie, “and I saw him and he was walking around very softerly and he ate all the cats and part of the fence.”

Jannie addressed me. “*I* was sick in bed, you know,” she said. “Was there *really* a lion out there?”

“A horseshoe stake?” my husband said desperately.

“That,” Laurie said with relish, “will be twenty cents.”

“But a horseshoe stake is long and hard and it wears—” my husband said. “Look, don’t the shoes go *around* it?”

“A sidewalk,” Laurie said. “It *wears* shoes, see? Now, for another dime, what goes under the water, over the water, and doesn’t get wet?”

“I left my rubbers somewhere,” my husband said to me.

“You must ask *me* what’s my name,” Sally said to Laurie.

“What’s your name?”

“Tiger,” Sally said. “You snick,” she told him.

Laurie said triumphantly to his father, who was scowling doggedly at his empty dessert dish, “An old woman crossing a bridge with a pail of water on her head, and counting yesterday and the money you lost to me on the checkers game that’s two-seventy-five, and counting my allowance tomorrow that makes two-eighty-five, and the dime you bet me you could eat your bread and butter without using your hands.”

“And when you dropped the book and the feather down the stairs,” Jannie said.

“Galileo,” Laurie told her approvingly, “I forgot. You had a dollar,” he said to his father, “that the heavy object and the light object would …” he hesitated, looking at me.

“Fall at the same rate of speed,” I said helpfully. “It looked like a sure thing.”

“Damn it,” my husband said, goaded, “I can show you in the book—”

“And twelve cents,” Laurie went on inexorably, “for swatting twelve hundred flies.”

“*That* wasn’t twelve hundred flies,” my husband said, “Mother counted them.”

“You *gave* them to me to count,” I said, “but—”

“*I* can count to twelve hundred,” Jannie said. “One, two, three, four, five, six, seven …”

“Showing off,” I said vengefully, “is vulgar.”

“What?” Jannie said.

“Where do you live?”

“Down the lane,” said my husband sadly.

“Four ninety-seven,” said Laurie, who had been figuring silently.

“Mother will give it to you,” my husband said.

Diabolically, both Sally and Laurie refused to catch measles after I had gone out and purchased a new thermometer and a large bottle of calamine lotion. My husband and I agreed that it was time that Laurie’s natural curiosity about things which did not belong to him should be channelized into a healthy pattern, and that he should be encouraged to give up spending nickels for packs of gum and begin, instead, a coin collection. I did not, at that time — in fact, it seemed like a good idea — perceive any of the parallels which have occurred to me since; the similarity, for instance, between coin collecting and a grasping curiosity about things which do not belong to you, the unfortunate similarity between coins and money; I remember agreeing with my husband that coins were preferable as a collection to, say, stamps, because they wouldn’t blow away, or match folders because coins, at least, had some intrinsic value. I remember even saying laughingly that if anything were to be collected, for heaven’s sake it might as well be *money*.

My husband and Laurie began on a small scale. I went to the bank and got a roll of nickels and a roll of dimes and a roll of pennies, and they spent an evening examining mint marks and dates and relative condition, and I sat peacefully over my book smiling at them occasionally and thinking how good it was that they should be interested together in such a grown-up fashion. They sent for some little books, named dime books and penny books and nickel books, and each book had a series of little holes large enough for the proper coins, and all coin collectors have to do is find the right coin for the right little hole and put it in. After a while my husband was going to the bank himself with a briefcase. He would get all the money we had changed into coins and then he and Laurie would take all the coins they needed for their books and give me the rest, and I would go out and pay for my groceries in the nickels and dimes which were not needed for the books.

I have never objected to money, as such. But after a while it became necessary to get a huge metal box to keep the coins in, and every mail began to bring heavy little packages of coins from Ruritania and Atlantis and it was suddenly abruptly clear to Jannie and Sally and me that their father and Laurie were planning to get hold of all the money in the world and put it away in their metal box, and a consequent strong bitterness began to show itself around the house. I began to make pointed comments about the last time I had seen a five-dollar bill, and I repeated several times at dinner what the grocer had said to me about people holding up a line at the counter because they had to count out seventeen dollars and thirty-six cents in dimes and nickels and pennies. Jannie took to sleeping with her penny bank under her pillow, and Sally, with a pretty wit, fell to bringing her father small stones and pieces of glass and play money which she embezzled at nursery school. I spent a bag of silver to buy my husband a Piece of Eight for a Christmas present, and had trouble hiding it, since Christmas was still quite a while off, until I thought of keeping it in my pocketbook. Even Sally learned to say “numismatist”; Laurie learned the Greek alphabet from Greek coins and one day turned in his spelling homework done entirely in Greek letters, confounding his schoolmates and thoroughly annoying his teacher.

One Saturday morning an intensely awaited package of coins arrived, and I had to pay thirty-one cents duty charges on it; while I was irritably counting out the money for the postman, Sally took the mail into the study where Laurie and his father were rearranging their classifications, and when I came stamping into the study shouting "Don't we pay enough for this money without—" I found Laurie and his father sitting one on either side of the coffee table, Laurie rocking back and forth and moaning, and his father holding his head in his hands and saying "Oh, no," over and over, and Jannie and Sally regarding them with unwilling sympathy.

"Something wrong?" I asked brightly.

"Something wrong?" Jannie repeated.

"Wrong?" Sally asked.

"Yes," said my husband.

"Look at these darned old *coins*," Laurie said, almost in tears. We looked at the heap of coins on the table, Jannie and Sally and I.

"They're *mixed*," Laurie said.

"Well, my goodness," I told him, "it certainly wouldn't be much fun *collecting* coins if all you did was just put them in the little books and put them in the cabinet. My goodness, half the *fun* in collecting coins—"

My husband raised his head and looked at me. "Listen," he said wanly, "what we ordered was two lots of coins from the same place. One of them was a lot of a hundred and fifty assorted coins of the world."

"Splendid," I said. "I suppose they cost—"

"The other," my husband said, raising his voice, "was a lot of a hundred assorted *counterfeit* coins of the world. And the boxes," he said, "the boxes …" He put his head back in his hands.

"They broke," Laurie said. "We got two hundred and fifty coins. Assorted. Mixed."

"Splendid," I said again. "Then all you have to do is sort the counterfeit coins into *one* pile and the *real* coins into *another*—"

"Yeah," Laurie said. "Daddy doesn't feel very well."

This did not seem like the time to enforce my rightful claims to thirty-one cents, so I collected the rest of the mail and left the study with the girls. We sat down on the couch in the living room and opened a letter from the electric company and bills from three department stores and an announcement of the annual fund drive of the Boy Scouts and a pamphlet from a toy company. This last caught the attention of the girls, and we opened it to read. It turned out to be one of those maddening documents in which the desire of children to play with toys is explained and justified, and the desire of parents to buy toys for their children is made painless by a sugar-coating of sound educational advice; "The child's natural impulses are harmlessly directed—" I read, under a picture of a hammering set, and, with a block set, "Little fingers learn busily sense of balance …" "Ar," I said, through my teeth.

"What does it say?" Jannie asked. "Read it to us."

The center of the pamphlet was occupied by an article entitled "Healthy Children are Happy Children" or else "Happy Children are Healthy Children," and there was a picture of a sweet-faced mother bending earnestly over her child, guiding his little fingers as they learned a busy sense of balance with a set of blocks. "Who's *that?*" Jannie asked, leaning over to see, "who's that lady? What's she doing?"

I consulted the article. "Children are naturally cooperative and reasonable," I read at random.

"What?"

"*That* means that little girls like you and Sally and boys like Laurie *like* to do things right. That you *want* to learn the best and nicest ways to act."

"I *do?*"

"*I* don't," said Sally emphatically.

"That's not reasonal," Jannie said critically. "Like eating with my fingers; I want to eat with my *fingers*."

"I think the people who wrote this would *let* you eat with your fingers," I said. "Constructive something-or-other."

"Hah," said Jannie.

"Only snicks," Sally opined. "Only snicks."

"Children are happier and better adjusted," I read grimly, "when given responsibility. The feeling of participating—"

"*I* know," Jannie said. "Pick up your room, set the table, hang up your jacket, brush your teeth, wash—"

"No good," Sally said. "*Not* washing."

" — your hands, put away your toys, fold your napkin—"

"And it means that when I ask you to run upstairs to get me a handkerchief you should go cheerfully," I said, patting her on the head.

"You just read more of that," Jannie said. "I don't think it's sensal at all, except about eating with my fingers."

"Parents should never show anger before the child," I read. "Parents should never show anger before the child. Parents—"

"Hah," Jannie said again.

"Run in the study, dear," I said. "Ask Dad how he's coming with his coins."

"Not *me*," Sally said. "Not *me*."

"But *you*—" Jannie said.

"I do *not*," I said. "I never show anger at all, except that you and your sister and your brother can be far and away the most irritating, the most infuriating, the most maddening—"

"Snicks."

"Snicks," I said. I took a deep breath. "Anyway," I went on, "it says here that Sixes *enjoy* helping around the house."

"What's a Six?" Jannie scowled. "Am *I* a Six?"

"You're a *snicks*," Sally said, leaning forward to look around me at her sister, "an old snicks."

"And Sally is a Three and Laurie is a Nine."

"Then are you a Thirty-Four?"

"Thirty-Two."

"I will tell Laurie he is a Nine," Sally said, sliding in one movement off the couch and landing walking. Jannie and I watched her open the study door. "You are both snicks," she announced.

" — Thaler," my husband's voice said. "See if there ever *was* such a country as Thaler." He sounded a little shrill. Sally closed the door. "*I* told them," she said, coming back and climbing onto the couch.

"Mother is of course," I read, "interested in her *own* activities, such as Parent-Teachers meetings, cooking for the Girl Scouts, sewing costumes for —" I stopped. "Now what?" I inquired vaguely.

"Brownies," Jannie said. "You promised you would make brownies for the school party."

"I must have been crazy," I said. I leaned back comfortably. "My *own* activities, it says here," I said. "Taking a nap, for instance."

Jannie laughed shortly. "That is the silliest thing I ever did hear," she said. "What does it ever say in there about mommies sleeping?"

“It says I should be relaxed.” I ran my finger hopefully down the lines. “It says naturally Mother is not going to handicap her children by teaching them insecure patterns of behavior; what would we think, for instance, of a mother who believed herself fond of her children, who nevertheless allowed them to see her in a temper? Or who told them obviously untruthful stories, broke promises, or showed malice?”

“You better make those brownies,” Jannie said acutely. “What does show mals mean?”

“You remember?” I asked, “when you told Daddy about my running the car into a telephone pole?”

Jannie grinned. “You said I was a tattletale. You said I—”

“Yes,” I said. “Well, that was foursquare, honest-to-goodness malice, right off the boat, and according to the lady who wrote this I should never have said it.”

“Well, I’m not a—”

“You are *so*. And every time I think of your babbling to Daddy about that telephone pole I want to—”

“*I* didn’t,” Sally said. “*I* didn’t tell Daddy anything. I will tell him now,” and I grabbed for her too late as she slid off the couch again and went to the study door. “Go away,” her father said, as she opened it.

“Mommy hit a pole,” Sally said.

“*Again?*” My husband’s voice rose.

“No, no, no, no, no,” I said, coming after Sally. “Sally was just chattering.”

“Tattletale,” Jannie said promptly.

I stepped in front of her and asked gracefully, “How are the new coins coming along?”

Laurie smiled at me weakly. “So far,” he said, “we have a hundred and seventy-five counterfeits.”

“Oh, splendid,” I said. “I thought there were only a hundred to start with. How does it happen that—”

“Will you *please* close that *door?*” my husband said.

The girls skittering ahead of me, I closed the door sharply and went through the living room and into the kitchen, where I brought up sharply before the sink and the breakfast dishes. “Well,” I said brightly, “time to get to work.”

“Did Daddy show mals?” Jannie asked. “Who was the lady who wrote all those things?”

“A lady who works with children,” I said absentmindedly, wondering at a sound which came from the study as of many coins crashing against the wall, and calculating with another part of my mind whether there was enough chocolate for brownies, or whether I would have to run out and get some, and hearing with still another part of my mind Jannie’s wise voice saying, “Not like mommies, then. Ladies work with children, and mommies *play* with them.”

“And *you*’re a snick,” Sally said.

Dreamily, rinsing glasses, I had wandered on to cheerful reflections on our holiday season, which included, besides Christmas and Thanksgiving, five birthdays and an anniversary, and which seemed to be racing on with its usual neckbreaking speed, although it seemed at the same time that the days would never pass. It seemed, too, increasingly clear that our hopes for a sixth birthday in our family during the holiday season might be optimistic; the suitcase which Jannie and I share was sitting, packed, in the corner of the bedroom, contemplated lovingly by me the last thing at night and the first thing in the morning — although, as it turned out, what I was contemplating lovingly this time was a suitcase containing Jannie's yellow sundress and a jigsaw puzzle, with which she had secretly replaced my blue satin bed-jacket and a dozen mystery stories and a rough draft of an informative letter beginning "Dear … Well, we have a new son/daughter, and so this makes two pair/three of a kind …" Since I did not find out, as it happened, that Jannie had repacked the suitcase until I reached the hospital, my fond regard was not in any way tarnished, although secret fears about last-minute Christmas shopping had touched the back of my mind. The same old baby clothes, much the worse for Sally's vigorous infancy, were in the bottom dresser drawer, and there was half a can of Dextro-Maltose 1 in the kitchen cabinet. "It's the home stretch again," my doctor told me affably, apparently relying upon some medical doctrine about any metaphor suiting — by now — the mother of four, "out of the trenches by Christmas." He used to laugh every time he said this.

Oddly enough, the children were able to continue their theoretically normal lives. Laurie pursued his project, for which he vaguely believed he would have a silver arrow from the Cub Scouts, of writing down all the numbers in sequence until he reached infinity; he was at this time well up into the millions, with infinity nowhere in sight. Sally was comfortably settled in nursery school, from which she brought home daily bulletins about a Mr. Grassable (who had as friends Mr. Dirtable and Mr. Sandable) and a gentleman named David who brought gum with him every morning. Jannie followed her own social life, which was only nominally affected by our family holiday season, and which required a good deal of backing and filling on my part. I became reconciled to the last-minute race to town to pick up a book or a toy or a paint set for Jannie to take to a party; invitations arrived by mail and by phone, and it was at last necessary to invest in three extra pair of white socks, to take care of Jannie's social obligations. The afternoon of Rita’s party we climbed into the car, Jannie and I, at three o’clock, thanking heaven that Sally had chosen to sleep until now, and making a final check before we started. Jannie was wearing her green party dress, which she had of course chosen herself; it had a tiny white collar and rows of smocking. She had on the official white socks and her school shoes neatly shined, by me. Her best coat still fit her — although it had begun to look like Sally in another month or so — and she was wearing her green beret. She was carrying a small package with a carefully chosen doll inside; the package was wrapped in green tissue paper and the card enclosed was signed, typically, “ennaoJ.” There were green bows on her pigtails, and she was wearing, as a special favor, her coral necklace. She looked very grown-up, and unbelievably pretty.

“Have you got a handkerchief?” I asked her before I started the car, and she nodded gravely, deeply aware of her green bows.

“I brought my invitation,” she said. “In case we forgot the time or something.”

“I only wish I knew more about the people,” I said, looking at the invitation with hope, as though its pattern of pink balloons and bright lettering might somehow indicate what sort of person had paid a dime for six of them at the five and ten; “I feel a little bit worried, letting you go off to a strange house.”

“I got an *invitation*,” Jannie said.

I sighed, and started the car. “She sounded all *right*,” I said, “the little girl’s mother, I mean. When I called her to get directions to the house, she sounded all right. Richmond Road,” I said, “and turn left at the private school.”

“I say ‘Thank you very much, Mrs. Arden,’ when I’m ready to go home.”

"Did you say you had a handkerchief?" We turned onto Richmond Road and Jannie settled back and folded her hands in her lap, no longer the everyday Jannie who rode with me, in her blue snowsuit, to the grocery and the post office and the bakery, but a dressed-up lady in a white collar and a green beret; "Is Rita a polite little girl?" I asked with great casualness.

"She's all right," Jannie said. "From school."

I have always remembered a birthday party I went to where all the children were older, and strangers, and I sat in a corner all afternoon determined not to cry. "Do you know who else will be there?"

"Pals of mine," Jannie said, exasperated. "From *school*."

"I suppose it's all right," I said.

"Well, now that I'm all dressed and everything," Jannie said.

I peered through the window. "Left at the private school," I said. "We watch for Overlea Drive and turn right. Then there's a sign saying Arden halfway up the hill. She said we couldn't miss it."

"Tell Sally I'll bring her some candy," Jannie said as we made a hesitant left turn around the private school, "and I'll bring Laurie some cake. And don't plan on any supper for *me* tonight — I'll be too full from the party. And the invitation says the party is over at five, so you come and get me maybe about five-thirty. That," she explained, "will give me time to pick up candy and stuff that people have forgotten about, so I can bring it to Sally."

"Have you got a handkerchief? Overlea Drive."

"And I say," Jannie went on, her tone sharpening, "I say 'Thank you, Mrs. Arden,' when I'm ready to come home. And I *have* got a handkerchief."

"Sign saying Arden," I said, "sign saying Arden."

"I've never been here before, you know," Jannie said. "Rita doesn't take the school bus."

"I'm surprised, living so far away from the school," I said. "Sign saying Arden, Private Road."

I turned the car and had to shift into second. "The chauffeur brings her," Jannie said. "I wonder if that's Rita's house way up there?"

It was the only house in sight. We were driving past terraced lawns, rich with ornamental trees and graveled walks; I saw a sundial and what may have been a swimming pool. Above us, on the top of the hill, the house looked like someone's dream of a country club, with picture windows and fieldstone and gabled roofs. "Is that where *we*'re going?" I asked, turning to look at Jannie.

"Seven chimneys," she said. "Rita always *said* she lived in a big house."

We turned onto a circled driveway which took us past a garage holding, I thought, three foreign cars, and came around to the front door. We stopped abruptly because the car parked by the front door was so soft and low and shiny that the irresistable thought of bumping it and perhaps putting a scratch on its fender (that *was* a fender?) made my teeth chatter. One of a pair of matched gray poodles rose lazily from the wide front steps and looked down at us. "Jannie," I said, "look, honey, I've only got on my blue jeans and my old jacket. And my loafers. I'll just wait here and you run on up and ring the doorbell. I'll just wait here and see that you get in all right."

Jannie turned and stared at me. "Why don't you come up to the door?" she said. "You're my mother, aren't you?"

"Yes," I said doubtfully, and climbed out after her. She ran up the steps, nodded cheerfully at the poodles when they approached her, and rang the bell; I followed gingerly, edging up the steps and moving aside briskly when one of the poodles came too close. I had a sudden rich picture of the years ahead, with me hanging around in the shrubbery trying to catch a glimpse of my beautifully-gowned daughter waltzing in the ballroom, and then the door was opened by a maid in a yellow uniform, and behind her clustered a group of little girls in party dresses pink, blue, and white.

"Hi, kids," said Jannie.

"It's *Joanne*," said a little girl in blue, who was apparently the hostess, "*now* we can start the party."

"And *this*," said Jannie grandly, "is *my* mother."

The little girl in blue curtsied, I almost curtsied back, and Jannie said, as they turned to go inside, "*We* live in a bigger house than *this*," and then called back to me, "Don't forget to tell Sally what I'm bringing her," as the door closed.

When I came back to get Jannie at five-fifteen, which I thought a neat compromise on time between the invitation and Jannie's obviously superior planning, I had put on a skirt and a pair of decent shoes. When I rang the doorbell the maid asked me inside, and I waited for barely a minute, listening to the sound of small girls' voices screaming happily from somewhere within, before a woman in gray taffeta and what were probably real emeralds — I would have believed anything by then — came to me, holding out both her hands to take mine.

"So *you*'re Joanne's mother," she said. "*Won't* you come in and have a drink?"

At about four o'clock on a Thursday afternoon the express man delivered a huge cardboard box containing a vast collection of curtains and drapes, found in an attic and sent along by my mother, in the hopes that I could use some and make the rest into slip covers or bedspreads or dusting cloths. I took the curtains out and left the big box in the front hall, meaning to take it out and leave it for the trash man when I came downstairs to make dinner. At about four-ten Laurie came out of his room, where he had been painting, and wandered into the bedroom where I was sorting the curtains out on the bed.

"What's the big box downstairs?"

"Some things came in it," I said.

"Presents?"

"No, these curtains."

"Who wants *curtains?*"

At about four-thirteen Sally woke up from her nap, and went down the stairs head first, on her stomach, bumping from step to step and calling me. When she finally found me in the bedroom, after calling me through all the rooms in the house, she asked immediately, "Is it for me?"

"Is what for you?"

"The present. Downstairs, in the hall."

"No," I said, "it was for me. These curtains."

"Can I have them?"

"No."

"*You* can't come to *my* house."

At four-thirty precisely Jannie arrived home, trotted up the front walk, opened the door, and fell over the box in the hall. "Who put this here for me to trip over?" she asked indignantly.

"Mommy's junk came in it," Laurie said. I was by now in the study, inquiring if my husband would like a cocktail before dinner. He said no, he was working on an article about a woman with second sight, and he wanted to keep his own head clear. I went into the kitchen and halfheartedly began to take potatoes out of the bag. Jannie came into the kitchen and asked if she and Laurie and Sally might play with the big box in the hall, and I said yes, if they were quiet, because Daddy was working.

Nearly ten minutes later, after a good deal of giggling and screaming and two trips outside the study by my husband, once to the hallway to say to the children that if they could not keep quiet their mother would send them all to their rooms and once to the kitchen door to say to me that he could not work on the woman with second sight so long as those children were making so much noise, Laurie suddenly appeared in the kitchen and said delightedly, "Another present came, a real *birthday* present."

Wearily, having been half-expecting it, I put down the paring knife and followed Laurie through the study into the hall. My husband looked up as we passed and said, "This is a study, not a thoroughfare."

In the hall was the same big box, full of something which giggled and kicked around considerably. Laurie and Jannie watched pleasurably while I carefully opened the box, and when Sally popped out everyone screamed with surprise and hilarity. "I don't want *this* present," I said agreeably, "Tell the mailman to take it back." Everyone laughed again, and I went back to the kitchen.

Two minutes later Laurie reappeared in the kitchen. "*Another* present came," he announced.

Since I could not think of any good reason for persisting pig-headedly in my dinner preparations, I put down the paring knife and followed him through the study into the hall. "This is a study, not a thoroughfare," my husband said as we went through.

In the hall Sally and Laurie stood tensely while I opened the box and found Jannie. "I don't want *this* present at all," I said. "Tell the mailman to take this one along with the other." Everyone laughed.

I went back into the kitchen and in another minute Jannie and Sally came in to me. "Another present," Jannie said, and Sally added, "It's got *Laurie* in it *now*."

“This is a study, not a thoroughfare,” my husband said as we all went past.

I opened the box, found Laurie, everyone laughed, and I said, “I don’t want *this* present, either; tell the mailman to take them all back.”

I went back into the kitchen and took up the paring knife again, feeling mildly complacent over my participation in the children’s harmless games. There was a short, murmurous moment in the hall, and then the study door from the hall opened and my husband said, “This is a study, not a thoroughfare.” Then a great deal of whispering went on in the study, and finally my husband said, “All right, but just once.” After that there was much suppressed giggling from the hall.

I was opening the oven door when Laurie, Jannie, and Sally came into the kitchen. “*Another*—” Laurie began, and then, “What’s *that?*”

“I read about it in a magazine,” I said shyly. “It’s got tunafish and whipped cream and potatoes and chopped olives and black bean soup and sweet pickles and all sorts of good things.”

“I don’t like it,” said Sally at once.

“Well,” Laurie said compromisingly, “what’s for dessert?”

“Canned peaches,” I said. “You see, I spent all afternoon with those curtains and—”

“Tunafish?” said Jannie. “Please may I have some without tunafish?”

“I believe I’ll make myself a peanut butter sandwich while I’m waiting,” Laurie said.

“Girls, you can start setting the table,” I said. “Jannie, cups and glasses. Sally, table mats and silver.”

“*I* want to do glasses,” Sally said at once.

“Don’t forget the salt and pepper. Casserole, bread, salad, peaches.” I scowled indecisively at the oven door. “What would happen,” I asked

Jannie, “if I put in tomato sauce?”

“It would be even worse,” Jannie said cheerfully.

“Clean towels,” I said. “I’ll be right down; Laurie, you wash your hands before you touch that bread.”

I went out of the kitchen and through the study and through the hall and up the stairs, found the clean towels and brought them down again. “Supper in about five minutes,” I said as I went through the study; “Supper in about five minutes,” I said as I went past the dining room; “Supper in about five minutes,” I said as I came into the kitchen. “Laurie, start telling Dad supper is ready.”

Laurie went into the study and came back. “Not there,” he said.

“He probably went to wash,” Jannie said.

“Salt and pepper,” I said, surveying the table. Jannie had set everything left-handed, as usual.

“*I* washed,” Sally said, coming out of the bathroom. I glanced beyond her to the clean towel I had just hung on the rack, and sighed. “Laurie and Jannie, wash,” I said. “Dad ought to be down in a minute.”

“Seems like there was something I meant to tell you,” Laurie said, taking his place at the table with his peanut butter sandwich.

“You call those hands clean?”

“I said I didn’t *like* this,” Jannie said, looking into her plate.

“Seems like it was something about Dad,” Laurie said.

Ninki had four black and white kittens on December fifth. Their eyes opened, they began to tumble delightfully together on the kitchen floor, and Ninki, svelte and lively, got back to her mouse-hunting. I continued to come downstairs each morning step by step, holding on to the bannister. The morning the first snow fell I came into the kitchen where Jannie and Sally were eating oatmeal at the yellow table, and Elsie, a nice girl whom I had hired to stay with us until the first of the year, was cheerfully spreading mustard on Laurie's lunch sandwiches.

"Good morning," Elsie said brightly. "Still with us, I see?"

"Yeah," I said. "Coffee?"

"Good morning, Mommy dear," said Jannie, in the sweet voice which means she has decided to hold out on her oatmeal until ten minutes to nine, and Sally echoed, "Good morning, Mommy dear, dear morning, good Mommy."

"Uh," I said.

"Thought I heard the car go out last night," Elsie said conversationally, "but then I thought you'd surely wake me if you were going."

"I surely would," I said.

"And how do you feel? Well?"

"I surely do," I said. I took my coffee into the dining room and settled down with the morning paper. A woman in New York had had twins in a taxi. A woman in Ohio had just had her seventeenth child. A twelve-year-old girl in Mexico had given birth to a thirteen-pound boy. The lead article on the woman's page was about how to adjust the older child to the new baby. I finally found an account of an axe murder on page seventeen, and held my coffee cup up to my face to see if the steam might revive me.

"Laurie," Elsie said at the back stairs, "ten minutes after eight."

"I'm *coming*," Laurie said. "Mommy still here?"

"She surely is," Elsie said gaily. "Brush your teeth."

I turned to the sports page.

Jannie's voice rose clearly from the kitchen. "When we get our baby brother," she asked, "will he have his breakfast out here with us?"

"Oatmeal?" Sally added.

"He'll be very tiny," Elsie told them, "and at first he'll spend all his time in the crib and he'll have all his meals from a bottle."

"And I'm going to give him a bath," Jannie said.

"And I'm going to give him some of my oatmeal," Sally said.

"Let's ask Mommy when he's coming," Jannie said.

"Never you mind," Elsie said hastily "Finish that oatmeal."

Laurie came crashing downstairs and I heard my husband's feet hit the floor beside the bed. "Good morning, Mommy," Laurie called from the kitchen. "I was sure you'd be gone *today*."

"Yeah."

Laurie brought his tray in and set it on the table; he began to spoon sugar thoughtfully onto his oatmeal. "You know," he said, "you don't suppose you won't go at all, do you?"

"I've thought of it," I said.

Laurie began to laugh uproariously. "All those baby clothes," he said.

"That's enough sugar," I said. "Read the paper or something."

Laurie took the sports section and propped it up against the coffeepot. "By the way," he said suddenly, looking up from the paper, "the teacher asked me yesterday again what about my baby brother. She's going to sing 'Happy Birthday to You' when it comes."

"Tell her I've gone to Mexico," I said.

My husband came downstairs at that moment, glanced at me with some surprise, and said, "Good morning, good morning."

"Good morning, Dad," Laurie said. "Mommy's still here."

"Good morning," my husband said in the kitchen to Elsie and the girls, and I could hear Elsie telling him that she had surely thought we would wake her if we left during the night.

My husband brought his tray in and set it down on the table.

“Coins from Hong-Kong should be here today,” Laurie told him.

“Ought to write that fellow,” my husband said vaguely.

“How do you figure about Mommy?” Laurie asked.

My husband looked searchingly at me. “Damned if *I* know,” he said.

I lifted my head from the steam of my coffee. “Look,” I said bitterly, “I could go stay in a hotel somewhere and write you when it’s all over.”

“How do you feel?” my husband asked.

“Bah,” I said distinctly.

“So long as you don’t have any *children* today,” Laurie said. “You got to pick me up at Cub Scouts at five.”

“Tomorrow?”

“No,” said my husband. “Tomorrow is the Numismatic Society and I didn’t go the last time because I had a cold and I didn’t go the time before because your mother was here and I’d hate to miss it *again* for a trifle.”

“And Sunday of course your aunt and uncle are coming,” I told my husband. “How about Monday?”

Elsie put her head around the corner of the kitchen door. “Monday morning I take my driving test,” she said, “so don’t go before Monday afternoon. I can drive you. And then of course on Tuesday Jannie goes to Kathy’s party.”

“Wednesday?”

“I *was* planning to visit my sister,” Elsie said. “You remember you said it would be all right, you said you would probably be back from the hospital by then and—”

“Is Thursday fairly clear for everybody?” I asked, my voice rising.

“Well, *Friday*,” Laurie said, worried, “Friday is Cub Scouts again.”

“Have the baby on my birthday,” Jannie called from the kitchen.

Jannie’s birthday was ten months and some days off. “I’ll try to make it,” I said.

Laurie laughed. “Mr. Feeley says if the baby’s born before Tuesday he’ll give you ten percent of his winnings.”

“What winnings?” I asked.

Laurie glanced, dismayed, at his father, and his father said elaborately, rising from his chair, “Want to take another look at those Roman coins, son?”

“*What* winnings?” I said insistently.

“Nothing to worry about,” my husband said. “Just something we were …” He thought. “Making for the baby,” he finished finally.

“A book,” Laurie added helpfully.

His father glanced at him with respect. “That’s right,” he said, “a baby book.”

They headed for the study. “It *couldn’t* be before Tuesday,” my husband was saying to Laurie, as one continuing a private discussion, “the law of probability …”

“Ross told me in school yesterday he wants a dime on Christmas Day,” Laurie said.

“Tell him we’ll give him thirty to one,” my husband said.

From the study I could hear my husband saying that Ross’ money was as good as gone, and Laurie remarked that he thought he could count the teacher in for maybe even a quarter.

“I wouldn’t like to see any more money go on Tuesday,” my husband remarked absently, “you can’t count on *her* to figure the odds, you know.”

“Just like her to pick a day with no money in it,” Laurie confirmed. “Is this Nero, Dad?”

"It's the button from my jacket," my husband said. "I meant to ask Jannie to sew it on."

I lighted another cigarette and poured hot coffee into my cup; it did not seem worthwhile doing anything else. "Ten minutes of nine," Elsie remarked in the kitchen.

With a great shout Sally slid off her chair and Jannie followed. "Come back here and finish this oatmeal," Elsie said as they raced for the front door.

"Bye, Dad," Laurie said. He went through the kitchen to get his lunch box, and stopped in the dining room on his way to the front door. "See you at five?" he asked me.

"Oh, surely, surely," I said.

I followed them to the front door and waved as they got into the school bus; Sally sat at the front window to watch for the station wagon which would take her to nursery school. The mail had come, and I got Sally to pick it up off the floor for me and then went with it into the study.

"All bills today," I said maliciously to my husband.

"Again?" he said. "It seems like it was only—"

"Pay them in Roman coins," I said. I sat down in the straight chair I had brought into the study especially; the upholstered chairs are difficult to get out of without a struggle. "Pay them with your eleven Siamese gambling house tokens," I said.

My husband glanced at me apprehensively. "How do you feel?"

"Pay them in counterfeit Scottish merks," I said. "I feel fine."

My husband touched the stack of mail with one finger, timidly. "One of us," he said, "has got to go to the bank and see Mr. Andrews."

"Not me," I said.

“Of course not,” my husband said soothingly. “You can go in tomorrow morning,” he added, “if you’re still here.”

Our local bank is an informal and neighborly spot, lavish with its hard-covered checkbooks, always ready to look up the value of the Swiss franc, eager to advise on investments or make wills. Its atmosphere is substantially less hushed and reverent than, say, a good movie theatre, with a loudspeaker system which plays soft music for depositors, an air-cooling device which clears the air of the acrid scent of ten-dollar bills, richly upholstered benches for nervous mortgagees; it is a bank dedicated to every friendly pursuit except the swift transference of money. I have had occasion, over the past few years, to deal frequently with the bank’s Mr. Andrews, a man of chilling questions and a very cynical view of me, over some minor monies which have passed reluctantly from Mr. Andrews’ hands into our bank account, and rapidly from there into the hands of various milkmen, doctors, department stores, and sundry poker cronies of my husband’s. Mr. Andrews likes to believe that he is giving me this money as a favor. “We are always glad to lend funds,” he is apt to say, with a dim smile, “after all, that’s what a bank is *for*, isn’t it?” Since Mr. Andrews so obviously believes that that is the main thing that a bank is *not* for, my answer to this is usually a gay laugh and a quick question about how ninety days is six months, isn’t it? Mr. Andrews is also fond of saying things like, “Well, *we* have our obligations to meet, too, you realize,” and “If we were to accommodate *every*one who asks us …”

Mr. Andrews never says “money,” just like that, the way the rest of us do so often; he refers to it reverently as “Credit” or “Funds” or “Equity.” I have fallen into the habit of taking one or more of my children with me when I drop in to speak to Mr. Andrews about equity or funds or credit, in the unexpressed hope that their soft pathetic eyes might touch Mr. Andrews' heart, although I know by now that their soft pathetic little eyes might as easily open the door to the vault; the only time, I think, that I have ever seen Mr. Andrews really taken aback was when Laurie, when he had just commenced coin-collecting, asked if he might look over the bank's small change for V nickels.

At any rate, shortly before Christmas, then — and Christmas is of course always a time of great monetary discomfort around our house — I came timidly to Mr. Andrews' bank, at the back of my mind the thought that the children's presents had at least been bought and duly hidden, although not paid for, and holding by one hand my daughter Jannie, in a blue snow suit, and holding by the other hand my daughter Sally, in a red snow suit. The girls had their hair brushed and their boots on the right feet, and if I could raise the cash from Mr. Andrews they were each going to have an ice cream cone. We came into the bank, where the loudspeaker system was playing "Joy to the World," and found that the center paddock, where they usually foreclose mortgages, had been given over to a tall and gracious Christmas tree; because of the holiday season, they were foreclosing their mortgages in a sort of little recess behind the tellers. I sat the girls down on a velvet-covered bench directly in front of the Christmas tree, and told them to stay right where they were and Mommy would be back in a minute and then we would all go and get our ice cream cones. They sat down obediently, and I made my way over to Mr. Andrews' secretary.

"Good morning," I said to her.

"Good morning," she said. "Merry Christmas."

"Oh," I said. "Merry Christmas."

She nodded brightly and turned back to the papers on her desk. I twined my fingers around the ornamental ironwork of the railing, and said, "I wonder if I might perhaps be able to see Mr. Andrews?"

"Mr. Andrews? And what did you want to see him about?"

"Well," I said, coming a little closer, "it was to have been about our loan."

"Your loan?" she said, in that peculiarly penetrating tone all bank employees use when there is a question of money going the unnatural, or reverse-English direction. "You wanted to pay back your loan?"

"I hoped," I said, "that perhaps I could speak to Mr. Andrews."

"Isn't that sweet?" she said unexpectedly.

After a minute I realized that she was staring past me to where my girls were sitting, and I turned and saw without belief that Santa Claus, complete with sack of toys, had come out from behind the Christmas tree and was leaning over the railing and beckoning my daughters to him.

"I didn't know the bank had a Santa Claus," I said.

"Every year," she said. "At Christmas, you know."

Jannie and Sally slid off the bench and trotted over to Santa Claus; I could hear Sally's delighted, "Hello, Santa Claus!" and see Jannie's half-embarrassed smile; people all over the bank were turning to look and to beam and to smile at one another and murmur appreciatively. Because I have known Jannie and Sally for rather a long time, I untwined my fingers from the ironwork and made across the bank for their bench, reaching them just as Santa Claus opened the little gate in the railing and ushered them inside. He sat down under the warm lights of the Christmas tree and took Jannie onto one knee and Sally onto the other.

"Well, well, well," he said, and laughed hugely. "And have you been a *good* girl?" he asked Jannie.

Jannie nodded, her mouth open, and Sally said, "I've been *very* good."

"And do you brush your teeth?"

“Twice,” said Sally, and Jannie said, “*I* brush *my* teeth every morning and every night and every morning.”

“Well, well, well,” Santa Claus said, nodding his head appreciatively. “So you’ve been good little girls, have you?”

“I’ve been very *very* good,” Sally said insistently.

Santa Claus thought. “And have you washed your faces?” was what he finally achieved.

“I wash *my* face,” said Sally, and Jannie, inspired, said, “I wash my face and my hands and my arms and my ears and my neck and—”

“Well, that’s just *fine*,” Santa Claus said, and again he laughed merrily, caroming Jannie and Sally off his round little belly. “Fine, fine,” he said, “and now,” he said to Jannie, “what is old Santa going to bring you for Christmas?”

“A doll?” Jannie said tentatively, “are you going to bring me a doll?”

“I most certainly *am* going to bring you a doll,” said Santa Claus. “I’m going to bring you the prettiest doll you ever *saw*, because you’ve been such a *good* girl.”

“And a wagon?” Jannie said, “and doll dishes and a little stove?”

“That’s *just* what I’m going to bring you,” Santa Claus said. “I’m going to bring good little girls *every*thing they ask for.”

The fatuous smile I had been wearing on my face began to slip a little; there was a handsome doll dressed in blue waiting for Jannie in the guest room closet, and a handsome doll dressed in pink waiting for Sally; I began trying to signal surreptitiously to Santa Claus.

“And me,” Sally said, “and me, and *me*, I want a bicycle.”

I shook my head most violently at Santa Claus, smiling nervously. “That’s right,” Santa Claus said, “for good little girls, I bring bicycles.”

“You’re *really* going to bring me a bicycle?” Sally asked incredulously, “*and* a doll *and* a wagon?”

“I most certainly am,” Santa Claus told her.

Sally gazed raptly at Jannie. “He’s going to bring my bicycle after all,” she said.

“*I* want a bicycle too,” Jannie said.

“Allllll right,” said Santa Claus. “But have you been a *good* girl?” he asked Jannie anxiously.

“I’ve been so good,” Jannie told him with ardor, “you just don’t *know*, I’ve been so good.”

“I’ve been good,” Sally said. “I want blocks, too. And a doll carriage for my doll, and a bicycle.”

“And our brother wants a microscope,” Jannie told Santa Claus, “and he’s been a very good boy. And a little table and chairs, I want.”

“Santa Claus,” I said, “*excuse* me, Santa Claus….”

“Aren’t they darling?” a woman said behind me.

“And candy, and oranges, and nuts,” Santa Claus was going on blissfully, “and all sorts of good things in your stockings, and candy canes—”

“I forgot, I want a party dress.”

“But you must be *good* little girls, and do just what your mommy and daddy tell you to, and never *never* forget to brush your teeth.”

I went with haste back to Mr. Andrews’ secretary. “I’ve *got* to see Mr. Andrews,” I told her, “I’ve got to see him *fast*.”

“You’ll have to wait,” she said, looking fondly over to where my daughters were receiving a final pat on the head from Santa Claus.

The loudspeaker system was playing “O Come, All Ye Faithful,” I was thinking wildly: bicycle, microscope, bicycle, table and chairs, doll dishes, and my daughters came running across the floor to me. “Look,” Sally was shrieking, “look at what Santa Claus gave to us.”

“Santa Claus was here,” Jannie confirmed, “he came right into the bank where we were and he gave us each a present, look, a little bag of chocolate money.”

“Oh, fine, fine, fine,” I said madly.

“And I *am* going to have my bicycle, Santa said he was *too* bringing it.”

“ — and me a bicycle too, and doll carriages and dishes and—”

“ — and in our stockings.”

“Mr. Andrews will see you now,” said the secretary.

I sat my daughters down again and made my entrance into Mr. Andrews’ office. His nose still retained a trace of jovial redness, but the jolly old elf’s eye was the familiar agate, and the faint echo of jingle bells around him sounded more like the clinking of half dollars.

“Well,” said Santa Claus, selecting my loan slip from the stack on his desk, “and what brings *you* here again so soon?’

It was a beautiful morning, cold and clear and full of color, and the taxi driver was just finishing a story about how his wife’s mother had come to visit them and canned all the peaches his wife had been planning to put into their freezer. “Just wasted the whole lot of them,” he said, and pulled up in front of the house with a flourish.

“There are the children on the porch,” I said.

“Beginning to seem like Christmas,” my husband said to the taxi driver as I got out, and the taxi driver said, “Snow before morning.”

Jannie’s hair had obviously not been combed since I left, and as I went up the front walk I was resolving to make her tell immediately where she had hidden the hairbrush. She was wearing her dearest summer sundress, and she was barefoot. Laurie needed a haircut, and he had on his old sneakers, one of which no longer laces, but fastens with a safety pin; I had made a particular point of throwing those sneakers into the garbage can before I left. Sally had chocolate all over her face and *she* was wearing Laurie’s fur hat. All three of them were leaning over the porch rail, still and expectant.

I tried to catch hold of all three of them at once, but they evaded me skillfully and ran at their father. “Did you bring it?” Jannie demanded, “did you bring it, did you bring it, did you bring it?”

“Is *that* it you’re carrying?” Laurie demanded sternly, “that *little* thing?”

“Did you *bring* it?” Jannie insisted.

“Come indoors and I’ll show you,” their father said.

They followed him into the living room, and stood in a solemn row by the couch. “Now don’t touch,” their father said, and they nodded all together. They watched while he carefully set the bundle down on the couch and unwrapped it.

Then, into the stunned silence which followed, Sally finally said, “What is it?”

“It’s a baby,” said their father, with an edge of nervousness to his voice, “it’s a baby boy and its name is Barry.”

“What’s a baby?” Sally asked me.

“It’s pretty small,” Laurie said doubtfully. “Is that the best you could get?”

“I tried to get another, a bigger one,” I said with irritation, “but the doctor said this was the only one left.”

“My goodness,” said Jannie, “what are we going to do with *that?* Anyway,” she said, “*you*’re back.”

Suddenly she and Sally were both climbing onto my lap at once, and Laurie came closer and allowed me to kiss him swiftly on the cheek; I discovered that I could reach around all three of them, something I had not been able to do for some time.

“Well,” Laurie said, anxious to terminate this sentimental scene, “so now we’ve got this baby. Do you think it will grow?” he asked his father.

“It’s got very small feet,” Jannie said. “I really believe they’re *too* small.”

“Well, if you don’t like it we can *always* take it back,” said their father.

“Oh, we like it all right, I guess,” Laurie said comfortingly. “It’s only that I guess we figured on something a little bigger.”

“What *is* it?” asked Sally, unconvinced. She put out a tentative finger and touched one toe. “Is this its foot?”

“Please start calling it ‘him,’” I said.

“Him?” said Sally. “Him?”

“Hi, Barry,” said Laurie, leaning down to look directly into one open blue eye, “hi, Barry, hi, Barry, hi, Barry.”

“Hi, Barry,” said Jannie.

“Hi, Barry,” said Sally. “Is this your foot?”

“I suppose it’ll cry a lot?” Laurie asked his father, man to man.

His father shrugged. “Not much else it *can* do,” he pointed out.

“I remember Jannie cried all the time,” Laurie went on.

“I did not,” Jannie said. “*You* were the one cried all the time.”

“Did you get it at the hospital?” Sally asked. She moved Barry’s foot up and down and he curled his toes.

“Yes,” I said.

“Why didn’t you take me?” Sally asked.

“I took you the last time,” I said.

“What did you say its name was?” Sally asked.

“Barry,” I said.

“Barry?”

“Barry.”

“Where did you get it?”

“Well,” Laurie said. He sighed and stretched. “Better take a look at those Greek tetradrachms,” he said.

“Right,” said his father, rising.

“Jannie, you go find that hairbrush,” I said.

Laurie, on his way out of the room, stopped next to me and hesitated, obviously trying to think of something congratulatory to say. “I guess it *will* be nice for you, though,” he said at last. “Something to keep you busy now *we*’re all grown up.”

Appendix: Handbill

Some Poltergeist Incidents in the Residence of S. E. H. Esquire

With a Moft Interefting Difcuffion of the Probable Refults of fuch Difturbances in the Dwelling of a Gentleman.

Mr. H. depofing, That, Having lived upon this houfe for more than feven years together, he has until recent months feen no evidence of fupernatural poffeffion, Until, within the months just paft, when his houfe has become feemingly a meeting-place, or neft, for demonic fpirits;

That, for the fpace of more than three nights together, his family has been difturbed by the founds of a great running, or ftamping, which, going on above half an Hour at a time, has caufed the greateft Apprehenfion among them;

That his Wife, a Female of nervous difpofition and eafily excited, almost into Frenzies by Supernatural Manifeftations, has at feveral feparate times been troubled by the Night Mares, as of a Perfonage whifpering into her Ear fecrets of Horror;

That, having as was her cuftom the daily fpoons in her hand and fetting them one by one into the Beaufet, fhe has had at different times one fpoon or another taken forcibly from her hand and on one ocafion this fpoon was afterward hurled, or thrown, violently at her Head;

That, fince thefe manifeftations, a cabinet door belonging to a Televifion fet, will neither ftay clofed nor fuffer itfelf to be latched, although four feparate Carpenters endeavored to perfuade it fhut with their Hammars and a Mr. Feeley, a gentleman, being newly come into the houfe, did ftrike it moft violently with his foot;

That Mifter H.'s fon, a child of fome eight or ten years, doth fo conftruct nightly with his leffon-books a Barrier, or Wall, againft the doorway of his nurfery, in order, as he fays, to *keep out the goblins*, and he doth, befides this, fay that he hath feen feveral times a Wolf, or other large black animal, upon the Roof outfide his Window;

That at night recently, this Manifeftation did take up a Knife, or Dirque, which Mifter H. doth always keep by him left footpads come upon him fuddenly and unawares, and dafh'd it fo wildly againft the wall that it like to have broke into a thoufand pieces;

That for the fpace of fome feven nights running, there hath been in this houfe the found of drums, of laughing, of ftomping, and crafhing of objects, not to be accounted for even by the feveral children of Mifter H. and more, perhaps faith Mr. H. than could even be performed by his children without guefts or other children in company;

Thefe things, attefted to by Mr. H. and his family, have been feen and witneffed by many other perfons who have vifited Mr. H.'s houfe to obferve them, and by the aforefaid Feeley, gentleman, and all fuch perfons agree that the houfe is poffeffed by a Poltergeift, or Evil Spirit, which has in its Intent the moft Malicious Amufement at the expenfe of thofe dwellers in the Houfe;

That Mifter H.'s Landlord, a man of fome means, refufes either to have the houfe Exorcifed or to allow Mifter H. to Loofe his Leafe, and that therefore Mifter H.'s only Recourfe, as he fays, is to open his Houfe to Vifitors at a Penny a View, fince, as he fays, it is already become fo full of Company at beft that he may as well Charge.

Raising Demons (1957)

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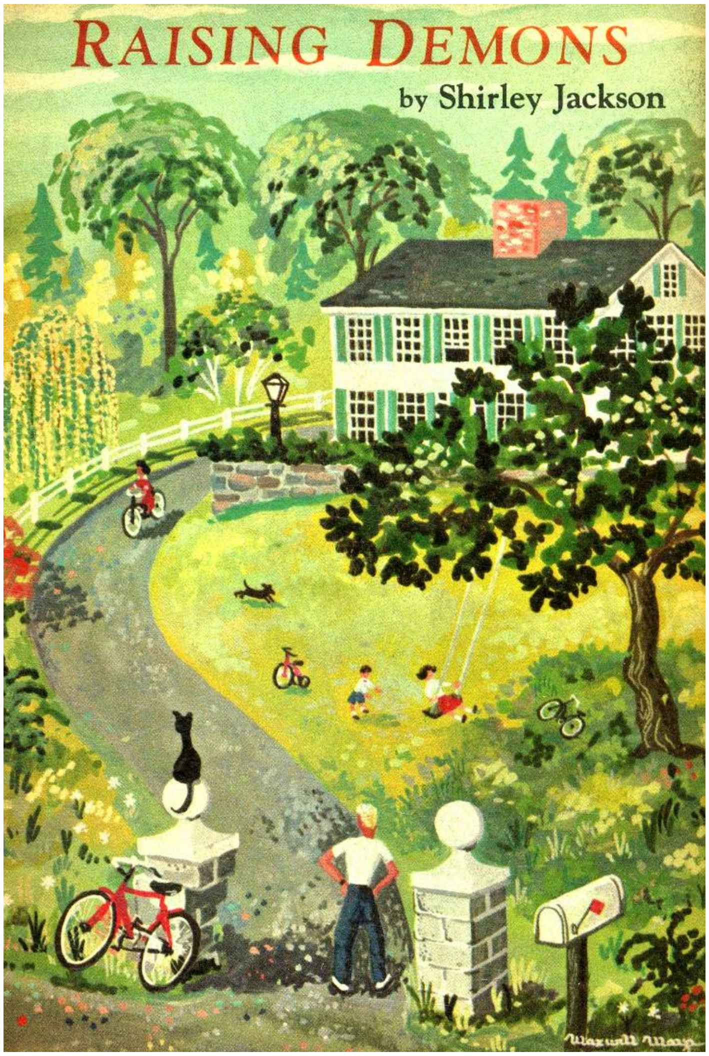
RAISING DEMONS
by Shirley Jackson
Maxwell Mays

The first edition

For

Louis Scher

I conjure and command you, O Demons, all and so many as ye are, to accept this Book with good grace, so that whensoever we may read it, the same being approved and recognized as in proper form and valid, you shall be constrained to appear in comely human form when you are called, accordingly as the reader shall judge. In no circumstances shall you make any attempt upon the body, soul, or spirit of the reader, nor inflict any harm on those who may accompany him, either by mutterings, tempests, noise, scandals, nor yet by lesion or by hindrance in the execution of the commands of this Book. I conjure you to appear immediately when the conjuration is made, to execute without dallying all that is written and enumerated in its proper place in the said Book.

CONJURATION FROM THE GRIMOIRE OF HONORIOUS

One

I DO NOT now have the slightest understanding of the events which got us out of one big white house which we rented into another, bigger white house which we own, at least in part. That is, I know we moved, and I think I know why, and I know we spent three pleasant months in a friend's summer home, and I am pretty sure we got most of our own furniture back. What really puzzles me, I suppose, is how a series of events like that gets itself started. One day I went to clean out the hall closet and the next thing I knew we were trying to decide whether to have all four phones put on one line, or leave them all different numbers and list ourselves four times in the phone book. We decided wrong, by the way. What with the phone starting to ring for Laurie at eight in the morning and for Jannie about noon and for Sally in the early afternoon and every now and then — a high, uncomfortable voice, stammering and usually hanging up unexpectedly — for Barry, we know now that we should have left the four phones separate. We should have listed three of them for the children and kept the fourth one private, giving out the number to the two or three people who either have no children of their own or are still optimistic enough to try to telephone their friends.

We had rented the big white house for nine years. Sally had been born while we lived there, and so had Barry, and the kitchen needed repainting. The stairs and the walls and the positions of the light switches and the crack in the glass of the front door had all become affectionate and familiar to us. Laurie knew the bike routes to everywhere in town from the house, Jannie could cross the street to play with a friend, Sally had slept in Jannie's old carriage on the front porch, where Barry now slept, the shadows of the pillars moving slowly across the plaid carriage robe. All the millions of things we possessed as a family were inside the house, but, inexorably, there came one shocking moment when we discovered that the house was full.

I went, one spring morning, to clean out one of those downstairs half-closets, which begin as very practical affairs, meant to be the resting place for wet boots and umbrellas, and end up as containers for ice skates and then hockey sticks and then tennis rackets and then, by the most logical of extensions, baseball gloves and football helmets and basketballs and riding boots and jackets left behind by visiting children. I had picked up a big cardboard carton at the grocery, and into it I put the baseball gloves and the football helmets and the riding boots and the tennis rackets and the basketball. I put the carton at the foot of the back stairs, so I would remember to take it up the next time I went, and I put clean newspaper on the floor of the closet and went and got all the wet boots from the corner of the kitchen and the spot inside the front door and the back seat of the car, and I lined the boots up in the closet and derived an enormous satisfaction from closing the closet door tight for the first time in months.

Later when I went upstairs I took the carton with me. There was no room for it in the bedroom shared by my two daughters. There was no room for it in the bedroom of my older son, and certainly no room for it in the tiny room where the baby lived. There was no room for it in the attic where we kept sleds and garden rakes. There was no room for it in the attic where we kept trunks and boxes of things I meant to give away someday. I knew there was no room for it in the garage because I had tried a day or so before to put the snow tires in there and had finally to put them in the cellar, consequently there was no room in the cellar because I had barely been able to squeeze in the snow tires. I was not going to leave a carton of football helmets and a basketball in the bedroom which my husband and I shared, particularly since there were already sixteen cartons of books in the corner next to my closet, and I could not leave it in the upstairs hall because there were nine more cartons of books lined up along that wall. Anyway I knew if I left a carton of baseball gloves and football helmets and a basketball right out in the front hall it would only be a day or so before I had to gather them all up again from the living room and the kitchen, and I would probably have to put them all back into the hall closet and then the door would not close again.

With a certain feeling of bewilderment, and a strong sense of the inevitability of fate, I took the carton back downstairs and put everything directly back into the hall closet, and of course the door would not close. I could not find anywhere to put the empty carton, so I took it outside and left it for the garbage man.

A day or so later I decided to put away the winter clothes in moth balls, but the closet I have always used for winter storage was full of boxes holding the baby’s clothes and gifts people had sent him, because there was no closet in the small room where we put the baby. It occurred to me that I could put the winter clothes away in a trunk in the far attic, but when I finally got the attic door open I discovered that the trunk was full; my husband had cleaned his filing cabinet and when there was no place to put the papers and correspondence and clippings which were too important to be thrown away but not of any immediate usefulness, like our old college yearbook and the copy of our marriage license, he had carried them up in the laundry basket and put them all away in the trunk in the far attic. I thought that I might buy a cardboard closet to put the clothes away in, but there would be no place to put a new closet, since both the attics were full, unless I put a closet in the baby's room and moved the baby's things out of the moth closet and then put the winter clothes in the old moth closet, but then there would be no place to put the baby, because there was only just room enough in his little room for his crib, and I had to take him in on the girls' bed to dress him.

We had three more attics, but one of them was full of old lumber and bricks left over from the various additions that had been built onto the house, and one of them was full of bats, and the last could only be reached by climbing through a trapdoor in the ceiling of the next-to-the-last attic and even if I could get past the bats and through the lumber and bricks I did not think I could keep taking the baby up and down through a trapdoor.

That night at dinner my husband remarked that he wished he could get to his place at the dining room table without having to squeeze so past the buffet; either he was putting on weight, he pointed out, or I had moved the table. I said that now we had the baby's high chair in the dining room because there was no place to put it in the kitchen I could not possibly have the dining room table any farther away from the buffet because if there were any less space around the kitchen doorway I would not be able to get in and out at all, and no one would get any dinner. My husband said why not give all the children their dinners around the kitchen table, thus making considerably less congestion and confusion in the dining room at dinnertime, and I had to explain that if I put chairs for all the children around the kitchen table at dinnertime I would have to go around through the study to get from the stove to the sink, and Laurie added indignantly that that was a fine thing, that was, to expect him and the girls to eat in the kitchen and let the baby eat in the dining room.

After dinner Laurie had a friend in to watch television, so my husband and I had to sit in the study. Jannie came in to read in the study because the boys asked her please kindly to let them alone while they were seeing the western movie; Sally was asleep upstairs with the lights out so Jannie could not read in bed, and the light in the dining room was not good enough to read by. With three of us in the study someone had to sit in a straight chair, so I thought I might as well get some mending done and let Jannie have the comfortable chair with the reading light. When I went to get my sewing basket I found that it was full of walnuts the children had brought home. They had not been able to find any place to put the walnuts until we decided what to do with them, so they had put them in my sewing basket, which was already pretty full of socks. Later, when I went upstairs to look at the baby I perceived, seeing almost for the first clear time, that both sides of the staircase were lined with things — books, sweaters, dolls, boxes of crayons — which had been put there temporarily and then left because there was no place else to leave them. I came downstairs and went into the study and stood in front of my husband until he put down his book and looked at me.

“We have too much stuff,” I told him. “Dolls and hockey sticks and winter clothes and walnuts.”

“I thought there seemed to be more around than usual,” he said.

“There is no more room in this house,” I said. “We cannot fit in one more thing. Not one.”

Jannie lifted her head. “Ninki is going to have kittens again,” she said.

“Well, she can’t have them here,” I said. “There isn’t an inch—”

“Last time she had them in the green living room chair.”

“When I went by a few minutes ago there were four or five jackets and a pile of library books on that chair,” I said.

“Start asking people now if they want kittens,” my husband said. He picked up his book again. “Return the library books,” he added, with the air of a man settling a petty domestic problem.

“We have got to get a bigger house,” I said.

“Don’t be silly,” my husband said, reading. “There *is* no bigger house.”

“A new house?” said Jannie. “Can I have a room of my own?”

When I went down to the grocery the next morning the grocer said he heard we were thinking of moving. We’d been in the old Fielding house quite a while now, he said; perhaps now we were aiming to buy? He *had* heard, just by accident, that Mrs. Wilbur wanted to sell that big place on upper Main Street. It would be good for us to be living on upper Main Street, because then the kids could walk to school, not to mention being right in the school district so Sally could get into the kindergarten. While I was out with the car, he said, I ought to go on up Main Street and take a look at the big house from the outside. “You’ll know it by the gateposts,” the grocer said.

When I went into the post office the postman said he heard we were thinking of moving. While we were about it, he suggested, we ought to think of getting a house closer in to town. Then we could get our mail in a postbox in the post office instead of having to wait for Mr. Mortimer to come round with the rural delivery, because now that Mr. Mortimer was getting on, and particularly since the day Mr. Mortimer’s car skidded and went into the ditch, which they hadn’t been able to get parts for it because it was so old, well, the postman said, it must be something of a trial to us not to be getting our mail till three, four o’clock in the afternoon. Did I know that Millie Wilbur was thinking of putting that big house on the market? The one upstreet, with the gateposts? Wouldn’t hurt the price of eggs to have a look at it.

Mr. Cunningham in the gas station said he heard we were thinking of moving, and that big white house with the gateposts would be a good buy if you knocked some off Millie Wilbur’s price.

Feeling that I was in the grip of something stronger than I was, I drove slowly on up Main Street. The house with the gateposts was unmistakable, particularly since the left-hand gatepost leaned at a sharp angle inward toward the driveway. I saw maple trees, and a wide lawn, and a barn almost as big as the house. I could almost see our children running on the lawn, swinging from the trees, playing in the barn. I did not notice the sagging front steps or the flaking paint.

When I came up the hill toward our own house it looked small and overstuffed. I carried the groceries in and put them on the kitchen table and then went into the study to speak to my husband.

“I understand we’re thinking of moving,” I said.

“We are not,” he said.

“Millie Wilbur’s putting the big old house with the gateposts on the market.”

“We are not interested. You may tell Millie Wilbur.”

“Must be twenty rooms in that house. And a barn. Trees. Two gateposts.”

“I’m sure whoever buys it will have plenty of space. Now I am working,” said my husband.

The phone rang, and when I answered it, it was a lady who introduced herself as a Mrs. Ferrier. She understood we were thinking of moving. I said we were not and she said oh, that was fine, because her husband had just been transferred to our town and they had been getting pretty desperate about a house. I said we were not moving and she said they were ready to take just about *any*thing, and when could she come and look around our house? Because, she said, they were living at present with her cousin, all three children, and they were getting so desperate they really didn’t care what they got, so long as it was a roof over their heads. I said it was our roof and we planned to keep it over our own heads, and she said would it be all right to drop around tomorrow? I said no, and she said about three, then, and thank you and goodbye.

I still had the extraordinary feeling of inevitability, which I began to identify as the same feeling as I get when I try to stop my car on an icy hill. Before I could get back to the kitchen the phone rang three more times. The first was a local real estate agent, who had heard that I had been looking at the big old house with the gateposts. He was sure I was going to like the inside of the house even better than the outside. The second call was from Mr. Gore down at the bank, who thought that before we went any further on this deal we ought to understand the principles of the mortgage; he said he would be up to see my husband that evening. The third call was from Mr. Fielding, our landlord, who understood that we were thinking of moving.

I avoided going into the study, because I knew that my husband would ask me who had been on the phone. I went into the kitchen to open my groceries and get out the vegetable soup for lunch, and I decided that I had better make a potato pudding for dinner, since then my husband would be agreeably full of potato pudding by the time Mr. Gore came from the bank.

When Jannie came home from school that afternoon she said that her teacher had put it into the class news that Jannie's mommy and daddy were going to get a new house and Jannie would walk to school instead of taking the bus. A girl named Carole lived just past the big white house with the gateposts, and Carole passed the big white house every day on her way to school and Carole said it was a very nice house except the people living there were mean and wouldn't give candy on Hallowe'en. Laurie came home late, because he rode his bike to school and on his way home had detoured to have a look at the new house. He reported that it looked pretty good and he had met a very nice lady standing on the side porch and she had asked him lots and lots of questions. He repeated this to his father at dinner, although I made strenuous attempts to interrupt, and his father looked up from the potato pudding to say what kind of questions, for heaven’s sake? Laurie said oh, like how much furniture we had, and when we planned to move and things like that, and Laurie added that he had told the lady lots of furniture, and pretty soon. My husband took another piece of potato pudding and remarked mildly to me that I should caution the children against this kind of silly talk with strangers, because that was the way rumors got started, and rumors were harder to stop than they were to start.

Although I told my husband afterward that I believed it was only a coincidence, Mr. Gore from the bank and the real estate agent arrived together. I showed them into the study, closed the door, sent Jannie to read in our bedroom, turned the television set down very low, and went out to wash the dinner dishes.

That, so far as I can recollect, is the first stage of how we happened to start to buy a big white house with two gateposts. After about an hour my husband came out of the study to get the cigar humidor, and a little later he came to the study door and asked if I would get out some more ice. I decided that I might perhaps look officious if I went barging into the study while the men were talking, so I stayed thoughtfully in the kitchen, and finally cleaned all the pantry shelves, thinking of Mrs. Ferrier coming tomorrow. When I heard the front door close, I waited a few minutes and then went timidly into the study.

“Company gone?” I asked, through the smoke.

“Yep,” said my husband.

“Any news?” I said.

“Why, I don’t know,” said my husband. “Were you expecting news?”

I counted to ten. “I thought you might have been talking about the house,” I said.

“What house?” my husband said.

“I thought,” I said carefully, “that Mr. Gore, and the real estate agent—”

“Bill,” my husband said. “Fine fellow.”

“I thought you might have been discussing our possible purchase of the house now owned by Mrs. Millie Wilbur. It is a big white house, about halfway up Main Street past the railroad station. It has two gateposts, the left-hand one slightly askew.”

“Askew,” said my husband appreciatively. He thought. “Wrong side of the tracks,” he pointed out. “Didn’t tell me *that.*”

“It’s the right side of the tracks, actually,” I said. “I mean, all the big nice old houses are on out there. We’re on the wrong side of the tracks *now*, really.”

“Depends which side you’re *not* on,” said my husband acutely. “Well.” He nodded and took up his book.

“But what about the house?”

“What house?”

“I am going to bed,” I said.

“By the way,” he remarked, as I opened the study door. “One more thing about that house. Seventeen people living there.”

“What?”

“Seventeen,” he said firmly. “Four apartments. One downstairs front, one upstairs front, one downstairs back, one upstairs back, one downstairs front, one upstairs—”

I closed my mouth. “You mean,” I said after a minute, “there are four separate apartments in that house? Four kitchens? Four bathrooms? Four—”

“One upstairs back, one upstairs front, one downstairs—”

“Four telephones?”

“One downstairs up.”

When I went to see the house with the real estate agent the next morning I learned more about it. There were three acres of land, on which we might someday put a swimming pool, or a tennis court, or a miniature golf course, or a garden. The barn was two stories high, suitable for a summer theater or any number of square dancers. The house had been divided up into four apartments about six years back, and could be un-divided by the removal of beaverboard partitions. (It occurred subsequently to both my husband and myself that what we should have done was put all four of our children, and their possessions, into one apartment and leave the partitions in, but by then it was too late.) There was no wall to go with the gateposts. There were four separate entrances to the house, and the agent assured me that there were indeed four separate kitchens, four separate bathrooms, four separate telephones, and garage space in the barn for four cars.

The agent had keys to two of the apartments, and we went gingerly into the downstairs front, tapping at the beaverboard behind which lurked the downstairs back, and marveling at the wallpaper, which had green funeral urns and laurel leaves. We went outside and out the entrance to the downstairs front and around the corner and in the entrance to the downstairs back, where a little dog yapped at us so persistently that we took only the most perfunctory glance at the rooms. The wallpaper there was of purple rhododendrons with many leaves. We went out again and around another corner of the house to the stairway which led up to the upstairs back apartment. We could not get in, but by craning our necks could get a glimpse of the wallpaper, which seemed to be orange and black birds. Then we went around another corner of the house and came to the entrance to the upstairs front, which was actually the main front door of the house, although we could not get in, and could only guess at the wallpaper; I subsequently discovered that it was a multicolored geometric pattern.

We were just getting into the agent's car to go home when the lady who lived in the downstairs front came home and invited us in again. She had been packing, she said. She had been after her husband for six months to move to Schenectady where her sister lived, and news that the house might be sold had been enough to give him a final push. I asked her if she had done her own decorating — the wallpaper, for instance — and she said certainly not, and one of the big reasons in favor of moving was that the wallpaper was beginning to get on her nerves, not to mention the downstairs back, because, although she had never been one for gossip, since once people started telling tales about their neighbors you never knew where you were, she knew for a fact that the downstairs back were behind on their rent since last fall and the upstairs back never got along with anyone and she wouldn't be a bit surprised to hear that they were separating the way she yelled at him. The upstairs front were very nice people and she had never heard a word against them from anybody, although she must say if anything would help this blessed wallpaper drive her out it was that radio going going going all day long. Also they were most ungracious about the clothesline and she wouldn't put it past them to have cut it the day her wash fell down.

We backed out, nodding, and got into the agent's car again. I looked back at the house as we drove off and it seemed enormous; next to the barn was what looked very much like a berry patch.

When Mrs. Ferrier stepped inside our front door at one minute before three that afternoon it was perfectly clear to me without hesitation that we were not going to become fast friends. She stood just inside the door, looking around. She looked at the hall closet, half closed, at the flotsam and jetsam lining the stairs on both sides, and at the wallpaper in the hall, which was the cabbage rose design we had chosen with Mr. Fielding nine years before. She closed her eyes for a minute and then, with me following, went on into the living room, where the library books still sat on the green chair and someone had left a jacket on the television set. “Nice large room, if it was fixed up,” Mrs. Ferrier said. In the dining room she tapped the table thoughtfully, perhaps looking for termites, and pulled back a curtain to see if the room overlooked the road, glancing briefly at the dust on the windowsill. In the study she nodded to my husband, turned completely around once, and then remarked that we seemed to be making no practical use of the space in our house. “This room would be *much* larger,” she said, “if you took out all those books.”

Mrs. Ferrier thought the master bedroom should have faced west, and she barely put her head inside the smaller bedrooms. “They would be much larger,” I told her, “if we took out the beds.”

Mrs. Ferrier fixed me with her cold eye. “If you took out the beds where would you sleep?” she wanted to know, and I followed her meekly downstairs.

“Well,” she said, at the front door again. “How soon can you be out?”

“Good heavens,” I said, “I haven’t any idea of—”

“It shouldn’t take you more than two or three weeks to pack. Most of this stuff I suppose you’ll be throwing away; be sure to get a man to carry it off; I don’t want it all piled around back or something. I’ll stop in someday next week to measure for the curtains. That little bedroom at the head of the stairs will have to be enlarged. Say it takes you a month to get out — I’ll have the carpenters here on the first of May.”

“I hardly think—”

She smiled at me, which did not make me like her any better. “I thought someone had told you,” she said. “I was a Fielding before I married. I told the family that it was a pity to have the old family house falling apart in the hands of strangers; we owe it to the town, after all, to have Fieldings living here. So we are coming home again.” She sighed nostalgically, and I unclenched my fingers from the stair rail and said as quietly as I could that I was sure the villagers would be dancing in the streets when they heard that the Fieldings were coming home again. “Goodbye,” I added firmly, opening the front door. “I’ll see you in a day or so, then,” Mrs. Ferrier said, and of course I did not push her down the front steps.

We bought the big white house, at last, by merely signing our names on a piece of paper. Mr. Gore and Mr. Andrews down at the bank arranged the financial transference with an almost invisible maneuver of figures on a card. When my husband asked if we could borrow our money right back again and use the house as security, everybody laughed.

I stopped in at the grocery that afternoon to tell the grocer that we had bought the big white house with the gateposts and he told me a story about a fellow he knew who had rented for twenty years, saving money, until at the end of twenty years he had twenty thousand dollars in the bank, and he bought an old house planning to make it over and now, six months later, he was five thousand dollars in debt. I asked him if he had met Mrs. Ferrier and he said she had been in the store a couple times. “She takes after the Birminghams,” he said, “from East Hoosick when old Delmar Fielding married the youngest Birmingham girl and the Fieldings first got into real money.” I said I wished the Birminghams had stayed in East Hoosick, and he said a lot of other people had wished the same thing ever since the oldest Birmingham girl had got herself into the Prohibition party and went around making speeches.

He gave me a dozen cartons and I went home and began halfheartedly putting things into them. I took all the overshoes and skates and football helmets out of the hall closet and put them into a carton and put the carton in the hall by the front door. I took all the things off the stairs and put them into another carton, which I stacked in the hall next to the first carton. I was wondering what to put in the third carton when I was interrupted by Jannie to say that Ninki had just had her kittens on one of the comfortable chairs in the study and that my husband was sitting in the other comfortable chair and wanted to know what to do. I sent Jannie back to say that he should go right on reading and I put a clean dustcloth in the bottom of the third carton and went to get Ninki and her kittens, but I was interrupted again by the real estate agent on the phone. Could we move ourselves and family into the downstairs front apartment in the big white house, he wanted to know. Because although the downstairs front was vacating, the people in the upstairs back and the upstairs front were insisting upon at least two months' notice before they moved, and the downstairs back, who had been notified that back rent was to be paid in full, was refusing to move at all. Even if we planned to take out the partitions and change the wallpaper after we were moved in, there would still be a delay of at least two months before we could claim anything except the downstairs front. I had barely hung up the phone when Mrs. Ferrier called to say that now we had actually bought another house she was speeding things up a little because her cousin was getting pretty pointed about having all of them around all the time, so she was arranging to have the carpenters and painters arrive on the twentieth of April and would we please have the house clear by then.

Ninki's kittens were all black except one, who had four white feet. I went to the back porch to leave the carton of kittens and then came back into the study and told my husband that right after supper I was going to go to bed and read a mystery story and if the phone rang again he could answer it. When I heard Mr. Mortimer's car sideswipe our mailbox I got up without enthusiasm and went out to pick up the mail. There were three bills and a letter from my mother saying that a dear old friend of hers was going to Europe that summer and had not had a chance to rent her summer house. Would we be interested in borrowing the house? It was completely furnished, in a pleasant mountain town seventy miles from where we lived, and had a new washing machine, a dishwasher, an electric mixer, and a deep freeze.

We had never owned a new washing machine, a dishwasher, an electric mixer, or a deep freeze. I read the letter over once to myself, twice aloud to my husband, and again at the dinner table. I sent a telegram to my mother that night, and the next morning I looked in the phone book under "Storage and Transfer" and got in touch with a Mr. Cobb, who listened sympathetically to our problem, and said that he believed that he was just the fellow to settle everything for us. He came to our house that afternoon, and walked with me from room to room; he made little jokes about "folks who never know what they've got until they come to put it away," and, "bet you people have spent a long time gathering up these things," and, "funny how most people don't understand about cubic feet; you take the average man, he knows how long a foot is, and usually he knows what a *square* foot is, from buying carpets and so on, but most people just don't understand the idea of cubic feet." This was so true of me that I could only nod and say it was a shame, the ignorance of the general public. Mr. Cobb was a very considerate person; when he had finished his tour — during which it was brought home to me just how much stuff we had in the garage and the attics and how the children had accumulated swings and slides and sleds outdoors

— he sat down in the study with my husband and me and talked the whole situation over with us.

Money, it turned out, was the basic problem in putting furniture in storage, and the next most basic problem was the cubic foot. The concept of the cubic foot was intimately discussed, Mr. Cobb having passed over money swiftly and compassionately, and Mr. Cobb told my husband about how the average man knew about feet and square feet but not cubic feet. Mr. Cobb then remarked that we had a great many things to store, didn't we, and my husband and I said oh, not so much, considering it in terms of *cubic* feet; most of our stuff, we pointed out, was flat, like books. Mr. Cobb smiled slightly and said well, you take ten thousand books, which is what we estimated we had, and you pile them on top of one another, well, that mounted into cubic feet. I said shrewdly that if you took rugs and laid them flat, that was almost *no* cubic feet, and Mr. Cobb said well, it was a funny thing about rugs. Rugs, he said sadly, could not be stored unless they were freshly cleaned and rolled, which made them, he said, spreading his hands in a wide gesture, into cubic feet again. Almost all of Mr. Cobb's function — aside from lighting cigarettes for me, and pausing respectfully when my husband spoke — seemed to consist of taking objects which actually existed in almost square feet, and translating them into cubic feet — rugs had to be rolled, books had to be boxed, pictures had to be put into packing cases. He also suggested helpfully that we stuff as much stuff into other stuff as we could. He then made his last clear translation — nice flat money into cubic feet of space — by suggesting gently that payment was of course in advance, and departed.

We had to do it, at last. You cannot transport four children with clothes and toys and five cats and a dog and a baby carriage and a coin collection and two typewriters and a picnic hamper in one car and still have much room left for furniture. Our borrowed house had all the beds and dishes and chairs and tables that we needed, and in much better shape than those we left behind, and since we only expected to stay until mid-August, to be back and moved in before it was time to get ready for school, we fondly supposed that we would not need heavy coats or electric trains or hot-water bottles, although, as it turned out, the first month we were in the borrowed house it rained every day.

I managed almost immediately to dispose of the dishwasher, by permitting it to chew up and eat one of the imported wineglasses, leaving only the stem, and then I managed to upset the coffeepot into the washing machine, and I was still picking dried coffee grounds out of the children's shirts when Mr. Cobb's warehouse receipt, accompanied by bill (payable in *advance*, Mr. Cobb's letter pointed out nudgingly), arrived in the mail, and my husband, apoplectic, strode furiously into the kitchen. "What in the *name* of heaven," he demanded, "is a pedestal burlapped? And why did we want to *store* it?"

I thought. "It's the cats' scratching post, I think," I said. "We could hardly bring it with us, you know."

"Do you realize," said my husband, waving the papers under my nose, "that we also stored one empty crate? Three pieces of canvas? One metal cakebox?"

"I meant to send that cakebox back to your Aunt Sadie," I said. "You remember she sent us that chocolate—"

"Stack six wastebaskets," my husband said. "Snow shovel."

It turned out that what we could not identify the children largely could; we had no trouble with such items as 295: Radio TV cabinet, or the series of eight items labeled 68: Rug, 69: Rug, 70: Rug, and so on. Item 17: Large Green Chest S & M Soiled — S & M turned out to mean Scratched and

Marred — was the Pennsylvania Dutch chest which had been given to us as a wedding present by friends in the antique business, and what was Scratching and Marring and Soiling to Mr. Cobb and his goblins was to us a fine antique finish. Nothing of ours, actually, was to Mr. Cobb in precisely tiptop condition; his abbreviations for Bad Order (B.O.), Scratched and Marred, Moth-Eaten (M.E.), Soiled, Rusted, Worn, Torn, Loose, Chipped, and Dented, were listed after almost every item. Double Bed Mattress Burnt brought back vivid memories of the morning I fell back asleep with a cigarette in my hand, Mexican Chair Broken reminded us of the time my husband tried to reach the top of the closet shelf. Tricycle B.O. spoke for itself, although it had been the little girl next door who had put her foot through the spokes.

It was in the odd items, however, that we found ourselves glancing secretly at one another, wondering what furtive hiding places had been invaded, what hidden lairs of junk were now exposed. The Coal Grate, for instance (R. though it was), which none of us could remember; had Mr. Cobb stored in our name some priceless piece of metalwork belonging to old Mr. Fielding, or had he boldly wrested it from the furnace in some mistaken zeal, or had we, indeed, at some past time gone hand in hand and bought our first coal grate, hoping eventually to build a full fireplace around it? The Folding Mirror for Dressing Table S & M, I remembered; it had come off a dressing table which my mother-in-law had sent us with a load of other furniture when she moved from a house into an apartment; the dressing table had long been disintegrated and thrown away, and the mirror had lain in an attic corner for years. In cubic feet it must have been priceless to Mr. Cobb. Round Green Table Iron Base B.O. mystified us all, but Laurie saved us over Occasional Chair Without Cushion Joints Weak; that, he pointed out after much thought, was the chair which had been in a corner of the cellar near the workbench, which he and his father had been using as a sawhorse, thus almost certainly weakening the cushion joints.

We owned an old metal phonograph horn, we discovered, and a mysterious item identified as Trunk M.T.B.B.O.; we finally narrowed this down (Marred, Broken, Bad Order) to the extra T. and considering that this was the trunk into which my husband had unloaded his filing cabinet, we came at last to assume that the T. stood for Trivia, or Too-heavy.

Gradually, during the long summer days, our list became as intimate a part of our daily life as the washing machine grumbling to itself in the kitchen, or the deep freeze doggedly making popsicles downstairs. “Small Round Table S & M,” I would cry gaily to Laurie, and he would be allowed one minute before answering, “Girls’ room, corner near the window.” “147, Fire Lighter,” my husband would come back, and if no one could guess it (far corner of the cellar, leaning against the wall) another penny went into the pot for Mr. Cobb. D. R. Table puzzled us, until we realized that it was not a table Dented and Rusted, but our old dining room table; Bundle Metal Disces B.O. were not a little sack of Greek coins my husband had somehow overlooked, but the metal records for our old-fashioned music box, although how Mr. Cobb was able to estimate that they were in B.O. is beyond me. Mr. Cobb made three cents on items 166, 167, and 168, listed individually as Ador. Arm Chair B.O. Ador. Arm Chair Arm Off B.O. and Ador. Arm Chair B.O. since we could all clearly remember armchairs with the arms off, but none that might reasonably have impressed the hard-bitten Mr. Cobb as Adorable. Items 154, 155, 156, and 157 infuriated my husband. “Bundle 4 Bed Slats,” he said helplessly. “Bundle 5 Bed Slats, Bundle 4 Bed Slats, Bundle 3 Bed Slats — you simply can’t *trust* those people; *we* could have made one Bundle 16 Bed Slats and saved just that much money.”

"Consider for a minute," I begged him, "consider item 285, one half Round Side Table — now we *must* have saved money *there.*"

"Red Boot Black Box," my husband murmured.

"My red boots?" asked Sally.

"My black box?" asked Jannie.

"My red box for blacking boots?" asked Laurie.

"Boxing boots?" I asked. "Blacking gloves?"

"It's dented," my husband said, consulting the list. "Probably another Bundle Bed Slats they were ashamed to put down."

One of Mr. Cobb's favorite dodges was a confusing little shortcut known as CU, or Contents Unknown. Small Victrola, CU. Packing Case, CU. Carpet Sweeper with Handle, CU. Carton CU, Carton CU, Carton CU, Flat Carton CU. (The Flat Carton Contents Unknown earned Mr. Cobb another penny.) Kitchen Range CU. (The remains of our Thanksgiving turkey, I believe.) Electric Baseball Game CU. Moreover, after items 68 through 74 ("Rug, Rug, Rug, Rug, Rug, Rug, Rug") it was satisfying to learn that we had tamed one — item 191, Domestic Rug.

By far the most absorbing sequence turned out to be 133 through 137 — Red Parasol, Sword, Sword, Sword, Small Flag. These probably came from the same costume department as 19: Spear and 20: Horsewhip, and we began to think nostalgically of how, as a family, we could have held Mrs. Ferrier at bay, armed with our swords and our spears and our horsewhips and our red parasol, and waving one another on with our Small Flag. At any rate, we were all happy to reflect that the Black Hat Box (204) and the Floor Mop (382) were beyond harm, as was the Pair Auto Tires Worn (158) and, of course, the Odd Drawer from Table (370). Besides, there was nothing so particularly odd about the drawer, it was the *table* that was so odd, appearing and disappearing the way it did.

Whenever I tried to picture the items on Mr. Cobb's list, think concretely of, say, the ashtrays and metronomes and bed tables and kitchen chairs, they fell automatically into place, as they had stood for so many years. I think that during the long days of that summer — and after the first month of rain it was hot all the time — I slowly forgot that our house was not waiting for us, and came to believe that we would go home to the familiar place; my only concession to the idea of a new house was to set my mental picture of our old house in the new location on upper Main Street, and sketch in a barn in back, and the gateposts in front. We received a sharp letter from Mrs. Ferrier accusing us, in so many words, of stealing the garage doors. I threw the letter away because of course we had not stolen the garage doors. I had smashed one of them slightly trying to get the car out one day, and we had taken it off the hinges, but it was right there leaning against the side of the house if Mrs. Ferrier had only used her eyes.

The weather was hot, we went swimming, and the children, even Barry, were brown and lively. Our neighbors were almost all summer folk like ourselves, and agreeable, informal people; the children picked up acquaintances after their own fashions. Because our next-door neighbor, a Mrs. Simpkins, dropped over on our first morning and pointed out most pressingly that it was so nice for her young ones to have what she insisted upon calling "gentle, *refined* kiddies" right next door, I felt that it was incumbent upon me to make immediate overtures of friendship, and I invited the Simpkins children over, sight unseen, for supper. We cooked hamburgers out in the back yard, with Mrs. Simpkins beaming down at us from her kitchen window, but after supper the Simpkins boy settled down to play house with his sister and Jannie. Laurie, refusing ungraciously to be Daddy, spent the evening indoors staring disconsolately out at the lake.

"Golly," he said perhaps thirteen times, "golly, I sure wish there was something to *do* around this joint, boy."

When, the next morning, an invitation was delivered to Laurie and Jannie, asking them to take their evening hamburgers in the Simpkins back yard, Laurie refused pointblank, and only the threat of no swimming for one whole week persuaded him to go. He came home immediately after supper, and spent the evening indoors by the front window. "Golly," he said, "if only there was something to *do* around here."

On the third morning Laurie was still at breakfast when the Simpkins boy came down his back steps, his book of pressed flowers under his arm, and made purposefully for our house. Laurie raced out the front door, leaving me to cover his retreat by holding the Simpkins boy at the back door. I asked how Mrs. Simpkins was, and whether the collecting and pressing of wild flowers was not too arduous a hobby for the hot summer days. I said I was sorry, but Laurie had just stepped out and I did not know where he was or when he would be back. I said that when he did come back I would most assuredly tell him that the little Simpkins boy was looking for him and wanted to know whether he would like to pack a picnic lunch and go on a nature walk. After fifteen minutes I closed the back door on the little Simpkins boy with a strong feeling of sympathy for Laurie.

Laurie did not come home until long after the rest of us had finished lunch. When he came in he was in a hurry. He had a long scratch on his cheek, his shirt was ripped, and his nose had clearly been bleeding. He said no, he had not been fighting. He had met some fellows. One of them was named George. He had *not* been fighting. George had a catcher's mitt and another one of the fellows had a bat and George knew where he could borrow a ball. There had been no fighting, and Laurie could not imagine why I should think there *had* been. He and George and the other fellows were getting up a game on the ball field down by the lake, and he promised not to fight any more.

After two or three more fruitless attempts to interest Laurie in wild flowers the Simpkins boy gave up, and became a regular participant in the doll games his sister and Jannie played, with Sally tagging along. Laurie and George and George's friends, who traveled in a pack like wild dogs, spent their long days at the ball field or at the riding stables or in the lake, displacing a hundred times their own weight in water. My husband and I told one another that the children had never seemed happier or healthier. My husband set up a horseshoe-pitching court at one end of our back yard, and in the cool evenings he and Laurie went out to pitch horseshoes while the girls and I sat on the grass and watched them and Barry slept, smiling, on the cool screened porch. After Laurie had won every game every night for four nights in a row my husband decided that he was going to teach me to pitch horseshoes, but it turned out to be almost impossible for me to learn, because the only way I could lift the horseshoes enough to throw was by using both hands. After the evening when I, throwing two-handed, put a horseshoe through the canvas back of one of our lawn chairs, my husband set up a badminton court, which was much more successful. For some reason Laurie could never learn to play badminton at all, and Jannie and I, who both liked the game, never were skillful enough to beat anybody except each other. My husband and I played a lot of badminton as the summer wore on. I refused, as I have been doing every summer since I can remember, to allow anyone to try to teach me to swim, and Sally and I made sand castles while Laurie tried to learn racing dives off the dam and Jannie learned from her father how to do the dead man's float. After weeks of effort Laurie succeeded in teaching Sally a kind of rudimentary dog paddle. Several times the three older children and their father rented a boat and went off on picnic trips; I was always left behind as a punishment for not learning to swim, since, as Laurie explained severely, he and his father would have enough trouble with Jannie and Sally if the boat tipped over without having to save *me*, too. While they were gone on their boat trips Barry and I lay out in the sun and took long, lovely naps.

Until mid-July, the possibility of entering actively into any demanding situation, much less the practical policies of the State Department of the United States, had not been anything we had considered extensively; although, as a family, we had always been reasonably dutiful citizens. We hung out a flag on Decoration Day, observed the Fourth of July with noisy cheer, paid our taxes with reluctance but on time, sent children to school with an eye to the truant officer, crossed the street with the green light, did not use the mails to defraud — we were sensible, citizenly folk, but not obtrusive. Our active participation in the operations of the government had been confined, not to put too fine a point on it, to voting. This complacent footing was inevitably blasted, abruptly, out from under us, and the slight Japanese accent which Sally retained from the experience lasted for several months.

It was on a pleasant Sunday afternoon, when I was sitting reading a mystery story on our own front porch. Through the still air I could hear the distant enraged shouts of nine-year-old boys discussing reasonably the accuracy of a batted ball; Sally and Jannie, shiny from their morning swim, were playing in the sandbox; Barry had awakened, cheerful, from his nap and was singing to himself in the playpen, watching the sunlight, and holding aloft one small foot. My husband was around on the side porch, slowly relaxing into that heavy-eyed state which hits him about the seventh inning of the baseball broadcast, and which slips imperceptibly into a nap before dinner. I had just showered and changed into a clean skirt and blouse, and was in the process of deciding that it was really too hot to fry the chicken for dinner, and I would make instead some nice cool salad (tunafish?) when Laurie shot down the road on the bike we had borrowed for the summer, and came to a shrieking halt half an inch from the porch steps. “Got to get ready,” he said gaspingly, vaulting the porch rail. “Hurry.”

“Laurie, it’s just too *hot* to race around like that. You’ll have sunstroke or something; *nothing* is important enough to—”

“Company,” Laurie said. “People coming over. Here.”

I rose abruptly. “Company?”

“Got to *hurry*, they’ll be here in a minute.” Laurie started through the door and I followed after him, saying, “Wait, who—”

“Got to talking to them. Ball field. Said they’d be right over, we got to *hurry.*” He turned to the stairs. “Better put on a clean shirt,” he said.

If Laurie intended, uncoerced, to put on a clean shirt, immediate and violent action of some kind was called for from me. I moved swiftly to the window which opened onto the side porch, said, “Company,” and heard my husband groan. I then passed through the house to the back door, from which I shouted, “Jannie, Sally,” and was rewarded by a distant answering voice. “Clean shirt,” I said thoughtfully, and went up the stairs two at a time and into the girls’ room where I found two nearly clean dresses, skidded into the boys’ room where Laurie was buttoning his best Hawaiian print shirt, snatched a sunsuit for Barry, called downstairs, “Porch chairs,” and stopped long enough to run a comb through my hair. “Who *are* these people?” I shouted to Laurie, and he shouted back from his room, “Visiting America. One’s named Yashamoto, I *think.*”

Remotely I recalled rumors I had heard of a group of foreign students visiting our town for a brief vacation and orientation course in this country before going on to study in various colleges and universities all over the country. “How many are there?” I shouted across to Laurie, but he had gone downstairs. Serve them coffee, I thought frantically, or perhaps something typically American — hot dogs? No, no, not in the middle of a hot afternoon. Iced coffee; iced coffee, and there was a box of doughnuts in the breadbox if the children hadn’t gotten to it; cookies? I wish I had some ice cream, I thought; can’t serve company popsicles from the deep freeze, and I took the three bottom steps in one leap. I was plugging in the electric coffeepot when Jannie and Sally came through the back door; I threw their dresses at them and said, “Company, wash your faces.” They disappeared, murmuring, and I moved swiftly in to Barry, who was amused at the idea of wearing the sunsuit, since it was the first article of formal attire he had seen since summer’s start. I tied Sally’s sash, took a swipe at each head with the hairbrush, heard voices outside, emptied an ashtray on my way to the door, ducked my mystery out of sight, and opened the door. “Good afternoon,” I said, only slightly out of breath.

There were six of them. “Good afternoon,” said a gentleman in a red, white, and blue striped tie, who was, it turned out, the spokesman. “My name has been Horogai Yashamoto. Thank you very much for invitation to your home.”

“We are delighted that you have come,” I said, trapped without thinking into a kind of stilted formality. “Will you come in?”

I held the door open and they filed solemnly in past me, and then lined up inside. Each of them was wearing an identification button, and as Mr. Yashamoto introduced them one by one I kept trying to look sideways at the names on the identification buttons, hoping that they would forgive mispronunciation. The two Japanese men were Mr. Yashamoto and Mr. Masamitsu, there were three people from Argentina, Mr. and Mrs. Fernandez and Mr. Lopez, and a tall gentleman with a black beard, who was from Ceylon and whose name I never learned, because I got it first as Babar and no amount of correction, after that, could make me change it. “How do you do,” I kept saying, “how do you do.”

For one hideous minute we all stood just inside the front door, smiling eagerly at one another and all obviously trying helplessly to find some civil, neat, appropriate comment for the situation; then, blessedly, the side porch door opened and my husband, inadequately briefed by Laurie, came in with his mouth open. “Good afternoon,” Mr. Yashamoto said, with his little bow, “thank you very much for invitation to this home. We are pleased to have met you. We are pleased at seeing family life here.”

My husband took a deep breath. “Glad you could come,” he said manfully. “Hi,” said Laurie, appearing behind him. “Hi, fellas.”

Mr. Yashamoto bowed again to Laurie. “Our small friend Lorri,” he said, pleased. “We are meeting your parents now.”

“And my sisters,” Laurie said, waving at Jannie and Sally, who were standing shyly in the kitchen doorway. “This big one’s Jannie. The little one’s Sally.”

Mr. Yashamoto approached formally, and bowed to each of them. “Jonni;” he said. “Salli.” “H’lo,” said Jannie almost inaudibly, and Sally giggled and crossed her feet.

“*And* my brother Barry,” said Laurie.

Mr. Yashamoto, following Laurie’s pointing finger, bowed again, to the playpen. “Balli,” he said.

“Well,” said Laurie, who seemed at the moment to be in entire control of the situation, “let’s all siddown, then.”

Hesitantly, edging and backing and bowing and countering, they found chairs. I sat briefly until I was positive that our visiting gentlemen were firmly set into position, and then said, “Excuse me,” and raced back into the kitchen, where I took down glasses and set them on a tray, got out ice, spread the doughnuts thinly on a plate, and padded the spaces between them with gingersnaps. Give the coffee another five minutes, I thought, sugar and milk, spoons. When I came back into the living room I found our guests sitting, each with hands folded in lap, and all turned intently to Laurie, who was saying, "And the thing is, when you're playing second and there's a man on first, see, you wanna—" Everyone stood up again when I came to the doorway, and I said, "No, no, sit down, please," and finally sat myself, abruptly, onto the telephone table chair so that Mr. Yashamoto and Mr. Masamitsu and Mr. Fernandez and Mr. Lopez and Mr. Babar would also sit down. Hastily, I noted that Mrs. Fernandez was giving Laurie that gaze of hypnotized attention which usually means a state of utter bewilderment, that my husband was eying Mr. Yashamoto in the manner of a monomaniac who intends shortly to enter upon his exclusive field of interest — in this case, of course, coins — and that Jannie and Sally between them had cornered Mr. Fernandez. Laurie gave every impression of being about to describe, in detail, the several innings of his latest game, and Mr. Babar had a small notebook in which he was writing busily, pausing occasionally to glance curiously at the books on the shelves, or the children's bare feet, or the rug, or the table lamps, and then returning to his notebook to write again. I thought of telling him that the house was not ours, and that we claimed almost nothing in it, and then reflected that the furniture was of rather better quality than what we had left in the grasp of Mr. Cobb, so I was quiet.

"Trouble with *most* longball hitters, you got to—" Laurie was continuing purposefully, and I turned to Mr. Lopez, who was on my left, and I smiled at him politely and he smiled back. I strongly suppressed a basic superstition which came unbidden to my mind (if you talk *loud* enough you can *make* them understand) and said, very softly, “And how long have *you* been here, Mr. Lopez?”

He looked surprised, and thought. “Ten minute?” he said at last, tentatively.

“No, no. How long have you been in this country?”

Again he thought. “Juan,” he said hesitantly. “Juan Lopez.”

I smiled largely, and nodded. “And do you like it?” I asked.

“Oh,” he said, pondering. “Very much,” he said finally, and we both smiled, and nodded, and repeated “very much,” and smiled again.

“This is fine country,” Mr. Yashamoto said. “Very eatable food in this country.”

“We especially,” Mr. Masamitsu said suddenly, “we *especially* enjoy hot dog. And mustard,” he added wistfully. “And spaghetti.”

“Boy,” Laurie said, and sighed. “And relish. And pickles.”

“Peeckle?” Mr. Masamitsu turned wonderingly to Laurie. “Peeckle?”

“Peeckle,” said Sally, enchanted into speech, “peeckle, peeckle, domineeckle.”

“Anyway,” Laurie said, loudly overriding his sister, “I suppose you know what *rice* is, I guess? I guess you eat a lot of rice at home, don’t you?”

Mr. Masamitsu shuddered delicately. “Indeed no,” he said with eagerness, “indeed I do not; me, I eat no rice. Indigestion,” he said widely, and everyone smiled, and nodded.

Mr. Babar for a minute raised his head from his notebook, regarded Mr. Masamitsu intently, obviously debated making a note, and then reluctantly refrained; instead he leaned toward Sally and touched her hair gingerly and Sally turned, giggled, and said “Hey!”

“You are most kind,” Mr. Yashamoto said suddenly to my husband, “to allow us to come into this country of yours.”

It was at this moment that, as I say, the United States government, flags flying, walked into our living room and sat down. I could see my husband's eyes widen and knew that without warning the same realization had come to us both; here we were, unprepared, in a sort of ambassadorial role, forced to stand or fall by our reasonably representative way of life; we spoke simultaneously — was that "Yankee Doodle" sounding in the distance?— "Nice of you to come," my husband said largely, and I said with a great heartiness, "I hope you enjoy it here." Then everyone smiled and nodded again to each other, and I muttered, "Coffee?" and fled to the kitchen.

Jannie and Sally, with great plans for passing cookies, followed me into the kitchen, and I gave Jannie the sugar and milk to carry, and Sally the plate of doughnuts, and came after them with the tray of iced coffee. Each of our guests solemnly accepted a glass of iced coffee and — I believe most of them thought this a ceremonial to be followed precisely — a spoonful of sugar and a little milk, and then, finally, one doughnut. Food, no matter how ceremonial, had its usual gracious effect, and I felt my position as international hostess relax slightly as, glasses and doughnuts in hand, our guests stirred, and rose, and spoke to one another, and moved around.

Mr. Yashamoto at last entered into an animated conversation with my husband about Japanese coins. Laurie and Mr. Masamitsu discussed with loving detail the several beauties of the hot biscuit, the hamburger, the corn on the cob. Jannie took Mr. Lopez by the hand and led him off to see Ninki's kittens, Mr. Babar settled down to a painstaking scrutiny of the bookcase, Sally was telling Mr. Fernandez, with dramatic action, the story of the three bears, and I came over to sit beside Mrs. Fernandez on the couch and said, "What a *lovely* skirt." It was flaming red, with heavy gold embroidery around the hem, and I would have given my eyeteeth to have one like it. "Lovely," I said.

"Yes?" she said. "I not espeak English, no."

I thought deeply. "Lovely," I said, touching her skirt, and she watched me and then, touching her skirt, said imitatively, "Lovelee?"

Inspiration came to me. "Wait a minute," I said, holding up one finger in what I believed might be a universal gesture for patience, and I hurried over to where Barry, in his playpen, was thoughtfully chewing on his sunsuit strap. I lifted him, gave him a quick swipe across the bottom to make sure he was dry, and then brought him back and put him into Mrs. Fernandez' lap. "Baby," I said triumphantly.

She put her arms around him and hugged him, and Barry, craning his neck back to see her, regarded her for a minute with a slight frown, then apparently decided that she was friendly and smiled. I wondered briefly, watching him, if Barry's warm smile was not precisely the smile, friendly but bewildered, which we had all been using toward one another as a substitute for communication, and I looked upon my younger son with fond pride.

"Bébé?" said Mrs. Fernandez. She held out her finger and Barry grasped it and they both smiled again; she looked at me and we both nodded and laughed. Barry reached up and took hold of one of her gold earrings and she spoke to him rapidly in Spanish, and Barry smiled, and she and I looked at one another, and laughed. It was a masterpiece of communication.

"Balli?" she said to me.

"Barry."

"Ah," she said. "Barri." She spoke to him again, and he answered her in *his* language, which was surely as comprehensible to her as mine, and he showed her his four teeth and got her earring in his hand to play with. We were getting along famously; we were all beaming at one another once again when a voice spoke suddenly behind me. "Do you eat?"

Startled, I turned; it was Mr. Babar, squatting beside my chair. “Do you eat—” he thought, pencil in hand “ — breffist food?” he finished finally.

Blinking, I said, “Well, of course, we send for space goggles from the cartons, and compasses and things, but I personally—”

“The little Balli — what eats he?”

“Cereal,” I said meekly. “Strained baby food.” Mr. Babar frowned, shaking his head, and Mrs. Fernandez and Barry stared, uncomprehending, from one to the other of us. I sighed and stood up, giving them both my universal sign for patience, and went into the kitchen and came back with an unopened box of Barry’s cereal and a jar of strained squash. I handed them to Mr. Babar and he scowled at them, making notes in his book. “Most very interesting,” he said, and reluctantly gave them back.

I felt like an idiot, but I said, “Would you like to keep them? I have plenty more.”

“Keep them? Take them with?”

“If you want to.” I gestured foolishly, but Mr. Babar said with pleasure, “Thank you very much; this is of the utmost great value,” and hastily, as though afraid I might after all insist upon taking back my cereal and my strained squash, he hastened to his briefcase and stored them away. Then, coming back to where I was sitting, he asked, pencil poised, “Shampoo?”

I nearly did international relations an irreparable harm by giggling. After a minute, however, I said, sober-faced, “I wash my hair with it. So do my daughters.”

“Ah.” He wrote. Then he touched the sleeve of my blouse with the tip of the pencil. “How much?” he asked.

I stirred uneasily, and glanced around to see if my husband was listening, but he was showing Mr. Yashamoto our Japanese netsuke, a lovely little ivory carving which had been my birthday present. “This,” I heard Mr. Yashamoto say incredulously, “is *Japanese*?”

“Eleven-ninety-eight,” I said very softly to Mr. Babar, “but if you don’t mind—”

“Eleven *dollar*?”

“It’s nylon,” I said, “but please don’t tell—”

He beamed. “Ah,” he said. “*Nylon.*” And he made another note.

Mrs. Fernandez was singing softly to Barry, who lay back against her arm making small quiet noises, and Jannie and Mr. Lopez came back into the room and I heard Mr. Lopez saying, “People from different countries seem different, my Jonni, but cats — never. Cats are always much alike.”

“Except,” said Jannie intelligently, “that some of them are black and some of them are white and some of them are gray and some of them are striped.”

“True, true,” said Mr. Lopez, and Mr. Babar, apologetically, touched me on the arm to attract my attention. “Television?” he asked anxiously.

Suddenly, in the middle of a sentence, Mr. Yashamoto glanced at his watch and rose. “One hour,” he announced, and our guests stood, all together. Mr. Yashamoto came across the room and bowed quickly to me. “Thank you very much for visit to your home,” he said. “You have been most instructive.”

I leaned down to take Barry from Mrs. Fernandez and she hugged him and handed him to me. Between the two of us we managed to pry her earring out of his hand. “An opportunity not to miss,” Mr. Babar said to me, and then, unexpectedly, “I will not reveal cost of clothing.” I could have sworn he winked at me.

Mr. Lopez shook hands with Jannie, and Mr. Fernandez removed Sally from *his* lap. “How about a game tomorrow?” Laurie said to Mr.

Masamitsu, and Mr. Masamitsu bowed. “Swell,” he said precisely, “idea.”

“I do hope you’ll come again,” I said generally. “We have enjoyed your visit so much.” I turned to Mrs. Fernandez and said, “It has been a real pleasure.” “Bébé,” she said, touching Barry’s head. “Barri.”

“Come any time,” my husband said roundly to Mr. Yashamoto, “show you some more of those Japanese coins.”

They were all moving gradually toward the front door, and then, when they reached it, passed through it in single file, as they had entered, and lined up again on the front lawn.

“Thank you once more very much,” Mr. Yashamoto said, and my husband and I both said, “Do come again,” and Laurie called out, “Be seeing you, fellas,” and Jannie and Sally called, “ ‘Bye, ‘bye, ‘bye.”

They wandered off down the country road, our guests, conversing among themselves, and pausing once for a minute while Mr. Babar turned and took a long look at the outside of our house. Then he wrote quickly in his notebook, and they went slowly on.

• • •

August came upon us soon thereafter, and Laurie began saying “school” in a dreary voice, and giving us monologues which usually began, “Why’d they ever invent *school*, anyway, if they’d *only*—” My husband and I asked one another what had become of the summer, and at the dinner table we wondered constantly that the weeks had seemed so short. Laurie reported that Mr. Yashamoto had turned into a pretty fair shortstop, and then, sadly, that they had all gone. Mr. Yashamoto had promised to write to Laurie, and had left behind a snapshot, taken by Mr. Masamitsu, of himself and Laurie standing together grinning, with the lake behind them and a baseball bat in front of them, and Laurie put the picture up on his bedroom wall. Mrs. Simpkins stopped over one morning to say that her boy had settled down to studying his arithmetic against the approach of school, and they had seen so little of Laurie they wondered if he was studying, too. I said that Laurie had been teaching his sister Sally to dog-paddle.

With the departure of Mr. Yashamoto and Mr. Masamitsu the baseball season suffered a perceptible slump, and Laurie had been moping, sad and listless, his occupation gone, until he fortunately recollected the existence of the riding stables. As a matter of fact, it had seemed to me at first that Mrs. Simpkins's inquiry after Laurie was ironic, since I thought it unlikely that anyone living only next door could be in any doubt about Laurie's current interest. The first sign of Laurie's presence was always the panting arrival of our big dog Toby, then came the crash of Laurie's bike hitting the ground, and then, vividly, sometimes from as far away as ten or fifteen feet, the inescapable air of horse.

From a stable sage named Jerry, Laurie had managed to pick up such valuable items of information as the probable hands high of horses, what a cinch is, and certain aphoristic opinions which seemed to me more suitable for a men's smoker than a family living room. His father, whose interest in horses was confined to their shoes, was required, as the only other man around the house, to listen to unending detail about a black and white bay — or it may have been a bay and white black, or black and bay, or even spotty, as Sally suggested — whose name was Popeye and who was supposed by the bloods around the stable to be exceedingly dangerous. Sally and Jannie and I believed implicitly that Popeye had eaten a former stableboy and perhaps even another horse, and it became a custom with me to glance quickly at Laurie when he came home to see if there were any marks of horse's teeth on him.

We planned to leave our borrowed house earlier than most of our neighbors were planning to leave their summer houses, because we thought to give ourselves two good weeks to get moved before school. As a result, the last days of our summer vacation were filled with farewell parties. We had been out playing bridge on Saturday night and because it was our last Saturday night had been persuaded to stay for one rubber over our quota (and would have won it, too, if my husband had led back a spade that time); when we got home we were both a little irritable (and so was the baby-sitter, coming sleepily out to the car with her coat thrown over her shoulders) and entirely because of my husband's forgetfulness I neglected to set the alarm. As a result I woke up on our last Sunday morning with one of those guilty starts, and found myself staring unbelievingly at an alarm clock which had slid secretly past eight o'clock and somehow gotten itself around to half-past ten.

Now, I do not believe that my children will pack up their little clothes and their small treasures in colored bandanas and set off, trudging sadly down the road out into the cold world — I do not *really* believe that my children will run away from home if Mommy is not up in time to give them breakfast, but this morning the house was suspiciously quiet, and when I cried out "Laurie?" and then "Jannie? Sally?" there was not even an echo to answer me. My husband stirred uneasily and I snarled at him, rolling out of bed and racing into the girls' room, saying "Jannie? Sally?" in a voice which became more urgent as I perceived that they were not there, but that they had most certainly *been* there for some space of time after arising; the toys were out of the bookcase and a fort of some kind had been built with dresser drawers in one corner of the room; Jannie's box of very small glass beads had been broken open and the beads scattered around thoughtfully near to the door so that, barefoot, I managed to step on several thousand.

As a last heartbreaking touch — a tender gesture for Mommy, no doubt, and probably performed just before the final exit into the world — both beds had been made, crookedly and with the sheets hanging, but still made, with the spreads put on. In Laurie's room, *The Boy's Book of Baseball Stories* lay open on the bed, and Barry, who after nearly nine vivid months of life had developed a kind of patient cynicism about his family, was lying in his crib talking to himself and playing agreeably with Laurie's hairbrush. I absent-mindedly picked up Laurie's pajamas, which were sprawled on the floor, and looked into them vaguely, saying "Laurie?" Since his dirty socks and dirty shirt and bathing trunks and riding boots were on the floor I could see no reason for hanging up his pajamas, and dropped them back onto the floor and said to Barry, "Where is Brother?" He stared at me, and then smiled.

Followed by Barry's sudden wail, I went padding from step to step downstairs and into the kitchen, where I was suddenly made aware of my optimistic conclusion the night before that I would leave the dinner dishes and do them in the morning. "Laurie?" I said. "Jannie? Sally?" There were three cereal bowls on the table, two empty and one half empty, and, glancing at the cereal boxes where they sat high on the shelf, I reflected briefly on the magical capacities of children who are hungry and relieved of the pressing assistance of adults. I decided that I could not go out hunting for my children until I had clothes on, and went back upstairs to dress. I had brushed my teeth and combed my hair and was looking for a clean handkerchief when I heard the clear sweet voice of my long-lost daughter Sally. "Mommy?" she was saying in the kitchen, "Mommy has gone to Fornicalia to live. Where my grandma lives, grandma. Would you please like some breakfast?"

Concluding, and rightly, that she was talking to the milkman, who needed urgently to be told that he must leave three quarts of milk instead of five, and a dozen eggs, I went to the head of the stairs and shouted, "Sally?

Tell him to leave eggs and three quarts. Then stay exactly where you are until I come down."

I slammed the dresser drawer shut, hoping it would wake my husband, slid into my shoes, and raced downstairs to find Sally, who has a kind of literal mind, frozen halfway between the door and the table. "Can I move now?" she asked, as I came to a stop, "move?" There were five quarts of milk on the table, and three dozen eggs. "Sally," I said helplessly, "where have you been?"

Sally, who was then almost four years old, has always been very pretty. Any time I am prepared to spend an hour or so working on her, she is very lovely indeed, although her general appearance is of a child barely kept in a state of minimum human cleanliness by the most stubborn determination. Her hair was not cut short until she was six, so that summer it was still long and curly; since this particular morning she had been on her own for several hours she was recognizable largely by the voice and by the horrible doll she was carrying. She had chosen to put on a sunsuit, which would have been perfectly reasonable if she had not put it on backward; her hair was not able entirely to conceal the condition of her face, and from where I stood it looked very much as though she had gotten a lollipop from somewhere, because there was a lollipop stick wound in one curl. "Where have you been?" I asked again.

"Out," she said inconclusively. "I been visiting, visiting." Her odd jangling manner of speech had never annoyed me more, and I said sharply, "Visiting where?"

She waved. "Around," she said.

"Where is Jannie? Laurie?"

"Laurie is on his bike. Jannie got eaten by a bear, eaten."

This was so close to my guilty expectations that I went nervously to the kitchen door and looked out; there were no bears but at least part of Sally's general appearance was explained by the impressive line of mudpies on the back step. Following a reasonable train of thought, I asked, "Did you have breakfast?"

"I had it at Amy's house, Amy's."

Amy's mother was one of the sweetest people I had met that summer. Her children were always spotless, and they were fed at correct times in an immaculate kitchen. I had never heard Amy's mother raise her voice to her children and she always seemed to have time to make her own clothes. "You *would* go to Amy's," I said.

"Well, I told Amy's mother that I did not have any breakfast, breakfast, because my mommy did not wake up and give it to me, mommy. And Amy's mother said I was a poor baby, baby, and she gave me cereal and fruit, cereal, and she said there, dear, and she gave me chocolate milk and I *did* remember to say thank you, remember."

I made a mental note to stop over later and tell Amy's mother laughingly that Sally had certainly fooled us, hadn't she, because I was right here making breakfast and Sally had just run out and I had spent *hours* looking for her and... "I told Amy's mother you were gone away to Fornicalia," Sally said, seating herself at the table before her half-finished bowl of cereal. "Laurie got me this cereal but he put on too much milk and I went to Amy's."

She seemed satisfied that she had given me a reasonable account of her morning, and I said "California" absently as I began to clear dishes out of the sink and stack them. "Hickory Dockery Dick," Sally said musically. "Why did they come home wagging their tails behind them, tails?"

By half-past eleven I had coffee making and had located Jannie (breakfast at Laura's house, scrambled eggs and orange juice and toast because Jannie's mother was still asleep because Jannie's mother had not come home until way, way late last night) and had had word of Laurie, who called to say that he was at the stables helping water the horses and would be back in a little while for lunch. "I see you finally got up," he remarked over the phone. "Yeah," I said.

I had fed Barry and put him in his playpen, and was feeling a little bit less like the delinquent mother whose children are found begging in the streets. Sally told me a long story about an elephant she and Amy had encountered, which asked them civilly the way to the zoo, zoo, and gave them each a piece of bubble gum, a delicacy ordinarily forbidden Sally, but I had to let her keep it because it was a present from an elephant. By the time my husband came stomping downstairs I was sitting at the kitchen table drinking coffee and smiling maternally at Sally; I gave my husband another smile of patient, tolerant understanding, and asked him sweetly if he would care for coffee? He nodded, and sat down at the table, but he jumped when I lifted the frying pan. "Eggs?" I asked him, and he shook his head no.

"Dockery Hickory Dick," Sally said. "Later will you take us swimming, Daddy, swimming?"

"Of course he will, dear," I said largely, and my husband turned his head and looked at me for a minute.

"Daddy would *like*—" I was going on maliciously when the back door opened gently and Jannie said, "Can I change to a dress?"

"Good morning, dear," I said.

"Good morning. Can I? My white sundress? You didn't wake up this morning, did you?"

“Jan, later Daddy will take us swimming, Daddy.”

“Can I change to my bathing suit?” Jannie switched smoothly. “Can I change to my blue bathing suit?” She was wearing a pair of shorts and a blouse which she dearly loved but which was so small for her that she could only button the top button, and it left a two-inch gap over the top of her shorts. “So I’ll be all ready when we go swimming?”

“Can *I* wear a dress, dress? *Can* I?”

“No,” I said. “Later. No.”

“Can I anyway go barefoot?”

“Can I, barefoot?”

“You’re already barefoot,” I said, puzzled.

“But you weren’t awake so we could ask, so I thought,” Jannie said judiciously, “that I had better ask *now.*”

“You may go barefoot,” I said.

“Thank you,” Jannie said. “May I change to my bathing suit?”

“*I* had breakfast at Amy’s,” Sally said. “Ha-ha.”

“Ha-ha,” Jannie said. “*I* had breakfast at Laura’s.”

“Horrible,” my husband said. “Way to bring up children,” he explained to his coffee cup.

“And Daddy will get you each an ice-cream cone,” I said to Jannie and Sally.

Sally nodded approvingly. “But furstaneta finish my cereal,” she said. “Furstaneta” translates precisely as “First I need to,” and it precedes most of Sally’s important actions; in this case, tipping her bowl of cereal onto the floor.

“Bring up children,” my husband said.

There was a scratching at the back screen and Toby put his head in and looked around at us. Almost immediately there was the crash of Laurie’s bike hitting the ground outside. “Daddy will take you swimming, too,” Sally told Laurie, as he came through the door.

“Not me, kiddie,” Laurie said blandly, relieving Jannie of the piece of bread she was covering with mayonnaise as he went past, and leaving her gazing astonished from the jar of mayonnaise to her empty hand. “Me, I’m on Popeye this aft.”

“Don’t come any closer till I finish my coffee,” his father said.

“Buddy’s gone lame,” Laurie told his father.

“If his shoes are too tight tell him I’ll take them,” my husband said.

“Horses don’t get lame from tight shoes, bud,” Laurie said. “How about some food?” he asked me.

Slinging one leg over the seat of his chair, he pulled the jar of mayonnaise toward him. “Jerry says,” he told Jannie, “that kid sisters are only good to have if they’re sixteen years old and have no big brothers.”

“Laurie,” I said, “that is hardly the way—”

“To address your ever-loving family,” Laurie said. “Jerry says,” he went on, “you got to have families, because otherwise where would you borrow money?”

“Good lord,” my husband said, just as Jannie put in suddenly, “Mommy, where am I?”

“Sitting at the kitchen table,” I said. “Why?”

“I just all of a sudden couldn’t remember how I got here,” Jannie said, looking around at all our startled faces. “I don’t remember *any*thing.”

My husband and I stared at each other. “Jannie,” he said, “tell us what happened.”

“I fell, I *believe*,” Jannie said. “I believe I fell.”

“Where did you hit yourself?” I asked.

“Down on the woodpile,” Sally said. “Jannie fell off the woodpile, Jannie.”

“Did you?” I asked. “When?”

“I don’t remember,” Jannie said, pleased.

“Your own name?” Laurie asked with interest. “Because it’s Jannie.”

“How old are you?” Sally asked.

Jannie giggled. “Now I don’t even remember *that*,” she said.

“What were you playing on the woodpile?” I asked.

Jannie took a deep breath. “Well,” she said, “I was playing on the woodpile with Laura and Laura’s brother Johnnie and we were playing pirate ship and Laura was the captain and Johnnie was the first mate and I was the shrew—”

“Crew.”

“Shrew. And I was the shrew, and I said I was going to dive overboard looking for fish and Laura said that was no way to catch fish you had to use a spear and *Johnnie* said—”

“And then you fell?”

“Not *yet.* And Johnnie said I was supposed to dive overboard to be dead, see, because I was a captured maiden and so I said I would only pretend to dive overboard because even if you were captured maidens you *couldn’t* go jumping off the woodpile. Could you?” she appealed to Laurie.

“Depends,” Laurie said judiciously. “I know that ole horse Buddy—”

“Anyway,” Jannie said, “Laura said I had to jump and Johnnie said he would if I would and so then I fell.”

“But you can’t remember anything about it?”

“Well,” Jannie said doubtfully, “I *do* remember a little bit about playing on the woodpile. But now I think I *have* forgotten my name.”

“It’s Jannie,” Laurie said.

I glanced, frowning, at my husband, and he shook his head and shrugged. “It was all on television, all,” Sally said suddenly. “We saw it at Amy’s house, Uncle Bob’s program, Amy’s, and the little cow that laughs all the time, cow, he fell and hit his head and then he couldn’t remember all about Uncle Bob and the trip to the moon, moon.”

“It was *not*,” Jannie said, “it wasn’t, it wasn’t.”

“And we all said we couldn’t remember,” Sally said. “Can we go swimming now, swimming?”

“Now,” Jannie said reproachfully, “now I can’t even remember your name.”

“It’s Sally,” Laurie said.

“Shall I put a cold cloth on your head?” I asked solicitously.

“Perhaps I better go lie down for a minute,” Jannie said, her voice noticeably weaker. “I’ll just leave my bread and mayonnaise.”

“Suppose,” I said, “you go lie down for a minute and take your bread and mayonnaise with you, since you seem to have made four slices of bread and mayonnaise and I do not see that you have eaten more than half of one.”

“But I don’t feel—”

“If you are too ill to have your nice bread and mayonnaise, then you are too ill to go swimming.”

Jannie sighed, and thought, and sighed again. “This is not very fair,” she pointed out. “Swimming might be very good for my poor head.”

“Say, kid,” Laurie said to me, “how about some sandwiches to take down to the stable?”

“Make them yourself,” I said, reaching for the coffeepot.

“No woman knows how to cook, anyway,” Laurie said. “Jerry says,” he told his father, “that the worst thing about having a wife is she does the cooking.” His father nodded bleakly.

“If any big-mouthed brother of a horse cares to take over the cooking in *this* house—” I began indignantly.

“But if I eat *all* my bread and mayonnaise, then I will be—”

Laurie guffawed. “If I’m a brother of a horse then what’s Jannie?” he demanded, and then, without waiting for the indignant answer Jannie was opening her mouth to deliver, he remarked, “Here comes Amy, simple.”

“Amy?” said Sally, just as I was saying, “Simple is not a polite name for—” and my husband was saying, “Any young man as fresh as—” and Jannie was saying, “Horses don’t have sisters, they have—” “Amy?” Sally said. “May I please have two cookies, two, one for Amy and one for me, cookies?”

“You may, you may,” I said hastily. “Provided you eat them outdoors.” If Sally’s refrain conversation is difficult to bear, Amy’s repetitive conversation is worse; where Sally repeats the vital word, Amy repeats the whole sentence; Sally is the only one in our family who can talk to Amy at all. “May I please play with Sally?” Amy was saying through the back door screen, “is Sally here so she can play with me?”

Sally slid off her chair and made for the cookie jar. “Amy,” she shouted, “Daddy is going to take us swimming, swimming, and ask your mommy if you can come, your mommy.”

“My mommy,” said Amy solemnly, opening the screen door and joining Sally at the cookie jar, “doesn’t let me go swimming right now, because I have a cold. I have a cold, so my mommy doesn’t want me to go swimming, because I have a cold. I have a cold,” she told me, “so my mommy won’t let me go swimming.”

“Because she has a cold,” Laurie said helpfully. “See, she has a cold and so—”

“Laurie,” I said feverishly. “Sally and Amy, please take those cookies out*doors.*”

“Anyway,” Jannie said with finality, “then that makes Sally a horse, too, because if Laurie is the brother of a horse, then Sally—”

“If you ask your mommy can we each have two cookies,” Amy began, preceding Sally out the screen door, “then maybe if your mommy says we can have two cookies—”

Delicately Laurie shut the door behind them, and remarked consideringly to his father, “You know, you take that Riff. Now there’s a nag can jump and run and about everything, and then there’s Raff, and he’s Riff’s own twin brother and you think that horse can jump?” The phone rang.

“It’s probably a horse for Laurie,” Jannie said, inspired.

“I’ll get it,” my husband said, abandoning Laurie in mid-sentence.

“I’ll just change into my bathing suit right now,” Jannie said, taking advantage of my preoccupation with the ringing of the phone to leave two slices of bread and mayonnaise behind the toaster. “See you later, kid,” Laurie said, patting me on the head.

“Well, well, well,” my husband was saying over the phone. “Isn’t this a *surprise.*” He turned and grinned evilly at me. “But you’ve *got* to come on over,” he said, “we’d never forgive you if you didn’t stop in. And plan to stay on for dinner,” he said, looking away from my dropped jaw. “Pot luck, of course.”

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Two days before we were to leave, we got a letter from the real estate agent at home, saying that all four apartments in our new house were empty, the downstairs back having loaded their clothes and their television set in a pickup truck in the middle of the night and made off without further reference to the back rent. The agent said that a checkup on the downstairs back apartment indicated that they had been systematically removing furniture and household goods for some time; perhaps ever since they were first informed of the sale of the house. Nothing was left in the downstairs back apartment, not even the lightbulbs or the curtain rods, and the agent was of the opinion that they would have taken the glass out of the windows if it had not been broken already. My husband thought that we should keep the downstairs back apartment intact, repair the windows, and rent it out again. I thought that if we rented the apartment again, we should make out a lease since, although we had not had a lease with Mr. Fielding for nine years, I was still rankling over the arrogant terms in our old lease for our apartment in New York, and I thought that we could give the people who compose leases a lesson in generosity and broad-mindedness. It turned out, however, that the only truly unjust clause which rankled with me was the one prohibiting tenants from keeping mockingbirds, and it seemed pointless to plan to rent our downstairs back apartment with a lease urging the tenants to keep mockingbirds, so we thought we would not rent the apartment.

We wrote to Mr. Cobb and asked him to give us back our furniture on August twentieth. We thought that it would take us about three hours to drive home, so we told Mr. Cobb to expect us around noon. Because there was no place we could reasonably hope would take in six of us, with dog and cats, overnight, we planned to spend our first night at home in our new house. “We will be camping out,” I told the children. “We will all pitch in and help together,” my husband said, “and not expect Mother to cook a real dinner or anything that first night.”

It had been impractical, in terms of simple cubic feet, to let Mr. Cobb store our books, after all, and we had at last agreed with a friend of a friend that if he let us leave our books in his empty warehouse we would arrange to have them moved whenever he needed the space for something else.

Early in August he had written asking if we could move the books, and we said he could put them in our new house, the downstairs front of which was then empty, and we would of course pay for the trucking and unloading. I do not think that either my husband or I remembered this clearly; we knew, of course, that there were two hundred cartons of books, but we still thought of the books as lined neatly on bookshelves, even though we had packed them ourselves. Because of the mounting expenses connected with our moving, we decided that we would not plan to have the house painted or the wallpaper removed for a while yet, my husband pointing out that the way things were piling up we would be lucky if the children could get a shoe each to wear to school.

I had already discovered that during the short space of the summer we had accumulated so much more property that it was not going to fit in the car going home, so I had borrowed cartons from the grocer in our summer town and packed them with whatever I could fit in, and mailed them off home, where the postman, thinking that we would have enough to worry about in our moving without coming down to the post office to pick up packages, had taken them up one evening on his way home and dropped them off on the front porch of our new house. As a result we were able to fit into the car very nicely going home, with the dog, the cats, the children, the typewriters, the coin collection, the baby carriage, and the picnic hamper, although our departure, full of sad goodbyes, was a little marred by the discovery that I had put the car keys in an old pocketbook which was in a carton now on the front porch of our new house, and we had to unpack the glove compartment of the car to get the spare car keys and in order to unpack the glove compartment we had to clear the front seat of the car because we were crammed in so tight.

When we got home it was later than we had expected, around two o'clock, and our new house was waiting for us, eager, expectant, and empty, with the cartons on the front porch. The front door was unlocked and so, we discovered, were all the other doors. There was a great tangle of door keys in the kitchen sink of the downstairs front, but none of them fit any of the doors in the house. Inside, divided among the several rooms of the downstairs front, were our two hundred cartons of books, spread judiciously so that their combined weight would not go through the floor. The phone in the downstairs front had been disconnected, and Laurie went around and in the downstairs back and reported, shouting through the kitchen wall, that that phone had been disconnected, too. Then he went out and up to the upstairs back, where *that* phone had been disconnected, and around and up to the upstairs front, and of course that phone had been disconnected, too. Barry was still in the car, in his car bed, and so were the coin collection, the typewriters, the picnic hamper, and the box with Ninki and her five kittens. I got into the car and drove down to the railroad station where there was a pay phone. I looked up the number of the E. J. Cobb Storage and Transfer Company, and when I got Mr. Cobb on the phone I said well, here we were, and was our furniture on the way over?

Mr. Cobb was quiet for a minute, and then he gave a little silly laugh. “Look,” he said, “I certainly do hope that you're not going to be sore at me or anything.”

“Why on earth should I be sore at you or anything?” I asked. “I only called to find out about the furniture.”

Mr. Cobb laughed the silly little laugh again. “I know how you ladies all like to have things arranged just so,” he said. “My wife—”

“*My* furniture.”

“Well,” said Mr. Cobb. “See, the men got the small truck all loaded for you. All ready. That truck could roll right now.”

There was a long silence. Finally Mr. Cobb started all over again. “I know how you ladies like to have everything just so,” he said. “I just hope you’re not going to be sore at me.”

“I think after all I *am* going to be sore at you,” I said.

“Mostly,” Mr. Cobb said in an aggrieved tone, “mostly, people are always rushing you and telling you to be sure and certainly get their furniture right there and ready to roll at exactly a certain time. And then mostly those same people don’t even bother to be there or anything. *Mostly*, you can figure if you deliver the furniture on the day they say, why, there won’t even be anyone there to sign for it. That’s just the way it goes,” he finished brightly.

“I suppose it is,” I said. “Now, about our furniture. Right now we don’t even have a place to sit down, so if you could—”

“I could send over a bench or something,” Mr. Cobb said.

The operator cut in, to say that my three minutes were up, and I could hear Mr. Cobb’s phone hang up emphatically. I had to go to the ticket agent to get change, and when I came back I had to look up the number of the E. J. Cobb Storage and Transfer Company again, and this time the phone was answered by a female voice. I told her who I was and asked for Mr. Cobb.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “Mr. Cobb is out of town.”

“He was there just a minute ago.”

She turned away from the phone and spoke to someone. “ — had to hurry—” a voice said indistinctly in the background. “I’m sorry,” she said into the phone again. “Mr. Cobb has just left for Philadelphia. He was in a great rush to catch his train. What?” she said off the phone. “Oh. He probably won’t be back before Thursday,” she said to me.

"I see," I said. "Well, I don't really want Mr. Cobb in any case. I want my furniture."

"I'm sorry," she said. "If it's furniture you want, you will have to speak to the foreman."

"Then let me speak to the foreman," I said.

"Just a minute," she said, "I'll see if he's in. Freddie," she called, off the phone, "you know that load of goods was supposed to be put on yesterday and Ed forgot? You got enough on to go? Well, *you* come and talk to her, then."

There was another silence, and then a man's voice on the phone. "Yeah?" he said.

"What about my furniture? It was supposed to be delivered at noon today."

"You the lady with the goods supposed to go out today?"

"Yes," I said. "I am."

"Well, that goods is not loaded yet." He thought. "We ain't got it on the trucks," he explained.

"Why not?" It was getting warm in the telephone booth, and I opened the door.

"Because we didn't load it on yet. Ed says to tell you he's sorry and he hopes you ain't sore."

"Your three minutes are up," said the operator, and the foreman said "boyoboy," and hung up.

I had one more nickel and before I looked up the number of the E. J. Cobb Storage and Transfer Company I took a deep breath and planned roughly what I was going to say so I would not have to waste any of my three minutes. When I rang the number again Mr. Cobb answered. "Hello?" he said. "Cobb Storage."

"All right, now," I began, and Mr. Cobb gasped.

"This is the Cobb Storage Company," he said in a different, high voice. "Did you want something?"

"Yes," I said. "And if you are Mr. Cobb you had better get onto that train you are in such a hurry to catch, and I am warning you right now that Philadelphia is not half far enough and Thursday is not half long enough because in approximately four minutes I am going to arrive at the E. J. Cobb Storage and Transfer Company with a crowbar and when I get there I am going to come into the E. J. Cobb Storage and Transfer Company warehouse with my crowbar and when I come in I am going to start swinging that crowbar right and left smashing whatever is closest, and if whatever is closest turns out to be Freddie that is going to be all right although I would rather it were Mr. Cobb or his secretary. And," I went on, raising my voice, "now I think of it I am going to bring Mr. Tillotson the policeman and my lawyer with me and I am going to have you arrested for stealing even if you are not Mr. Cobb at all. And after I have you arrested for stealing I am going to call our insurance company over at the bank and tell them that every stick of furniture we own has been stolen with malice aforethought by Mr. Cobb of the E. J. Cobb Storage and Transfer Company and we want to collect all our insurance on it so we can buy more to replace what Mr. Cobb has stolen, and left us without even anything to sit on. And then I am going to send you the bill for hotel accommodations for our family of six from now until we get furniture for our house, and our dog will have to board at the kennel and so will our six cats, and then I think I am going to bring suit against Mr. Cobb for extreme mental anguish brought about by his stealing all our furniture so we came home to an empty house with nothing to sit down on." I stopped for breath.

"I am extremely sorry that you are taking this attitude," Mr. Cobb said.

That is a phrase which has always annoyed me. I raised my voice a little higher, and the ticket agent, who had been craning his neck around the corner of the ticket booth, ducked back down inside.

"Now look," I said, "I am not going to be insulted by some trifling little insignificant worm of a storage and transfer man who scratches and mars and steals people's furniture and I should think that you could regard yourself as pretty lucky because I have not really lost my temper yet, but I am going to if you keep talking about attitudes because what attitude can people take when they have no place to sit down? And if you think for one minute that you can retire to Philadelphia with the profits from stealing our furniture you are very much mistaken, because the next person you will deal with will be my husband and *he* is not a poor defenseless woman."

"If you would try to be calm," Mr. Cobb said.

"And I am not going to be insulted on top of everything else and if you think you can talk that way to a lady you had better think again because I am right now going out to tell everyone I know in town that the E. J. Cobb Storage and Transfer Company not only steals furniture entrusted to them for storage and breaks and smashes everything but they also yell curses and obscenity at people just trying to get their furniture back and by the time I finish with you you will regard yourself as extremely fortunate if they let you out of jail long enough to fire Freddie, because I personally am going to —"

"Your three minutes are up," said the operator.

I still had a good deal I wanted to tell Mr. Cobb, but when I went to get more nickels the ticket agent peered out at me from the back of the ticket booth, and shook his head no. I got back into the car and drove to our new house, where I found that my husband and the children were sitting on cartons of books and eating potato chips. My husband said that they were trying to decide what to name Jannie's new room and Laurie's new room, since Jannie and Laurie were going to share the upstairs back apartment, and each of them would thus have a small bedroom and a larger room for other activities and there was quite a problem in thinking of names for these larger rooms. Laurie thought he would like to call his room Laurie's Laboratory, because since it had formerly been a kitchen he could keep the sink in and do chemistry there and maybe set up a darkroom to develop pictures and we could get him a microscope. Jannie wanted to call hers a Study so she could study there, but my husband said that *he* had a study, and two studies would be confusing, and he suggested that she put her books in there and call it Jannie's Library. I said she could call it her salon, and Laurie said a salon was not a nice name for a room where a little girl kept her books, but she could call it Jannie's Joint. Sally said why not put her bed in there, bed, and then she could call it her bedroom? Or, Laurie thought, she could call it her Giggle Room, because that was all she ever did, anyway.

Jannie, who had been for the past ten days engaged in running one joke into the ground, said smartly that Laurie's room, then, should be called Laurie's Stable, and he could keep a horse in there, and besides, it always looked like a stable. She was going on to elaborate this last point when a moving truck stopped in front of the house and began a complicated maneuver to enable it to back across the rhododendron bush beside the front steps. We all went to the front door and a man got down from the truck. From his voice and general air of graceful self-possession I strongly suspected that it might be Freddie. He removed his hat respectfully and remarked that he hoped he had gotten the right house. My husband said never mind about the right house; if that was furniture in that truck we would take it. Freddie said that Ed hoped we weren't going to be sore at him, because they had certainly meant to deliver our furniture today and had even gotten this small truck loaded, so Ed decided that they should bring over what they had, just so's we could have some furniture in the house tonight, and they would bring over the rest tomorrow, absolutely, on Ed's personal word of honor, or the next day at the very latest.

We explained that due to certain obstructive difficulties in our house it was going to be necessary to take some of the furniture to the upstairs front apartment and some around to the back entrance and up the back stairs to the upstairs back apartment, and that the furniture in the downstairs front was going to have to be very carefully spaced so that the weight of the furniture and books would not go through the floor. Freddie said he understood perfectly. The first thing that came off the truck was my husband's workbench, which the men carried out back to the barn. Then came Laurie's bicycle and Jannie's and Sally's tricycles, which the children offered with pleasure to ride out to the barn. I stood on the front porch with Barry in his carriage, to tell the men where to put things, and my husband stayed inside, to do as much arranging as he could, and to see that nothing went through the floor. They unloaded our glass-topped coffee table, and I checked to make sure that Mr. Cobb had not smashed the glass top, and then told them to take it into the living room downstairs front, and then they unpacked the old music box, which has always gone in the dining room, and inside, my husband, already arranging, moved the music box to the corner where the buffet was going to go, because the music box has always been on top of the buffet.

Things were going so smoothly that I decided to drive down to the grocery and get some beer, because it was an almighty hot day, and while I was gone the men unloaded the ping-pong table, which went in the barn, and Laurie's desk, which went into the upstairs back, and the cushions from the living room couch, which my husband arranged where the couch was going to be. The movers and my husband and I drank beer, and the children drank grape soda, and Barry had a bottle of orange juice, and then the movers unloaded the hall table and two bridge tables and my husband's desk and Jannie's puppet theater and our two laundry hampers. After the laundry hampers, which I recalled were full of clothes, came four barrels of dishes, and the guest room bed tables, and the odd dressing table mirror, which my husband arranged temporarily in the upstairs hall. The number of things in the moving truck seemed endless. I checked the piano bench, and the carton which held the waffle iron and the electric broiler and the dog's dish. There was a carton of piano music, and a barrel of toys, and then Sally's toy box and Jannie's toy box and Barry's bathinette. Sally and Jannie retired to Sally's new room to unpack the barrel of toys, the rugs arrived, were stacked in the front hall, and my husband put our big silver fruit dish in the middle of the dining room floor where the dining room table was going to be. Finally, from the very back of the truck, came the picnic table and benches, and the outdoor barbecue. The men then brought in an odd leg from something, had another can of beer, thanked us, were thanked, and departed with the truck, cutting across the front lawn.

In our new living room, then, we had perhaps sixty cartons of books, the piano bench, the coffee table, and the carton of piano music. In the dining room were the music box, another forty cartons of books, and the silver fruit dish. In the kitchen were four barrels of dishes, and a carton with the waffle iron, the electric broiler, and the dog's dish. Upstairs in Sally's room were her toy box and a barrel of toys, unpacked. The guest room had two bed tables. In what was going to be the new study was the odd leg off something and my husband's coin collection, which he had brought in out of the car, and another fifty cartons of books. In the front room where we planned to put the television set were another fifty cartons of books and the picnic hamper. In my husband's and my bedroom was a carton, sent by me from our summer home, which held half a dozen wet bathing suits wrapped in aluminum foil, three plastic sandpails, Sally's blue sunbonnet, and Laurie's collection of shells. It was half-past six.

I heated Barry's baby food and his bottle in the hot water from the kitchen sink, fed him sitting on the piano bench with a carton labeled Miscellaneous Non-Fiction for a tray, cleaned him as well as I could, and changed him into his pajamas. I opened a can of dog food and fed Toby on a newspaper on the kitchen floor, and Ninki in the top of an old mayonnaise jar I found in the pantry. Then we shut all the animals inside the new house, got the rest of us, including Barry's carriage, back into the car, and drove to our local inn. Everyone had a hot bath, and the inn was serving its special pecan cinnamon honey pie for dessert that night. The children fell asleep early after their tiring day, and my husband and I played bridge with a nice couple in the lounge.

The rest of our furniture arrived at half-past six the next morning. The men had already carried in a great deal of it by the time we got to our new house. Freddie told us confidently that he had figured out where everything went, and some of his arrangements were so tasteful and judicious that we left them: the big dining room buffet in the television room, for instance, and the lawn chair in the pantry, which turned out to be a very practical arrangement, because later on when we got a washing machine we had to put it in the pantry and while I was doing the wash I could sit down. We had to leave the buffet in the television room because the men had brought it in through the front window and Freddie said he was pretty sure they couldn't get it out again and anyway there was more room in there than there was in the dining room, with the table and all them cartons of books.

One of the things the men left in the front hall was the carton of football helmets, ice skates, and tennis rackets. With a feeling of pure triumph I dragged the carton over to our new hall closet, and unpacked it. I put in the ice skates and the basketball and the hockey sticks and the overshoes and then I got up off the floor and tried to close the closet door. After a minute or two I repacked all the things in the carton and called Laurie and told him to take it out to the barn. He said in a worried voice that the first floor of the barn was nearly full and if I wanted to put my car in there we were going to have to start putting things up on the second floor of the barn. I called to my husband, who was down cellar checking the furnace, and he said that what with the junk the previous people had left down there, and our own collection of cellar odds and ends, there wasn't going to be room down there for much more. When the next carton of odds and ends came in I waited until no one was looking and then carried it secretly around the house and put it in the downstairs back apartment.

Just before lunchtime the men got the refrigerator installed and working, and for some reason that comfortable old clatter made the house seem more familiar than anything else. I said I would go right down to the grocery for meat and milk and eggs and butter, and on the way I gave in to a kind of irresistible nostalgia and turned the car onto the old side road and out the three miles to take a look at our old house. When I came around the corner I stopped the car and stared; it was like meeting an old friend who has dyed her hair and taken to wearing tight velvet pants and mascara. The house was painted bright yellow, and at first I could not understand why it looked so odd, and yet so ordinary and like every other house we had passed driving home the day before. Then I realized: Mrs. Ferrier had removed the four white pillars.

Two

BEFORE WE HAD been in our new house six weeks, the back apartment was full of things, and the crooked gatepost had become a topic on which we were all morbidly sensitive. When we bought the house, my husband and I both assumed, upon the candid statement of the real estate agent, that the only thing defective on the property was the left-hand gatepost leaning off at a rakish angle. The roof, the furnace, the wiring, the plumbing, the foundations — all of these, we believed innocently, were new, newly repaired, or so solid that not even an earthquake could shake them. “But,” the real estate agent told first me, and then my husband, and then both of us together, “I’d be a pretty poor businessman if I tried to tell you that gatepost is *straight.*” We were forced to agree: that gatepost was emphatically crooked, and the real estate salesman was not a pretty poor businessman at all. The gateposts were massive stone affairs, although there was no wall to go with them; they stood at the end of a driveway which, while nicely dry during the summer months when we looked at the house, was not the splendid sweeping affair the gateposts seemed to imply. Nevertheless, my husband and I told one another with shy pride that the gateposts gave our meager three acres something of the air of an estate, except that of course the left-hand gatepost was a little crooked. When we talked it over afterward, though — the real estate agent reeling back to his office, the papers in his hands, and no doubt giggling incredulously to himself all the way — we decided that all we had to do was put up maybe a fence, and get the gatepost straightened, of course, and put in some kind of a lawn, and maybe a couple of more bushes on the side of the house where the wall had kind of fallen in — anyway, we thought, standing by the gatepost and regarding our land, it was not going to take much to get the old place looking like a mansion again.

We have no local firm of gatepost-straighteners, but every deadpan wit within the county limits had a stab at us. The man who came to repair the roof thought that we ought to get someone to hitch a team to the gatepost and pull it straight. The man who came to repair the furnace suggested that we dig out under the post on the uninclined side, and let the post settle down even-like. The electrician took a few minutes off from ripping out the dining room ceiling to say that what we had to do was dig out the roots of the tree under the gatepost. The plumber thought no; we better get a man to move the gatepost over two, three feet. I finally developed a kind of answer for use around the grocery and the post office, about how I'd taken a lot of trouble pushing that gatepost as crooked as it was, and any time I wanted it straight I would go on out and push it back again. My husband took to saying around the barbershop that it wasn't that that gatepost was crooked, it was that the other one was too straight. Laurie solemnly assured the kids in fifth grade that it was only specific gravity kept the gatepost up at all. Among ourselves we tended to avoid the subject, and after a while I got so I could drive the car between the gateposts without ducking sharply to the right. During one severe late-summer storm we all stood anxiously at the front windows, wondering if the gatepost would go down, but it stood staunch; what did go down was a tree across the street, smashing part of the front porch of a man who had asked Sally why *she* didn't take the gatepost apart and build it up again straight.

I still had to drive Sally to nursery school, and after a while the two older children took to waiting and riding along. Our new house was only two blocks from their school, but, as Jannie explained, it got very very very tiresome walking past the same houses every time. We had been in our new house for over six months, through our family holiday season, which begins early in October with Laurie’s birthday, then continues through Sally’s birthday on Hallowe’en, and Jannie’s birthday a week later and then Barry’s birthday and Thanksgiving, and finally the long home stretch into Christmas. On Laurie’s birthday we were still unpacking books, I remember, and his friends dined in the shadow of the half-filled bookcases in the dining room. By Sally’s birthday the men had come to sand the pine floors, and all the downstairs furniture was piled in the dining room and all the other floors were freshly varnished, so Sally had a birthday party in the kitchen, with crepe-paper barricades across the doors to prevent her guests from straying onto the fresh varnish, and balloons and lollipops hanging from the ceiling. By Jannie’s birthday we could use the dining room again, but the upholsterers had taken all the good dining room chairs to freshen the tapestry backs, so Jannie’s friends had a picnic dinner sitting on the glittering varnished floor. Barry was too little to have a birthday party, which was just as well, because that was when they were repairing the plumbing in the bathroom downstairs, and they had taken out the bathtub and put it in the study where my husband fell into it one night when he could not sleep and went downstairs to get a book. Since Thanksgiving came on Barry’s birthday that year, the men took the day off and went away and left the bathtub in the study from Wednesday afternoon until Monday morning. It was the most practical wastebasket we ever had in the study, but they came on Monday and put it back. Barry got a blue teddy bear for his birthday, and he named it Dikidiki.

The new house had a very good spot to put the Christmas tree, in the bay window of the living room, and from far down past the railroad tracks, coming home through the snow, we could see the lights of our Christmas tree shining from our house. There was a good sledding place for Jannie and Sally down behind the barn, although Laurie went up to the hill with the other boys. That Christmas we got a movie camera and a projector and screen, and I took movies of Barry in a pink snowsuit being tumbled off a sled pulled by Laurie in a brown jacket and a blue hat and Jannie in navy blue with a red scarf and Sally in green, with pompons on her hat. I took pictures of our house and our trees and our barn. In the long winter evenings we sat in the dark living room and my husband, running the projector with Laurie's help, showed us the pictures of Barry tumbling off the sled and Laurie in brown throwing a snowball at Sally in green with pompons on her hat, and Jannie standing proudly beside a monumental snowman, and the bare branches and snow-touched roof and the barn somehow at an angle because I had trouble holding the camera with gloves on. The children enjoyed looking at the pictures of themselves, and got very restless when they had to watch pictures of the house and barn.

We drove past the old house now and then, and I observed with contempt that Mrs. Ferrier had tried to compensate for the naked look of the porch by putting some kind of a grayish scratchy bush on either side of the steps. When the winter was over they might blossom into great colorful things, but I did not, somehow, envy Mrs. Ferrier with her yellow pillarless house and her scratchy bushes; she did not even have a crooked gatepost.

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Along about the beginning of February, when the days of winter seem endless and no amount of wistful recollecting can bring back any air of summer, I caught one of those colds which last for two days in the children and two weeks with me. I got to feeling that I could not bear the sight of the colored cereal bowls for one more morning, could not empty one more ashtray, could not brush one more head or bake one more potato or let out one more dog or pick up one more jacket. I snarled at the bright faces regarding me at the breakfast table and I was strongly tempted to kick the legs out from under the chair on which my older son was teetering backward. I could not think of anything to serve for dinner which was not dull, or tasteless, or unusually full of bones. There was never any news in the morning paper. The mail was slim and almost entirely composed of letters beginning "We are sure that through some oversight you must have neglected..."

This state of mind is not practical in a household which continues to move relentlessly on from breakfast to mail to school to bath to bed to breakfast, no matter how *I* feel. My only conscious positive wish was for the doctor to drop in — casually, perhaps, coming to pick up an old syringe he had left lying around — glance at me suddenly and exclaim, dropping his bag and turning pale, "Good lord — look at you! Why, you should be in the hospital," and, turning angrily to my husband, "Are you crazy? Can't you see that your wife is desperately ill?" I took my temperature twice a day, and limped carrying in the dinner dishes.

One morning the cleaner returned my gray suit with a button missing and I cut my finger slicing rye bread for toast for my husband and the children had been late for school. There was a letter in the mail from an old friend of mine who was driving through our town on her way to visit another old friend, and if I could take a couple of days off and go along we could all three spend a *marvelous* weekend comparing pictures of our children and talking about the time Marjorie cut her hair.

I read this letter to my husband, holding my bandaged finger well in sight. "It would have been nice to have gone," I said wistfully, and sighed. "Oh, well," I said. "Here's another bill from the telephone company."

“I don’t want to know about it,” my husband said, regarding the beverage I had served him for coffee. “You go along on that trip, do you good.” He hesitated, and then said stoutly, “I’ll take care of the children.”

“Fine,” I said, before he had quite finished speaking, “then if you think I should, I *will* go. Do me good to get away for a while,” I told him. “You won’t have any trouble, not if I’m only gone two days.”

“I am perfectly capable of running this house,” he said. “*Perfectly* capable. You just leave a list of things the baby eats, and so on. And who to call if someone gets sick.”

“I usually call the doctor,” I said, and went hastily to write to both my friends and sew the button on my gray suit and wash out a couple of blouses and generally compose myself to leave in two days’ time. My husband can turn on the stove and answer the telephone, but it seemed to me that it might help if I arranged to have the children largely out of his way; the baby, of course, had to stay at home, but I called my friend Kay and asked if our Sally could spend Saturday afternoon playing at her house, and perhaps stay for dinner. I explained that I was leaving Saturday noon for a short visit with a friend and returning Sunday night, and she said golly, what a lucky break for me, and since my husband would be a bachelor Saturday night how about he came to their house for dinner? I said that he had to stay home with the baby, and she said well, anyway, Sally could stay overnight with them. I said wonderful, I would do the same for her sometime.

Then I called my friend Helen and asked if Jannie could visit her Jennifer on Saturday afternoon, because I was going out of town for two days and she said gee, she wished *she* could get away for a day or so, and sure, they’d love to have Jannie for the afternoon and supper, and overnight, too, if I liked, and why didn’t my husband come over for supper, too, since he would be all alone? I said he had to stay at home with the baby, and she said then they'd expect Jannie sometime on Saturday.

Then I called my friend Peg and said could Laurie come over to her house Saturday afternoon because I would be away, and she said some people got all the breaks, someday *she* was going to go away for a weekend, and her William would be delighted to have our Laurie around on Saturday and if he felt like it he could stay overnight, and why didn't my husband drop over and take pot luck with them for dinner? So I said my husband had to stay at home with the baby, but we'd take a rain check on it, and I'd send Laurie along after lunch on Saturday.

The next morning, the day before I was to leave, Sally brought home from nursery school an almost undecipherable piece of paper which translated (I called the child's mother and checked it, finally) as: "My birthday party is on Sunday at three o'clock and Sally can come. This is from Pat." I called Kay and she said yes, her Ellen was invited, too, so why didn't Sally plan to stay at their house Sunday night instead, and she would pick them up after the party and see that they got to nursery school Monday morning. That way, she added, she would be able to take Ellen into town to get shoes on Saturday afternoon, as she had originally thought of doing. However, she said, if it would be more convenient for me to have things the way we first planned it... I said no, no, it would probably be just as simple for my husband to have Sally out of the way on Sunday, and I would try to arrange to send Sally to play with the twins on Saturday. So I called my friend Dorothy and asked if my Sally could spend Saturday afternoon with her twins and she said gladly, how lucky I was to be able to get away, would my husband like to come for dinner and I said he had to stay with the baby and she said she would give Sally supper and bring her home afterward.

When the children came home from school Friday afternoon Laurie was very much excited over an invitation he had received to go to the movies with his friend Oliver on Saturday night, and when I said that he had been invited to stay overnight with William he groaned and said but he *had* to go to the movies, he had *told* Oliver he would, he would go to William's some other time. So I called Peg and she said that was all right with her, send Laurie along on Sunday afternoon and she would take the boys skating and bring Laurie home after dinner, since Sunday was a school night. As I hung up the phone rang again and it was Helen, to say that some old friends of theirs had just phoned that they were coming for the weekend so there wouldn't be room for Jannie overnight; could she give the child supper and send her home? And if she came over Sunday afternoon she could go skating with them and she and Jennifer could make fudge or something. I said of course, how nice of them to take Jannie when they had company and all, and Jannie was extremely pleased.

Friday night I ironed a blouse and washed my hair and did my nails, and Saturday morning I took Jannie to her dancing school and made a casserole of scalloped potatoes and sausage. While I was busy in the kitchen Laurie ran out the front door, calling over his shoulder to say that he was going down to Rob's, and he telephoned later to say that he was staying for lunch. My husband was working in the study, and Barry was in his playpen; Sally hung around me in the kitchen, getting in my way.

I cooked the casserole and then put it in the refrigerator; since I was being picked up at eleven-thirty the best arrangement for the children's lunch seemed to be cheese and jelly and peanut butter and a loaf of bread set out on the kitchen table. I went to get Jannie at dancing school and when I came back my husband came out of the study and asked me if I had noted down where the children were expected to be so he could keep track of them, and anything else I thought he ought to know. I had fifteen minutes or so before I needed to dress, so I went to my desk and took up a pencil.

SATURDAY, I wrote, and then thought. A simple chronological outline seemed best suited to my husband's particular requirements, so I drew a line under SATURDAY and continued: Give Barry chopped vegetable soup and a bottle of plain milk, warmed, for lunch; Sally will have lunch at home (peanut butter, etc. on kitchen table); Laurie lunch at Rob's, Jannie at home. Milk in refrigerator. Sally to play with twins one o'clock, for dinner, home by bedtime. Jannie at Jennifer's, including dinner, home by bedtime, Laurie riding lesson three o'clock, home for dinner, movie evening with Oliver. Barry in playpen 3–5, supper casserole to go in oven 5:30, oven 375 degrees. Barry rice and liver soup and peaches for supper, bottle bedtime. Feed cats, dog. Laurie knows where dog food is. Laurie right to bed after movie, Sally, Jannie jellybeans at bedtime. SUNDAY: Sally home till 3:30, then Pat's party (do not forget birthday present, wrapped, on desk). Sally wear shoes to party, pink party dress (white socks in top left dresser drawer, if none there, blue will do). Comb hair. Bath if possible. Check neck. Laurie at William's, after lunch, ICE SKATES, William's for supper, home bedtime; school night, check homework, early bed. Jannie at Jennifer's, Sunday afternoon, supper, fudge, ICE SKATES, SWEATER. Home bedtime, school night, check homework, jellybeans. Barry Sunday breakfast cereal, bottle, lunch applesauce, cats milk Sunday morning, milk in refrigerator, did you leave casserole in oven Saturday night? Barry Sunday noon chopped vegetable soup, bottle, nap outdoors if weather clement, Barry Sunday supper chopped vegetable and bacon soup, bottle, pudding, feed cats and dog. Do not wait up for me. Cube steaks in refrigerator if you care to cook them, otherwise leftover casserole; jar in refrigerator labeled Mayonnaise is extra coffee to heat up. Bread in breadbox. Leave note for milkman Saturday night DOZEN EGGS, LB. BUTTER, COTTAGE CHEESE. Cover all children 10:30 Saturday night. SALLY PAJAMAS TO ELLEN’S, TOOTHBRUSH. Salad. Do not let Jannie forget extra sweater going to Jennifer’s, scarf. Check Sally Sunday morning for sniffle. Add note milkman 1⁄2 PT. SOUR CREAM. Thirty-five cents in change on top of refrigerator in case Laurie needs money for movies. Six jellybeans is plenty.

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We had a moderately pleasant weekend, although it snowed all the time and I lost another button off my gray suit and everyone seemed to have aged noticeably. My friend dropped me off in front of the house about nine on Sunday evening, and I was glad to get back, seeing the house lighted up and even the upstairs rooms bright, although the children should have been in bed. The dog met me at the door, wagging his tail, and there was an ominous thud as some cat leaped hurriedly off the kitchen table.

“Hello?” I called, setting down my suitcase. “Where is everyone?”

The only answer was the gentle stirring of a paper on the coffee table, and I went over and picked it up.

SUNDAY, it said. Barry and/or dog ate all directions. Have taken all children incl. Barry to hamburger stand for dinner, movies. Barry fond of movies, went yesterday too, also fr.fr. potatoes. Don’t wait up for us. Casserole on kitchen table, cats not fed. Milkman left two dozen eggs. Jannie says six jellybeans is not plenty. Leave front door unlocked. Jar in refrigerator labeled Mayonnaise was mayonnaise.

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Nothing is stable in this world. As soon as Barry was old enough to be regarded as a recognizable human being, with ideas and opinions, it became necessary for the other children to change him around. Since he was now too big to fit into a doll carriage, Jannie amused herself by dressing him in costume jewelry and ribbons. Sally sat on the floor next to the playpen and sang to him because, she said, it made him dance. Barry was clearly too formal a name, and we took to calling him B. B was too short, however, and he became Mr. B, then Mr. Beetle, and finally Mr. Beekman. He stayed Mr. Beekman until he was almost ready for nursery school, and then came around full circle, moving back to Mr. B, then B, and, at last, to Barry again. At one point he developed a disconcerting habit of answering no matter *who* was being called. Thus, dancing, and decked in ribbons, Beekman walked instead of creeping, and learned to drink from a cup.

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With the coming of our first spring in our new house it was overnight astonishingly clear that our trees and grass and bushes and flowers were real. They all showed a first pale green just like all the other trees and grass and bushes and flowers up and down the street, and I went out and took movies so we could all sit in the dark living room and see that our trees had surely turned green at the tips of the branches. The snow turned into mud, particularly in our driveway. My husband added up the winter's fuel bills and said it would be cheaper to take the barn apart and burn it stick by stick, then start on the furniture. I got up one bright Sunday morning and saw the sun and the blue sky and could not bear the thought of just driving casually down the street to the news shop to get the Sunday papers. I told the children that because it was such a particularly springlike morning I was going to get the papers by driving out the back road and out along the river road and then up the other way to the news shop, and home, and they could come with me if they liked. They got into the car, solemnly discussing the possibilities of the weather's getting enough into Mommy's head to provoke a popsicle all around. I did not expect to get out of the car, since Laurie could run into the news shop and get the papers, so I was wearing an old coat, warm and comfortable in spite of the way it looked, high, sheepskin-lined leather boots, and a red and white scarf tied over my hair, which I had combed only haphazardly, since it has always been very awkward for me to comb my hair properly until I have had my morning coffee. My husband was still asleep, and I left the coffee making in the electric coffeepot, and bacon in the pan ready to fry when I got back.

The sun was rich and the air was fresh, and I drove down the river road contentedly, deeply appreciative of the warmth of the sunlight after an all-night rain, my car splashing richly through the deep puddles. The road was extremely muddy and quite slippery, and I was glad that I had not, after all, had the snow tires taken off when it began to look like spring. I was thinking with some complacency, as a matter of fact, of how my husband had told me to get the snow tires taken off and I had forgotten. On the front seat beside me Mr. Beekman stood straight and alert in his car-chair, scanning the road ahead for possible cookies; now and then he turned to me and inquired, "Daddy?" In the back seat the three other children held converse among themselves, with raised voices and various pushings. Jannie, on the assumption that it was a matter of grave universal interest, gave us the names of the cowboys in her Red Rider gang at school; Laurie kept one hand caressingly on the barrel of the BB gun his grandfather had sent him over my urgent disapproval; he rattled BB's in his pocket and commented unceasingly upon the availability of passing objects as targets; Sally stood on her head on the back seat, singing. "Daddy?" Mr. Beekman asked insistently.

"Sunshine," I said, and sighed with satisfaction.

"Won't get many crows *today*," Laurie opined drearily. He has never yet, to my knowledge or his, shot a crow with his BB gun. "Too wet underfoot."

"If *I* was a space cadet," Jannie said, "you know what *I*'d do? I'd take an asteroid on, like, Friday night, and then when it started to rain on Saturday again—"

"Thursday, you'd have to," Laurie said. "Never do it on *time* on Friday, light years and all."

"Cookie?" Mr. Beekman suggested.

I breathed deeply and happily, blew the car horn twice as I came to the bad right turn, shifted into second, pulled the wheel around, and turned the corner into the path of a car coming, fast, the other way.

I was annoyed, because I was startled, and I put my foot down on the brake and simultaneously and instinctively shoved my right elbow into Mr. Beekman's stomach to keep him from pitching forward from his car-chair. "Woomph," said Mr. Beekman, and I pressed harder on the brake because my car was not stopping or even slowing down. I was suddenly acutely aware of the flimsy wooden bridge which was all that separated my car from the drop to the river on the right; I said "Floor" loudly, and hoped the children would understand; I tried to pull over to the left onto a broad lawn on that side of the road, and my car still would neither stop nor turn. I saw briefly that the driver of the other car was leaning far back in his seat, as though he, too, had his feet pressed down flat on the floor, and I braced myself against the back of the seat and put one foot on top of the other on the brake pedal, as though some kind of force might prevail upon the car to stop.

It was perfectly clear that the two cars were going to hit, skidding into each other, and I told myself firmly, there is plenty of time to stop, plenty of time. From a great distance I could hear the children's voices raised in what seemed to be enthusiastic cheering. The only question in my mind was perhaps a little academic: I was wondering how hard we were going to come together, and I was impatient at the ponderous independent movement of my car; if it was going to go off and smack into another car I wanted to get it over with. During the interminable moment between my putting my foot on the brake and the crash, I even had time to comprehend that none of us would be hurt, and then the long familiar nose of my car, intent upon destruction, swung itself with a shattering impact into the other car. Fantastic, I thought, sitting there for the first silent second, and that coffee cooking away at home.

“Cookie?” said Mr. Beekman into the silence.

“You all right?” I took my elbow out of Mr. Beekman’s stomach. “Children, are you all right?”

“Sure,” said Laurie. “Say, that was a *good* one.” He sounded pleased.

“*I* got on the floor,” Sally said, “and I found a penny.”

“We all got on the floor, except Laurie peeked,” Jannie said.

“Can I keep it?” Sally asked. “The penny?”

“Boy,” Laurie said with relish, “was *Mom* ever scared. You hurt or something?” he asked me.

“I’m not hurt,” I said. “I was *not* scared.” I felt very calm, sitting there comfortably, and then I realized that we were all talking with excited speed, that the echoes of the crash were still sounding along the country road, and that the doors of the other car were slamming open; the other driver stumbled out, his legs shaking and his face white, and he yelled at me, “What you think you’re *doing*?”

Deliberately I unclenched my left hand from the wheel and opened the door and climbed out; it was not until this moment that it had occurred to me that we were extraordinarily lucky that I, at least, had been going slowly, and it was at that moment only the thought of my innocent little children in the car which prevented me from speaking my mind fully.

“What,” I said, snarling, “do you think *you* are doing? Coming around a turn like that at that speed on a slippery road and we could all have been killed?” My voice began to quaver suddenly, and I stopped and counted ten. “At that speed,” I said, through my teeth.

“You insured?” he asked.

“Certainly I’m insured. Coming around a curve like—”

“Mom,” Laurie said from the back window, “can we get out?”

“No,” I said, not turning. “Now listen here,” I began to the other driver, and then the woman who was standing by his car, who had gotten out when he had and was standing there rubbing her forehead, took a step forward and said, “Nearly killed *me.*” “Now listen here,” I said again, and Laurie leaned out the back window and said, “Mom, can we get *out*? You all right?”

“The steering wheel hit me in the stomach,” I said, realizing then why I was standing as though I had just been kicked by a horse. I straightened up with an effort and said, “Now listen here—”

“I wonder what Daddy is going to say,” Jannie remarked brightly.

“Ooh,” I said, and doubled up again.

“*You*’re hurt?” the other woman said, and laughed shortly. “What about *me*?” She rubbed her forehead and brought her hand down and looked at it hopefully for blood. “You insured?” she asked.

“Oh, shut up,” I said.

“*My* little boy got hurt,” she said. “He’s still in the car, hurt too bad to move.”

“*What?*” Hastily, I made my way past her, thinking that she must surely be stunned or shocked, and got over to their car, where the man was leaning in through the front door, arguing. It was so slippery that I had to hold on to the fenders of the cars to keep on my feet.

“Come on *out*,” the man was saying. “No one’s going to hurt you.” Finally he reached in and pulled out a small boy about six years old. “You all right?” he asked the boy.

“Sure,” the little boy said.

“He is *not* all right,” the woman said, pushing past me to grab the little boy. “He is *not* all right,” she insisted, her voice rising, “he’s covered with blood.”

“Good lord,” I said helplessly.

“Where you hurt?” The woman began to run her hands frantically along the little boy, feeling the outside of his snowsuit. “You hurt in the head, like me?”

“No,” the little boy said, “I feel fine.” He smiled at me, and I smiled back nervously.

“There’s blood on his *hand*,” the woman announced loudly. “Look, blood all over his hand.” She held up his hand and the man and I leaned forward and saw a small scratch and a little blood. The man wiped the blood off with his handkerchief and looked deeply at the scratch. “You hadn’t ought to do that,” the woman told him. “Leave it for them to see.”

“I did it before, anyway,” the little boy said. “I did it over to Grandma’s house, on the door.”

“It’s awful,” the woman said hastily. She put her hand to her head. “I feel faint,” she said.

“I should think so,” I told her sweetly, “traveling at that rate of speed. We’re supposed to call the state troopers,” I said to the man. “We can’t move either of these cars, and no one can get past us along this road, and anyway an accident has got to be reported. Will you call them,” I said, “or shall I?”

He looked at his wife for a minute, and then said, “I’ll do it.”

I watched with irritation as he looked again at his wife, and then moved off toward the nearest house. “Mom,” Laurie called, “can we get out *now*?”

“Just be patient,” I said. “Sing or something.”

Jannie struck up halfheartedly with “The Old Chisholm Trail,” and the woman said, “Are you insured?”

I opened my mouth and then shut it again, reminding myself of the explicit instructions on my insurance papers, instructions about not discussing an accident with any but properly constituted authorities. I turned instead to look at the damage to my car. “Junior’s hurt bad,” the woman said as I walked away. The road was covered with bright fragments of chromium grillwork and broken glass, my fenders were crumpled unrecognizably, the front license plate leaned drunkenly sideways, bent almost double. “Oh, brother,” I said, thinking of my husband peacefully asleep at home. The other car gave a momentary impression of deep embarrassment, as though it were hoping to tiptoe away when no one was looking; it leaned backward, somehow, and it was not until I looked at it clearly now that I saw that what I had assumed from a brief glance earlier was wholesale destruction was actually the car’s natural condition; the lopsided body and buckled doors were rusty, the back window had been broken long before this morning, and there were grounds for deep suspicion in the clothesline which held one door shut. “Got to keep an eye on you,” the woman said suddenly, from just in back of me, “see you don’t tamper with the evidence.”

“I was thinking of lifting my car off the road and hiding it under a bush,” I said, regarding Junior, who was climbing over the front of my car, kicking off loose pieces of grillwork.

“Wouldn’t put it past you,” the woman said, “ramming us like that. You better start looking for trouble, lady, because Junior’s hurt bad and I hit my head on the windshield and I think I got a concussion." She rubbed her head vigorously.

"Uh-huh," I said, and made my way back to my own car and got into it and sat down.

"Mom," Jannie said, "when we going home?"

"In a few minutes," I said. "We have to wait until the police get here. The man's gone in to call them."

"Boy," Laurie said longingly, "I could sure get a good shot at that kid from here."

I sighed, and nodded. I saw the man coming back and I rolled down the window and called to him, "Did you get the troopers?" He did not answer me, but addressed his wife. "I got ahold of Carmen," he said, and she said, "Okay." Then the man turned to me and said, "Don't worry, lady," and looked again at his wife.

"Sergeant Smith of Homicide," Laurie said. "Gotta sew this case up good, Inspector."

"Crime," Jannie pointed out conclusively, "does not pay."

"Right as always, Watson," Laurie said. "Jeeps, looka the hot rod."

I blinked; this was surely not the state police? Then the man, who was still standing near my car with his wife, said, "Carmen," and I was reassured. Carmen's car was perhaps slightly older than the one which had hit me, but it seemed resolutely to be hiding its age; Carmen's car was painted in glorious reds and whites, striped and gaudy; it looked like a chorus girl dressed as an automobile. "In my day," I said irrepressibly, "they used to write things on them, like 'Going my way?' and 'This way out' and —"

"What?" Laurie said. "Write on *cars*?"

The driver of this amateur circus wagon, who was, presumably, Carmen, got himself out of it somehow, and came to stand next to the woman and man on the road. He glanced briefly at me, and then at my car, and reached out to touch the hood tenderly. "Sure did a job on *this*," he said. "Sure did," said the other man.

Carmen glanced thoughtfully at the other car, at the woman, who immediately rubbed her forehead, and then at Junior bouncing on what was left of my front bumper. "Anybody hurt?" he asked.

"Junior's all cut up," the woman said.

"That so?" Carmen turned toward Junior. "Where you hurt, kid?" he asked, and silently the little boy held up his hand for inspection. "Yeah," said Carmen. He shook his head. "Sure did a job on that car," he said.

"I know him," Laurie said suddenly. "Mom, I—"

"Shh," I said.

"But Rob and me've seen him *hundreds* of times, and—"

"Here are the troopers at last," I said thankfully. "*Now* we can get home soon." The troopers' car was black and smooth and very official; its license read "State Police" and the men inside wore the wide hats and faintly gallant uniforms which I had seen before and admired secretly; I was a little shocked to see how *very* state-trooperish they seemed, but when they stopped their car and got out and came striding toward us, I opened the door of my car with a feeling which Laurie, in a whisper, expressed to perfection.

"*Jeepers*," Laurie said.

"You suppose they ever caught a cattle rustler?" Jannie wanted to know.

"Daddy!" Mr. Beekman said with satisfaction.

The two troopers, who looked almost exactly alike and acted with almost identical motions, glanced at the other driver. "You the man called?" one of them asked, and the other driver nodded. Then both the troopers moved to look at the two cars and the debris in the road. One of them took out a notebook and pencil, and the other asked the questions; they glanced briefly at me, standing next to my car. By this time, anxious to co-operate fully with the law, I was holding in my hand my driver's license, my car registration, my insurance card, my gas credit card, and the receipt for a registered letter to a coin dealer which I had sent off several days before for my husband. "Anyone hurt?" the trooper asked.

"My little boy," the other driver said swiftly, "he cut himself bad. My wife got a bad crack on her forehead, maybe a concussion. No one in the other car got even scratched."

"Medical attention?"

"My cousin here, he's waiting to get them to a doctor. They wanted to stay, make sure everything was legal, first."

"That's right," said the woman. "Junior's all covered with blood, but we didn't want *her* getting away with anything."

"Hey," I said. I turned to the nearer of the troopers. "Look," I began, hesitating because I was concentrating on not raising my voice, on sounding as reasonable as possible, "listen," I said.

The other driver cut in smoothly. "Y'see, officer," he said, "we were coming home from church, my wife and me and the baby, and coming along the road here like we do every day, and this lady here, and I'm not saying she was out of her senses with drink or anything, but she come along over this road maybe fifty, sixty miles an hour, and—"

"I did not," I said flatly. "He—"

"Well, now," Carmen began, "I don't want to make any trouble for the lady, and I suppose what I say favoring my own cousin won't count for much, anyway, but she's got to admit she was on the wrong side of the road. I noticed her around here a lot, that big car, and maybe she doesn't always care about what happens to other people.” He looked blandly at the trooper. “I guess that’s what she’s got insurance *for*,” he suggested.

“But he wasn’t even *here*,” I said wildly.

Carmen and his cousin smiled understandingly at one another, and Carmen shrugged and said, “Not that I want to counterdict a lady, but *she* knows I saw what happened, and I guess I ought to kind of point out to her that it won’t do no good to *lie* about it. I was right behind Verge here, following him down the road. From church,” he added faithfully.

The trooper looked at me. “Well?” he asked coldly.

“Teaching her little children to tell lies,” Carmen said sadly to his cousin, and they both nodded.

I stood there literally helpless with fury. I do not remember that I have ever been so angry in my life. Everything I tried to say ended in a gasp, and I gestured violently; perhaps the trooper thought I was reaching for a shoulder holster, because he took a step backward, and then Laurie spoke cheerfully from beside me. “Mommy’s mad,” he said, “so *I*’ll say what happened. Recognize that guy, sheriff?” He spoke over his shoulder to Jannie, nodding at Carmen at the same time.

“Sure do, cowboy,” Jannie said. “Toughest hombre in—”

“I’m the Black Knight of the Forest,” Laurie said graciously to the troopers, “and my squire and me recognized this fellow because we see him a lot, him and the guy he calls his cousin here, because they go up and down these back roads all the time, stealing horses.”

“Rustling cattle,” said the Black Squire.

“And one day we were playing in that old hot rod the guy has, and it’s got a false bottom and the bottom’s full of drug traffic.”

“Admirable, Watson,” said the Black Squire approvingly. “Cattle rustlers and addicts, *they* are. And the reason they waited till my mother came along here was they are planning to blow up the old bridge."

"With stolen dynamite," Laurie finished. He looked at me brightly and smiled; apparently the defense had rested its case.

"Old Cap'n Hook," Sally shouted then from the back window of my car, "where's your crokkerdile, old Cap'n Hook?"

The troopers were regarding Laurie with sober attention, and I had the sudden first suspicion that they had not given entire belief to Carmen and Verge. "Officer," I began calmly, "shall I try to describe what happened?"

"Yeah," Carmen said loudly, "let's hear *her* tell it." He looked at Verge and they laughed.

"Ramming into people," the woman said. She rubbed her forehead and said "I ought to get to a doctor."

"Hey, listen." Junior spoke up suddenly. "Hey, listen, you guys. *Hoppy*'s after these two, both."

"Good work, kid," Laurie nodded approvingly. "Our spy in the confederate camp," he told the troopers.

"Oh?" Jannie twisted her face into a ferocious scowl. "Who let out Murphy's bull?" she asked sternly, and Junior retired behind his mother. "I ain't hurt," he said distinctly.

"*And* they're moonshiners," Laurie said.

"Hey," said Carmen, grieved. He glared at Laurie. "Watch out who you're calling names, bud," he said.

"Children," I said, "get back in the car at once. My little boy," I told the trooper, "is very excited. Naturally, the question right now is not the... ah... occupation of these gentlemen." I smiled kindly on Carmen. "I was coming slowly along the road," I said, "and when I got to this bad turn I slowed down, shifted into second, and blew the horn. As I came around the turn I saw this other car coming *quite* fast, and both cars skidded, and hit. *Then*," I went on, “this gentleman went into that house over there and called his cousin and told him to come over.”

“Ask that guy does he have a license to drive,” Laurie said, putting his head out of the car window, “I *know* that hot rod, just *ask* him. Ask him about how his kid got kept after school for throwing stink bombs, *ask* him.”

“Cattle rustlers!”

“Where’s your crokkerdile?”

“Well.” The trooper shook his head. “Let’s get this thing straight,” he said. “This moonshiner was coming slowly along the road on his way home from church. Church?”

“Yeah,” said Verge without conviction.

“And this lady was coming around the turn at a speed of—”

“About fifteen miles an hour,” I said sharply.

“Gangsters!”

The trooper looked at Verge. “I guess so,” Verge said miserably.

“Train robbers!”

“And the driver of the third car, the hot rod, was—”

“About two, three miles back,” Carmen said hastily.

“And the lady was driving recklessly?” the trooper asked, his pencil poised delicately above his notebook.

Verge swallowed, looked at Carmen, and then down at the ground. “I guess we won’t prefer charges,” Carmen said generously. “Give the lady a break on the whole thing, officer,” he said.

“Say, Lieutenant.” Laurie was out of the car again. “Like to have a look at my BB gun?” he asked.

Half an hour later I stopped my car, battered and limping, in my own driveway, with the bacon in the pan in the house ready to fry and the coffee by now probably boiled dry, and my husband peacefully asleep. For a minute we all sat in the car, breathing deeply, and then I asked shyly, “Laurie, was any of that true?”

“Any of what?”

“About the moonshiners and the dynamite and the false bottom on that car?”

“What about it?”

“Is it true? Did you really find a false bottom in that car?”

“We’re not *allowed* to play in somebody else’s car,” Laurie said, shocked. “What would Dad say? Hey,” he added suddenly, “I’m going to tell Dad right now.”

“*I*’m going to tell Daddy,” Jannie said. They struggled, pushing, out of the car, and raced for the house, with Sally following and shrieking, “Daddy, Daddy, Mommy hit another car and smashed it all up and the police came and I found a penny and Mommy—”

“Maybe I’ll just stay out here,” I said to Mr. Beekman, and he nodded.

“Cookie,” he said sympathetically.

Verge’s wife telephoned me about a week later and told me with enormous satisfaction that she had not had a concussion after all, but a deviated septum, and she had the doctor’s word to prove it, and they were going to sue me for plenty for her deviated septum and Junior’s many injuries. I think Verge forgot about it, though, because there was an item in the paper a few days after that saying that Verge had miraculously escaped injury when his car went through a guard rail along a back road and rolled down the hill into the river. Sole witness to the accident was his cousin Carmen, who had been driving along behind him. They were going to bring suit against the township for criminal neglect.

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The children were changing in the new house. They belonged in the town now. Laurie could go over to the gym in the evenings to see the basketball games, and Jannie walked to the library after school. I took movies of Sally riding her tricycle up and down the back walk, and of Barry being pulled in a wagon and walking unsteadily across the porch. The gatepost continued crooked. When the sap was definitely running that spring we thought we would tap our maple trees, and my husband consulted the *Encyclopaedia of Social Sciences* for directions, while I drove down to the grocery to get mason jars. Laurie drilled holes in four maples, just as the encyclopaedia said to, and we hung the jars on pegs under the holes. I set up a wash tub on the back of the stove. Some friends from New York called to ask if we were free for the weekend because they thought they might drive up and we said we were sorry but we were sugaring off, and could they make it the weekend after? Laurie and his father kept emptying the jars full of sap into the washtub on the back of the stove, and we kept it boiling day and night. After nearly five days we had boiled down about a pint and a half of syrup, and we put it into tiny medicine bottles, about enough for one pancake each, and sent it to all our friends, with a label saying it came from our own sugarbush. We estimated that what with the electricity and the repairs to the stove and the mason jars and the pots and the laundry bill and the wallpaper in the dining room peeling off from the steam our maple syrup had cost us about seventy-five dollars a gallon. I took movies of Laurie tapping the maple trees. Someone told us later that you were supposed to strain the sap before you boiled it.

I went down one morning to get the mail, and there was a magazine from the Junior Natural History Society for Laurie, a letter from my mother, six bills which I passed on unopened to my husband, and a birthday card for me. I opened it, looked at it, thought for a minute, and then leaned around to look at my husband past the coffeepot. “When is my birthday?” I asked him.

“Good heavens,” he said, staring.

“For the past eleven years, I believe,” I said icily, “I have had to remind you regularly once a year that my birthday is on...” I hesitated. “Oh,” I said. I held out the card. “Then why do I get a birthday card today?”

He looked at it with a kind of relieved smile. “Mistake, probably,” he said. “Someone must have made a mistake. They thought,” he explained more fully, “that today was your birthday. You’re sure it’s not?” he asked anxiously.

“I could telephone my mother,” I said, “or look up my birth certificate. And I’ve written it down for you a hundred times.”

“Then why,” he asked, putting his finger on the vital point, “send you a birthday card? You suppose someone thought it *was* your birthday?”

“That must be it,” I said.

He took the card away from me and scowled at it. “Signed L or F or maybe even J,” he said. “Nothing but an initial. Wouldn’t you think people —”

I took the card back again. “F,” I said. “I’m sure it’s F. And the envelope is certainly addressed to me, right name, right address.”

“Then someone must have made a mistake,” he said with finality.

“But who?”

My husband was opening the bills. “Now *here*’s a *real* mistake for you,” he said, nodding. “The dress shop. Thirty-seven—”

I took my birthday card and tiptoed away.

Although our life pursues a fairly even tenor, generally, it is very easy to upset our family equilibrium, and a minor unsolved mystery is surely a splendid way to do it. When my husband left the breakfast table he came into the kitchen where I was gathering myself together to defrost the refrigerator and said, “Any ideas?”

“No,” I said, “unless a kind of hash...”

“About that card, I mean,” he said. “Any idea who sent it?”

“Someone whose name begins with L or F,” I said. “Linda? Laura? Florence? Laurence?”

Laurie’s name is Laurence, but he sends people birthday cards only under the most extreme persuasion, and only if I buy them first and then sit him down and hand him the pen to sign and address them, and, besides, he always signs them “Laurie,” with a flourish underneath, and “Anyway,” I said, finishing my train of thought aloud, “he would have given it to me to mail.”

“And why send a card to you? He never did before.”

“And Sally and Barry can’t write, and if Jannie wanted to give me a birthday card she’d just *give* it to me, and besides Sally only believes in birthday cards if she gets invited to the parties and Barry—”

“Must be some kind of a mistake,” my husband said heartily, and went on into the study, still carrying the bill from the dress shop.

About half an hour later I stopped by the study and said, “You know, I’ve been thinking. About that birthday card—”

“Mistake, probably,” my husband said absently. He was putting a new ribbon into his typewriter, and had involved himself deeply.

“But I don’t recognize the handwriting. It looks like a child’s, almost. Look at the envelope.”

“I *can’t* look at the envelope,” my husband said. “I need another hand as it is.”

“Well,” I said, “either by a child or maybe someone writing left-handed. As though they were trying to disguise their handwriting, you know. Almost illiterate.”

“Well, ask Laurie,” my husband said. “He’s the only illiterate child *I* know.” He thought. “Except for the rest of your children, of course,” he finished generously.

I went and asked Laurie and Laurie said no, he had never seen the birthday card before. “Why?” he asked. “Your birthday or something?”

“My birthday is a hundred and forty-three days off and I want a plain silver necklace to go with my new black dress,” I said. “I was just curious about why someone sent me a birthday card.”

Jannie had never seen the card before, but thought it might have been meant for her. “I haven’t had as many birthdays as *you* have,” she pointed out, “so people are more liable to make a mistake on *mine.*”

Sally was not expecting any birthday cards, either, but added shrewdly that although her birthday was quite a while off, there would be no harm in her taking the card and keeping it until it *was* her birthday. “Then they wouldn’t have to send me another,” she explained.

Old Beekman did not recognize the card, but seemed to think that he would like to have it anyway. He offered me half a lollipop and a broken airplane in exchange, and was loudly indignant when I rejected what he must have regarded as a supremely fair offer.

“Cookie?” he suggested tearfully. “Candy, cookie?”

“Well,” I said, returning to my husband in the study, “about all I can think of now is to call everyone I know and ask *them.* Even though it seems kind of silly to send someone a birthday card and disguise your *hand*writing. I mean, why bother to send it at all?”

My husband, who was typing “Now is the time for all good men to come to the aid of their country” over and over again, looked up briefly and said, “Also, they used a two-cent stamp. Didn’t notice *that*, did you?”

I took up the envelope and looked at it again. “Most people only use two-cent stamps around Christmastime,” I said. “For Christmas cards, you know. Sometimes you come across them in a desk drawer or something but *most* people—”

“No,” my husband agreed. “You won’t often find anyone who remembers to use a two-cent stamp the rest of the year.”

“Looks kind of... well... cheap, doesn’t it?” I said. “Sending me a birthday card and then going out to get a two-cent stamp to mail it with. Imagine!”

“Might just as well not have gone to any trouble about it at all,” my husband said.

“Naturally,” I said reasonably, “it’s nice of them to want to send me a birthday card and of course I appreciate the thought and all, but it *does* seem that if you’re going to disguise your handwriting and go buy a two-cent stamp you’re a very strange sort of person, is all.”

“What’s another penny, anyway?” my husband asked. “The way things cost these days, a three-cent stamp is *nothing*. They probably just had the two-cent stamp left over from Christmas.”

“Imagine!” I said again. “Keeping an old two-cent stamp from a Christmas card. I wouldn’t be surprised if they *steamed* it off.”

“Fine lot of friends *you*’ve got,” my husband said indignantly. “Probably an old leftover birthday card too. See if another name’s been erased.”

“*I* wouldn’t be surprised,” I said. “Naturally, I don’t expect a gift from every casual acquaintance, naturally, but I *do* like to think that if anyone is going to send me a card, well, after all, I get enough birthday cards so’s I don’t have to take any old—”

The phone rang, and I went to answer it. It was my husband’s Aunt Lydia, and after I had asked how she was and how Uncle George was, and she had asked after me and my husband and the children I said how nice it was of her to call, because we hadn't heard from her in so long, and she said oh, she just thought she'd call, and she was surprised that *we* hadn't called *her*, and I said, well, I had been meaning to. Then she said well, she really wouldn't have called at all, actually, only she was going out for the day and of course today *was* her birthday and she thought we might have been planning to call *her* and she wanted us to know she wouldn't be there, because of course she usually expected to hear from us on her birthday, even if it was nothing but a card. "But I *sent*..." I said, and was suddenly silent.

She was saying oh, really, because then wasn't it funny that it hadn't arrived, because really she wouldn't have bothered to call at all except she was going out for the day and it being her birthday of course... I handed the phone silently to my husband and went and looked at my birthday card. "Happy birthday, Aunt Lydia," my husband said into the phone, and I stood there looking at the card and wondering at the way my handwriting had deteriorated since college.

My husband said goodbye to Aunt Lydia and hung up and came back into the study. "Funny thing," he said, going toward his desk, "here Aunt Lydia didn't get a card on her birthday, and you got a birthday card but it wasn't your birthday. Funny."

"Yeah," I said.

"I thought I'd write that place a letter about their bill," my husband went on, "tell them they can't get away with *that* kind of thing."

"Some days," I said, dropping my birthday card into the wastebasket, "*every*thing just seems to go wrong, doesn't it?"

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Laurie and I entered that spring into a most complex and subtle series of strategies. I would sigh deeply and wistfully at the dinner table, staring mournfully into space and refusing dessert, and when my husband asked me what was wrong Laurie would move in with a direct frontal attack. Or Laurie would come home from school with his face artistically smeared with mud and the look of a cowed and fearful wild creature; he would fling himself drearily into a study chair and when his father asked what on earth he had been fighting about *now*, I would cry indignantly that it wasn't fair to blame the poor child for something he couldn't help, he was the laughingstock of the neighborhood and it was our fault. Jannie came in with us after a while; she would sit on her father's lap and say, "Poor poor Mommy," and, "*Why*, Daddy?" in a particularly piercing nasal tone. After about a month — four days short, actually, of the time Laurie and I had originally figured it would take — my husband gave in. Laurie and Jannie and I chose a brown and cream station wagon, with gold and cream inside, and we gave the man the old car with its nose smashed in and one headlight hanging crooked, and when my husband went for a ride in the new station wagon he said that of course since we were in debt for the rest of our lives anyway with the house payments we might as well buy a car too and go bankrupt in style and didn't I think the gold oil gauge and speedometer were perhaps a little gaudy?

I took a movie of the decrepit old car being driven away and the glittering new car standing in the driveway. I went out and bought a new car-chair for Beekman, one that had a small steering wheel and gear-shift lever attached; when I put Beekman into his new car-chair he turned the steering wheel and said "Beep beep?" experimentally, and we all laughed and told him he was a brave smart boy. By the end of a week I was no longer fumbling wildly for the brake pedal in the new car, and Beekman was manipulating his steering wheel and gear shift with such wild abandon and skillful maneuvering as to earn himself the title of Mad-Dog Beekman; I could not, at any time of the day or night, attempt to sneak the car out of the driveway without attracting Beekman's attention, and he would hurl himself wildly at the doors and windows, calling out to wait a minute, he would be right there, and subsiding at last into hysterical terrors at my trying to drive without him.

For my part, I found it extremely difficult to drive with dual controls, trying to ease around a tight corner with Beekman beside me shifting rapidly from high to reverse to second, swinging his wheel around sharply and yelling "Beep beep." I used to try letting the car roll backward out of the driveway without starting the motor, but Beekman's room was in the front and as soon as I got as far as the gateposts he would apparently catch some reflection of light and I would see his small infuriated face pressed against the window and hear the crash as Dikidiki hit the wall, and after a minute my husband or Laurie or Jannie or Sally would open the front door and call that I was to wait, they were just putting on Beekman's jacket.

Usually, whenever Beekman drove, Sally wanted to come too. And whenever Sally came, Jannie thought she had better come along. And when Beekman and Sally and Jannie came, Laurie figured that we might just stop in at a movie or some such, and if we did he wanted to be along. As a result, whenever I went shopping in the new car, everyone came except my husband, who could not, for a long time, look at the new car without telling me how we were going bankrupt in style. One Saturday morning I almost got off without Beekman, who was learning from Sally how to cut out paper dolls, but before I was out of the driveway they were calling to me to wait a minute, and by the time I finally turned the car and headed off toward the big supermarkets I had all four of them with me, Sally accompanied by her dolls Susan and David and Patpuss, all dressed entirely in cleansing tissue, and carrying — although I did not know it when she got into the car — a pocketbook containing four pennies and a shilling stolen from her father's coin collection.

I suppose I should have known that all was not going to go well when I found a parking space on Main Street on Saturday at noon, with seventeen minutes paid for on the parking meter. Finding a parking space at all was so exceptional an occurrence that I wisely determined to disregard the fact that the car on my left — an out-of-state car, by the way, from some state where land is not so jealously parceled out as it is here in Vermont — was straddling the line. I eased my car in with only the faintest grazing sound, although it was immediately plain that if we were going to get out of our car at all, we were going to have to do it by sliding out the doors on the right-hand side.

"Jeepers," Laurie remarked, gazing from his window at the car next to us, "cut it a little close, didn't you?"

"It was Beekman," I said nervously. "He kept pulling to the left."

"Jeepers," Laurie said to Beekman, "you want to watch where you're going, kid."

"Dewey, dewey," said Beekman, this being a combination word he used for a series of connected ideas, roughly translatable as: Observe my latest achievement, far surpassing all my previous works in this line, a great and personal triumph representing perhaps the most intelligent progress ever accomplished by a child of my years. "Dewey," said Beekman pleasurably.

We made a pretty family group as we got out and set forth to do the marketing; after a preliminary skirmish by Laurie and me we got the back of the station wagon open, and removed and set up Beekman's collapsible stroller, and when I wiggled Beekman into it and managed to get one of his legs on either side of the center axle, he sat nobly, bowing to right and left. Laurie and Jannie spoke to one another for a minute about who was to push the stroller and then, with a certain strong pressure from me, put one hand each on the handle and pushed that way. Sally walked directly in front of the stroller, so that it bumped the backs of her ankles at each step, at which she said "Hey." Laurie and Jannie said "Look *out*," and Beekman said "Dewey."

I myself walked a step or two behind, holding anxiously to my pocketbook and trying to decide about dinner on Tuesday. In my pocketbook I had three single dollar bills and twenty-six cents in change, and a check for fifty dollars, wrung from my husband that morning by a series of agile arguments and a tearful description of his children lying at his feet faint from malnutrition.

I took Beekman into the first supermarket in his stroller, against the rules, and so I felt that it was only right to show my confidence in the store by cashing my check there as we left. I remember that it was the one moment of the day when the manager steps out for a cup of coffee and one of the clerks, whom I remember as fairly small and with lightish hair, cashed my check for me, counting out the fifty dollars in ten-dollar bills.

"Better count it yourself," he said, showing me the money, and I spread out the ten-dollar bills, peering at them through the leaves of the artichokes which were an unjustifiable extravagance except that Jannie and I were fond of them, and said, "Okay, okay," and stuffed four of them into my pocketbook, where I already had the three single bills and twenty-six cents in change.

I got in line at the check-out counter, with Beekman in his stroller and Jannie and Sally and Laurie crowding around me, and I gave the clerk the ten-dollar bill to pay for the artichokes and the canned shrimp and the box of cookies which Beekman turned out to have selected from a shelf as we went by. At that point I discovered that artichokes, which only a few weeks ago cost twenty cents, if not eighteen or even seventeen, had gone up now to thirty-five cents. I protested violently, holding up the line behind me, and the manager, returning unwanted from his coffee break, most unreasonably supported the girl at the counter. I threatened darkly not to buy his artichokes at all, but to go to the other market where I knew, and the manager knew that I knew, the artichokes were never quite as fresh. The manager, a tactless man to be in a position of such responsibility, said that that was all right with him. I said that I would not take the artichokes, and the manager said all right, no one was going to make me buy them. I said that when I was a little girl in California artichokes twice as big and twice as green as these were two for a nickel, and the manager suggested that I go back to California for my artichokes, then. Finally, when the children grew restless and the people behind me in the line began asking one another why on earth she didn't take her money and get out instead of keeping people standing here waiting, I let go of my ten-dollar bill and took my change and my bag of groceries and made my way out, grumbling.

I then went to the other supermarket to get the things that I always buy there, this time with a strong feeling of satisfaction at having shown the artichoke-manager that I was not to be trifled with. In this second supermarket I spent (although I did not subsequently find it necessary for my husband to know the exact amount) twenty dollars and twenty-six cents, which I paid with the precise change.

We then discovered that the electric company was closed. The shade was drawn and the door locked and we stood pathetically outside with our noses pressed to the glass. "Well," I said, rapping sharply, "what a way to run a business! Why, you'd think they'd *want* people to come and buy things. My goodness, you'd think—"

Jannie looked through the crack between the shade and the doorframe. "Is it closed?" she asked. ' "Because there's someone *in* there."

Beekman giggled, and Laurie, who was generally faintly embarrassed by having the rest of us follow him around, retreated half a dozen paces down the sidewalk and stood with his back to us, whistling and apparently scanning the street for casual acquaintances. Sally crouched beside Jannie and helped look through the crack. "Let us in," she howled, "let us in, let us in."

I rattled the door handle irritably.

"Let us innnnn," Sally shouted, and Beekman giggled wildly.

"Here someone comes," Jannie said. The door opened a little bit and Jannie and Sally, pushing, opened it wider and shoved themselves in. "Come *on*," Jannie said urgingly to me but I hesitated, because the girl who opened the door was making feeble brushing motions at Jannie and Sally and saying that they were closed, that she had only come to tell us that they were closed.

"Dewey," Beekman explained, and Laurie sighed, took a brief glance around to see if anyone he knew was watching, and stepped over to us. "Look," he said to the girl, "tomorrow's Father's Day. We got to get him a electric razor. On the bill."

" — taking *inventory*," the girl said. "There's no one here."

"But we got to," Jannie said, "on the bill because there wasn't any money in our banks at all, because Mommy—"

"So," I put in hastily, since Jannie was apparently prepared to enlarge indefinitely upon this purely personal subject, "we thought if we made the down payment we could put the rest on the bill."

The girl hesitated, looking from one to another of our eager faces, and then Sally said softly, “Poor Daddy’s Father’s Day,” and the girl smiled sympathetically and said, “All right. I’m not supposed to, you know, because we’re closed. But I’ll put it on the books like a regular sale and they’ll all think someone else did it and I guess it’ll be all right.”

“It would be really terribly nice,” I said gratefully.

“Only you’ve got to promise not to say *I* did it,” the girl said.

“I won’t say a word,” I promised.

“Silent as the grave,” Laurie confirmed.

“I promise,” Sally said.

“I promise,” Jannie said.

“Dewey,” Beekman said.

It was a perfectly simple transaction. The girl entered the sale of the razor on the books, payments to go on our electric bill. (Perhaps my husband would not even notice and anyway he could hardly *say* anything, it being his Father’s Day present.) I gave the girl one of my ten-dollar bills to make the down payment, which was four-fifty. When she went to the petty cash box to get me my change, I said, “You know, this is really very kind of you.” Sally was asking Laurie which could win more fights, a giant or an airplane, and Jannie was amusing herself by humming softly and opening and shutting the doors of the sample refrigerators lined up against the wall. The girl said, “Glad I was able to do it.” Then I suddenly glanced around and said, “Beekman?”

The stroller sat, empty, in the middle of the electric store. “Beekman?” I shouted. “*Beekman!*”

“Beekman?” the girl asked, pausing with her hands full of bills, “what are beekman?”

“Beekman!” said Jannie, running to the door.

"Beekman!" said Sally, going to look behind the counter.

"Dewey, dewey?" said Beekman from very far away.

"Beekman!" said Laurie, getting down to look under the stroller. "I don't really believe," he said thoughtfully, "that Dad would even like that razor if we went and lost Beekman."

"He's got to be here somewhere," I said.

"Dewey, dewey?" said Beekman remotely.

The salesgirl put down her two handfuls of money and went and opened the oven door of a sample stove. "Dewey," said Beekman, pleased.

"Is this what you were looking for?" the girl asked.

"Those are nice big ovens," I said, interested. "The one I've got now won't hold anything larger than an eighteen-pound turkey."

"Some of these models have two ovens," the girl said. "I can't show them to you *now*, but if you'd come back some other time..."

"I will," I said. I gathered Beekman up and went and put him into the stroller and fastened the strap tight and put the package with the electric razor on top of him to help hold him down. "This is really most kind of you," I said ineffectually. "I'll certainly be back for another look at those stoves."

The girl, who still smiled agreeably but was beginning to look, I thought, faintly regretful, said, "Nothing at all, really."

I said, "Well, we promise not to say a word, don't we, children?" and the children all promised again.

I took the change the girl held out and put it into my pocketbook and said, "Well, thanks, too, for finding Beekman," and the girl went over and opened the door for us and said, "Glad to do it." We wheeled the stroller out, all saying "Thank you," and the door closed firmly behind us.

Now, I am not going to pretend that when she handed me my change I counted it. I was thinking about that stove, and whether I could convince my husband that now there were so many in our family an eighteen-pound turkey was not big enough, and I was wondering how Beekman had gotten out of his stroller and I was noticing at the same time that that red jacket was really getting too small for Sally. And I am not going to maintain that when that impertinent girl told me artichokes had gone up to thirty-five cents, although they were surely no more than twenty-three or twenty-four cents not a week before — I won't say that I stood at the counter with people pushing behind me and the manager arguing and checked over the change *she* gave me. And it is, I think, not unreasonable that when the clerk cashed my check I merely glanced briefly at the fan of bills. My husband's subsequent contention — that I could only count up to five when we were married and have not learned anything since — is unjustified and easily disproven any time I want to go to so much trouble. All I know is that when I then sat down in the car with Beekman shifting gears aimlessly beside me I counted the money in my pocketbook and I had thirty-three dollars and twelve cents.

"Laurie," I said, "what's six times thirty-five?"

Laurie thought, mumbled, and finally said, "It's two hundred and ten."

"And add two hundred and fifteen?"

Laurie growled and mumbled further. "That makes four hundred and twenty-five."

"And twenty-nine cents for Beekman's cookies?"

"Hey," Laurie said, overtaxed.

"It doesn't matter anyway," I said. "It just *can't* come out right. I couldn't end up with thirty-three dollars, could I?"

"Why?" Laurie said.

“Somebody has given me ten dollars too much,” I said.

“What for?” Jannie asked.

“Either the man who cashed my check or the girl with the artichokes or the razor lady. Not the second supermarket,” I said, thinking, “because I gave them the exact change. A ten-dollar bill stuck to a single, probably.”

“Nice of them,” Laurie said.

“Yeah,” I said, pleased. “Now I can—”

“We talk about that kind of thing in Cub Scouts,” Laurie said. “Suppose somebody gives you too much money for change — what do you do?”

“Oh,” I said. I sighed. “Well,” I said, “I guess I’d better go back to the electric store. Maybe when Beekman got lost she got the change mixed up.”

“Or maybe even you had more to start with?” Jannie suggested.

“No,” I said, “because when I went and asked Daddy for money he said he didn’t have any and I looked then and I said how do you expect me to buy groceries for this family with three dollars and twenty-six cents and I counted it carefully *then* because Dad wanted to know was that all I had left from the money he gave me yesterday. And Dad said—”

“But the razor lady won’t let you in,” Sally said.

“Sure,” I said. “If I tell her—”

“I just bet she won’t, though,” Sally said.

“And you can’t wait till they figure it out and find out they gave you too much,” Laurie said, “because she wasn’t supposed to anyway and if she did give you too much she wouldn’t tell anyway and you promised you wouldn’t. And if she didn’t give you too much and you go in next time they’re open and ask, then you’d be telling anyway.”

“And we all promised,” Sally pointed out.

“And if she didn’t give you too much and she gets in trouble anyway, boy, will *she* be mad,” Jannie said.

But I went back to the electric store and knocked on the door and called and shook the handle and even tried to see in through the glass of the windows but no one inside would come. It seemed impractical to me to put the ten-dollar bill into an envelope and slide it under the door without an explanation, particularly since I was not at all sure I got it there and I certainly did not want to call public attention to my problem by endeavoring to shout an explanation through the door in hopes of her hearing me from inside. So I turned away reluctantly and started off for the other end of Main Street to the artichoke supermarket. The children watched me from the car, waving enthusiastically as I passed.

I came into the supermarket and found the manager in his cubbyhole. I gave him a friendly smile. "Look," I said, "I wanted to see you just to ask —"

"Lady," he said, "there is just absolutely *nothing* I can do. There hasn't *been* any change in prices. I mean, just the normal seasonal change. You can't really think I—"

"It's not that, it's—"

"The principle of the thing. I *know.*" The manager sighed. "Listen," he said, "all you dames get mad because of prices and what do you do? You blame me. But what do you think *my* wife—"

"But I don't *care* about your wife, I only want to tell you—"

"Look," he said. "You want to return the artichokes? You go return the artichokes, and I'll tell the girl to give you your money back. Not a general policy, remember," he said, shaking his finger at me warningly. "Don't think you can come in any old time and bring back artichokes, coffee, bread, anything, you don't like the price."

"Thank you very much," I said. I nodded at him politely and left. So now I've got this ten dollars, I was thinking miserably, plodding back to the car.

My children were all leaning out of the car windows in an interested fashion and a policeman was talking to Sally. “Do you want your nice mommy to be arrested?” he asked hotly.

Laurie and Jannie laughed and even Beekman smiled. “Yup,” said Sally.

“Look, honey,” the policeman said in a persuasive kind of voice, “you just give me one penny now and when your Mommy comes back she’ll give *you* a penny. Won’t she, son?”

“Sure,” Laurie said. “I bet Mom will give you *two* pennies, Sal.”

“Three,” said Jannie.

Sally deliberated. Finally she said, “You’re a nice man and my little baby Patpuss says you can have her shilling.”

“What?” said the policeman.

“If you promise not to ask little girls for money ever again,” said Sally primly.

“Look, Sal,” said Laurie in haste, “*anyway*, what’re you going to do with your penny?”

“Bubble gum,” said Sally.

“I bet you if Mommy gets arrested you’re not going to get any *bubble* gum with that penny,” Laurie said darkly.

“It’s my penny,” Sally said, “and he can’t have it.” She retreated, murmuring, to the farthest corner of the car.

“Please, little girl,” the policeman said coaxingly.

“Shilling,” said Sally with finality, “or nothing.”

“But I can’t put a shilling in a parking meter,” the policeman said.

“Here, officer,” I said, stepping forward generously. “See? I’m putting a penny in the parking meter and now the little girl’s nice mommy won’t be arrested.”

The policeman sighed and wiped his forehead. “Thanks, lady,” he said. “You know, I hate giving tickets for these things and that little girl, she’s got a penny.”

“Really?” I said. I turned and scowled dreadfully at Sally.

“Thank you, lady,” Laurie said with rare presence of mind.

“Well, dears, you are certainly very welcome,” I said through my teeth.

Beekman leaned forward, puzzled, to peer at me through the glass. “Mommy?” he inquired doubtfully.

“Silly baby,” said Jannie, laughing lightly. “Our dear mother will be coming along real soon now.”

“Well, thanks, lady,” the policeman said. He wiped his forehead again and shook his head. “Imagine that poor woman,” he said.

“Uh-huh,” I said. “Imagine that poor woman.”

The policeman went on down the street and the half-dozen people who had stood around on the sidewalk watching went on back to their own business. I went into the doorway of the music store, where I stood earnestly scrutinizing the new records in the window, and after a few minutes I came back and got into my car.

“You give back that ten dollars?” Laurie wanted to know at once. “Whose was it, anyway?”

I backed the car out of the parking space without difficulty, although Beekman was making a resolute left turn. “Well,” I began warily, “turns out I couldn’t find anyone to give it to. Consequently,” I said, “I still have it. No one would take it,” I said defensively.

“I suppose we better just ask Dad,” Laurie said.

“Well, I meant to bring that up, too,” I said. I turned the car into the parking space of the hot-dog stand and stopped. “Suppose,” I suggested, beginning to wiggle Beekman out of his car seat, “suppose we just don’t bother Dad with it; he always has such a lot on his mind. Anyway, he'd take it. So why don't we all just go in here and I'll—"

"I know," Laurie said, struck with an idea, "let's *give* it to him." He began to giggle. "Tie a ribbon around it," he said, "and give it to him for Father's Day."

"Hey," Jannie said with pleasure, "let's just do that."

"But," I said, "I was going to use it to buy everybody hot dogs and—"

"Boy," Laurie said, "I bet he never got a Father's Day present like that before. Boy!" He wheeled and raced after Sally and Jannie, who were already opening the door of the hot-dog stand; I could see Sally whip around the end of the counter inside and slide up onto a high stool. I took Beekman under my arm and started after them. "Dewey?" said Beekman eagerly.

• • •

Father's Day was duly observed; the weather grew warm; the incredible day arrived and school was out for the summer. Sally's nursery school had a little party for the old ones who were graduating into kindergarten the next fall. Jannie was promoted to the third grade. Laurie was promoted to the sixth grade. My husband was invited to teach at the girls' college just outside our town, and accepted, planning to start in the fall when Jannie went into third grade and Laurie into sixth grade and Sally into kindergarten. I began to think with an uneasy sensation which I finally identified as pure stage fright of the mornings next spring, when Barry would begin nursery school and I would be all alone in the house. I made tentative plans for garden work, and thought that with all the free time I was going to have I might get some reading done. I could even take courses at the college if I wanted to, things I had always meant to take when *I* was in college and never gotten around to — endocrinology, for instance, or

Advanced French. I could reorganize the linen closet and finally get the ragged towels down at the bottoms of the piles, instead of right on top where they always came out for company. I asked my husband what I should do with the long empty mornings I was going to have next spring, and he said that by that time the floors would need another coat of varnish. I said indignantly that I was certainly not going to stay home varnishing the floors all by myself while he was off teaching in a nice cool college, and he said then why didn't I get some practice cooking? I said I got all the practice cooking I needed, thank you, and went off and mooned over the red and tan jacket Laurie wore when he first went off to nursery school.

Then my mother wrote that Aunt Gertrude was home again, and I really ought to take the children to see her once, before, as my mother said, she "left her cottage for good." It was a matter of a two-hour drive each way, which was a lot for me with children in the car, but I had not seen Aunt Gertrude for many years, and my husband was not correct in assuming that my interest was wholly venal. During the greater part of my married life my Great-Aunt Gertrude was in the hospital; Laurie was only a baby when I heard from my mother that Aunt Gertrude had been found by a neighbor lying at the foot of her back steps with a broken hip, and my mother added in a postscript that Aunt Julie had written *her* that when the old lady woke up in the hospital and found out where she was, and why, the only thing that worried her was what would become of her cats. Finally, the cats were fed and cared for by neighbors, and they bred among themselves as they always had, pure white, and the old ones, unlike Aunt Gertrude, died off, and the new ones grew up. Although the neighbors fed them and tried to take them in, they lived, the young ones as well as the old, around Aunt Gertrude's back door, sheltering under the steps. The neighbors wrote us that it was amazing, the way the kittens grew up to cry at the door which they had never seen opened.

Aunt Gertrude stayed in the hospital for so many years that the original cats, and the generation following, had all died off or wandered away, but there was a splendid group of pure white kittens at the back door when the doctors finally decided that Aunt Gertrude, so old and so lonely for her cats and her roses and the low echoing ceilings of her little house, ought to be brought home for what the family gracefully called "the little time left to her." The family brought forward an unmarried cousin to feed the cats and tend the roses and wheel Aunt Gertrude out into the sunlight every morning, and it was generally conceded among the nieces and nephews that all the available family ought to make a point of calling upon Aunt Gertrude at least once before — as my mother so delicately put it — she "said goodbye to us all." There was, moreover, a pressing, but civilly silent, competition among several of the nieces over the mahogany breakfront which Aunt Gertrude had inherited from our common great-great-grandmother, and which Aunt Gertrude used to keep fancy sewing and catfood in. As a matter of fact, after my mother said that about Aunt Gertrude's saying goodbye, she added a postscript about how if Auntie said *one word* about the breakfront I was to *let her know at once*, and she could fly East if necessary.

"Laurie and Jannie and Sally ought to see her once," I told my husband with a kind of wistful smile. "They ought to see her once, before she Leaves the Family Forever."

My husband gave me a long thoughtful look. "You know perfectly well your cousin Barbara is going to get that breakfront," he said.

"In that little apartment of hers?" I laughed bitterly. "I wouldn't put it *past* her, of course, but—"

"Give Aunt Gertrude my love," my husband said, putting his paper up before his face.

"It's so many years since I saw her last," I went on, with a pang of real terror. "She used to *scare* me so." The long road over the hills, the thousands of roses, the homemade fruit cake.... I shivered. "Petit point," I said inadequately. "Preserved figs."

When, at last, with the three older children mumbling uneasily in the back of the car, I came over the long road which brought me into the pleasant valley where Aunt Gertrude lived in her small house with her cats and her roses, I found that a dozen unexpected memories came back at me: the dust, and the woods coming down to the back of Aunt Gertrude's cottage with the soft hills behind, and the way the cottage itself always seemed so tall until you came right on to it, because of the high stone steps which led up from the road.

"Children," I said, when we came in sight of the woods, and the roses, and the steps, "children, Aunt Gertrude is very old, you know."

"Is she a witch?" Sally asked, peering through the car window. "Because if she's a witch can she eat little children?"

"I want you to behave quietly," I said, deciding upon a tactful by-pass to Sally's question, "and there is to be no giggling, and no arguing, and no shoving."

"Do I have to kiss her?" Laurie asked.

"I rather think not," I said, remembering suddenly and vividly the soft and wrinkled old cheek which Aunt Gertrude had, so long ago, presented to me. "Just remember that Aunt Gertrude is *very* old."

"Is she a hundred?" Sally asked.

"I wouldn't be surprised," I said.

"Is she a thousand?"

"Well..." I said.

"A million?"

Laurie wriggled miserably. "I don't *want* to go," he said.

I stopped the car in front of the high stone steps and turned to look at Laurie. "Look," I said reasonably, "it's only this once."

"But I'm going to *break* something," Laurie said. "In that little house, I'll sit on the wrong thing or I'll step on something or I'll fall *over* or something."

I laughed and told him, "I stepped on a cat once. Aunt Gertrude laughed, but my mother was embarrassed."

"Did you get spanked?" Sally asked with interest. "Is she going to say abracadabra, Aunt Gertrude? Witches always say abracadabra. If she's a million, is that very old?"

We got out of the car, moving slowly, and stood below in the road, looking up at the steep steps and the pink roses above. "I'm scared," Jannie said; she came over and slipped her hand into mine. "Is Aunt Gertrude big?"

"No," I said. "Very small."

"I'm scared," Jannie said simply.

I took a deep breath. "Come along," I said, and we went up the steps, me well in advance, and Sally coming far behind on her hands and feet. I found, with a kind of bewilderment, that I had to bend my head to come onto the porch, although Laurie and Jannie and Sally passed easily under the low archway framed in roses, and I knocked on the door with the conviction that it had been only a day or so since I last saw its glass panel, engraved with a floral design, and chipped in the lower right-hand corner. "Ooh," said Jannie softly as the door opened, and I remembered the rich smells of fruit cake and marmalade and dried rose petals and cinnamon.

It was Cousin Maude who opened the door, and I stood breathless for a minute, the children pressed nervously close to me, while Cousin Maude told me that Aunt Gertrude was as well as might be expected, and, sighing, that Aunt Gertrude seemed as spry as ever, and I reported to Cousin Maude upon the health and prosperity of all the cousins she hadn't seen recently, and she told me about Uncle Frank and the horse, which I had already heard from my mother, expurgated.

"I brought my children to say hello to Aunt Gertrude," I explained at last, trying unsuccessfully to step aside from the clinging creatures at my skirts. "They wanted to meet her." This was a statement so patently false that even Cousin Maude forbore to comment. "Hello, darlings," she said perfunctorily. "I'll see if the old bird's awake," she said to me.

"I want to go home," Jannie said, very audibly.

"Me, too," Laurie said.

Cousin Maude went to the door of the bedroom and listened; the cottage had only two rooms, and I remembered clearly that sounds from one room were heard distinctly in the other; when Jannie began again, "I *want* to—" I took her hand tight and shook my head violently, and she was unwillingly quiet. Cousin Maude nodded and beckoned us to the bedroom doorway, and, dragging Jannie and followed without enthusiasm by Laurie and Sally, I went to the doorway.

"Aunt Gertrude," said Cousin Maude in a loud and vivacious voice, "here are some *visitors* for you, and isn't that *lovely*?"

"Oh, *go* away," said a voice from within, and I suddenly remembered Aunt Gertrude so vividly that it seemed like my mother pulling me instead of me pulling Jannie.

"Hello, Aunt Gertrude," I said weakly.

She was lying in bed, with pillows propping her up, and she was wearing a pink satin bedjacket trimmed with lace. After one look at her I recognized clearly that Aunt Gertrude had remained the wickedest and liveliest old lady in the world and was going to stay wicked and lively, very probably, until she got bored and left her cottage for good. “How do you feel, Aunt Gertrude?” I asked from the doorway; it was involuntary. Asking it, I remembered my mother again and realized that she had felt as nervous as I did now, when I was as scared as Jannie.

“Another one?” Aunt Gertrude said, and chuckled. “Come in, dear,” she said. “‘What’s that you’ve got with you? Children?”

“This,” I said, pulling, “is my son Laurie. And my daughters Jannie and Sally.”

“H’lo,” said Sally, who seemed to be the only one still able to articulate.

Aunt Gertrude waved largely at a long sofa upholstered in apricot satin which stood parallel to her bed. “Sit down,” she said, and, wordlessly, my children obeyed. I stood behind them protectively. Beyond us, the roses touched the windowpane and the sky was blue; inside, Aunt Gertrude leaned forward and regarded us with her old eyes open wide. “Now,” she said. “Tell me what you learned in school today, my dears.” She pointed to Laurie. “You, boy,” she said. “What’s your name?”

“Laurence,” said Laurie in a whisper.

“Named after your Uncle Clifford? Indeed. Good girl.” And she nodded approvingly at me. “And what did you learn in school?” she asked again.

“Fractions,” said Laurie, paralyzed.

“So did we,” said Aunt Gertrude, nodding profoundly. “Loved every minute of it, *I* did. Never got the footwork straight,” she said in an aside to me, “but no point letting on. Now, *you*, what’s *your* name?”

“Joanne.”

"Pretty girl," said Aunt Gertrude. "Your mother ever tell you about the time I danced with the Prince of Wales?" She laughed hugely. "Mercy!" she said.

"Did you?" Jannie asked, "did you honest, with a prince?"

Aunt Gertrude laughed again. "Let's see your hair, child," she said. Jannie came, glancing at me, up to the bed, and Aunt Gertrude touched her hair lingeringly. "Can you sit on it?" she demanded.

Jannie giggled suddenly. "I never tried," she said. She looked over her shoulder and backed up to the sofa and tried to sit down on her hair, and Aunt Gertrude said tolerantly, "Said I was the prettiest girl on the floor, he did. Wasn't true, you know," she said, shaking an admonishing finger at Jannie, "at least three prettier than I was. Never get thinking you're prettier than you are, child."

"Did he wear a sword?" Laurie asked, fascinated. "Aunt Gertrude?"

"Sort of thing one *had* to say," Aunt Gertrude went on, nodding. "I had the prettiest hair, though. *I*," she said sternly to Jannie, "could *sit* on *my* hair, don't forget *that*."

"I'll try," said Jannie obscurely.

"And *you*," Aunt Gertrude said, turning to Sally, "what have *you* to say for yourself, girl?"

Sally thought. "What do you use for teeth?" she asked.

"*Sally!*" I said.

"Good question." Aunt Gertrude leaned back, thinking. "Play much baseball?" she asked Laurie unexpectedly.

Laurie, caught completely off base, faltered and said, "I guess so."

"It was a million-dollar infield," said Aunt Gertrude, and shook her head sadly. "That was before I met Mr. Corcoran, of course," she told me. "My late dear husband."

“Naturally,” I said.

“Mr. Corcoran,” she told Laurie, “was not an athletic type of man like yourself. Most refined, of course, but not altogether athletic. A little chess now and then, occasionally a game of bowls, or, on warm evenings, croquet. Sad for one so enthusiastic as I.”

“Did he have a sword?” asked Laurie tenaciously.

“No,” said Aunt Gertrude, “but he had good sound investments. *There* was a dance for you,” she went on dreamily, “and I was in yellow, most daring then, of course; taffeta. Alençon lace. And *very* daring,” she added archly to me. “You ask about teeth,” she continued. “It was a trip in those days, my dears. I remember we once had a rabbit in the carriage, but of course my mother spoke to the man at once. We never imagined that she was so fanciful.”

“ — a sword?”

“It’s all very long ago,” Aunt Gertrude said. She looked at the children. “You wouldn’t remember,” she said.

“Where is that rabbit now?” Sally asked.

“Fine children,” said Aunt Gertrude, nodding sleepily. “Fine children. Married that young man, did you?”

“Nearly thirteen years ago,” I said.

Aunt Gertrude nodded again. “I liked that young man,” she said. “Nice young fellow. Green striped suit.”

“Not *that* one,” I said, horrified, “no, no, Aunt Gertrude, not that one. I —”

“Strong resemblance,” Aunt Gertrude said, nodding at Laurie. “I always did like that fellow.”

“He’s a radio announcer somewhere in Ohio now,” I said. “I married—”

“Reminded me of your Uncle Clifford,” Aunt Gertrude said. She brought her head up suddenly. “When’s that fool girl going to put me to sleep?” she demanded.

We tiptoed out, the children and I, and Aunt Gertrude stirred, and smiled, and spoke softly to herself. I told Cousin Maude that Aunt Gertrude was asleep, and the children and I went precariously down the steep stone steps. Halfway down I stopped and said, “We ought to take some roses home with us; Aunt Gertrude always used to tell me.”

Solemnly, avoiding thorns, I picked a huge pink rose for each child and one for myself, and we got back into the car. Before I started the car I looked up once at Aunt Gertrude’s house and wondered if I would ever come there again; in the mirror I could see the three children sitting quietly on the back seat, holding their roses. We had come out of the valley, and up the long green hill, and could see far behind only the great heap of roses that was Aunt Gertrude’s cottage, before Jannie moved slightly, and spoke.

“Someday, *I* think,” she said, “that prince is coming back.”

“With his sword,” said Laurie.

There was another long silence, and then Sally said, “She wasn’t a witch at all, and I don’t know why Mommy said she *was*, Aunt Gertrude. I *liked* her.”

“I’m going to keep my rose forever,” Jannie said, and Sally said, “*I*’m going to keep mine, too.”

“She’s sure pretty lucky,” Laurie said.

“Golly,” Jannie said, “and the prince coming back, and all.”

• • •

I was not yet done with nostalgia, as it happened. I wrote my mother about our visit to Aunt Gertrude and she wrote back that in hopes of the breakfront she had gone up into the attic to see if she could dig out some of that old china, and in the course of this exploratory journey she had "turned up a few things you will recognize, ha-ha. I thought you might like to have them, so am sending them on."

Through a series of those coincidences which are sometimes regarded as progress I found that I had pretty much outgrown the contents of the carton which arrived a few days later, and after a quick look at the top layer I ought really to have put it right away in the farthest corner of *our* attic, but without really thinking I picked up one of the autograph albums (how could I have forgotten Violet Manning, who wrote on a purple page, "Oh, my friend, our days will soon end, don't forget, your friend Violet"?) and then of course I started taking out the little china dogs I used to keep on my dresser, and the battered feather fan someone sent me from Honolulu, and the tiny mother-of-pearl opera glasses which showed a tiny picture of Niagara Falls. Then at the bottom of the carton was one of my grandmother's corset boxes which I had not thought of for all these years, and when I saw it, all the agonies of the summer when I was fourteen came back like a cold wave over my head and the opera glasses and the feather fan and Violet Manning all fell into place abruptly and I could only say, "Gosh."

During the long summer when I was fourteen years old, I made, with the collaboration of my friend Dorothy, four hundred and thirty-one clothespin dolls. I know that never before or since have I made so many of anything, or with so much enthusiasm, and I feel increasingly, now, that there is not enough time left in the world to make four hundred and thirty-one things; perhaps some quality of adolescent fervor has disappeared. I know that the summers these days are not so long or so warm as that summer when I was fourteen; perhaps if they would go back to the longer, warmer summers they used to have I would be less apt during the winter to require two martinis before dinner.

I cannot remember *why* Dorothy and I made so many clothespin dolls, any more than I can remember why we used to spend hours at a time sitting on the back porch at our house eating pomegranates and breaking occasionally into wild shrill giggling fits, and I cannot remember the exact day which separated the barren years without clothespin dolls from the days when we thought of nothing else. I do believe that it was probably my mother's suggestion, because she was always asking us if we couldn't find something to *do*, girls, and because I can remember the bright-eyed enthusiasm with which she approached us frequently, suggesting one or another occupation for growing girls, which she had read about in a magazine somewhere — that we should plan a bazaar to sell homemade cookies, for instance, or take long walks to gather sweet grass, or fern, or look for wild strawberries, or that we should learn shorthand. It seems only reasonable to suppose that the clothespin dolls were just another such suggestion, although I cannot understand why the idea held so much more immediate appeal than gathering wild strawberries.

My mother supplied the original materials, although Dorothy and I had to buy subsequent supplies from our allowances after my mother had washed her hands of the whole thing. The next summer we were interested in playing piano duets, Dorothy playing the bass, and my mother very soon came to wash her hands of piano duets. The following summer was the one when I began to write a book of poetry which I planned to illustrate myself and Dorothy took up the cello; that would have been the summer we were almost sixteen and I still have the first pages of the book of poetry. I have not felt equal to taking it out and reading it over recently, nor have I shown it to my husband, but I recall that the first poem was entitled "On Clouds," and the second was entitled “To a Rose,” and that is as far as I care to go in recollections of my book of poetry. Dorothy and I had by then grown a little apart, what with her cello lessons three days a week and me spending a good deal of time sitting among the nasturtiums at the foot of the garden thinking of rhymes; many years ago, when Jannie was a baby, my mother wrote me that she had run into Dorothy’s mother on the street and Dorothy was married and had a little boy. I always meant to write her.

That summer when we were fourteen had been an unusually hot summer, even for the warm summers we had then. I remember because our hands were always slightly damp and the paper would stick to our fingers. At first we kept our clothespin-doll supplies in a wicker basket Dorothy’s mother gave us, but after a while we needed three huge cartons which were full of crepe paper in various colors. We used to paw through the assorted papers on the rack at the back of the stationery store, looking for the odd pinks and blues of faded crepe paper, and one roll of black paper which had been water-soaked gave us a lovely moiré effect. We had gold and silver paper, and of course the clothespins, which were the old-fashioned, round-headed kind, not the utterly efficient snap clothespins which may have come into general use because Dorothy and I had dressed up most of the round-headed clothespins there were.

Day after day during that hot summer we carried our three great cartons lovingly, and staggering, back and forth from my house to Dorothy’s house, to the kitchen at Dorothy’s or the dining room at my house. We needed the largest possible table in either house because of the magnitude of our operations, and we always left tiny scraps of paper on the floor. If we wanted to set out our clothespin dolls and compare them or label them or count them, we had to use the long hall at Dorothy’s house. The only place we ever found in which to store our clothespin dolls without tangling them or crushing them was in the collection of corset boxes my grandmother had been accumulating for a number of years; these corset boxes were just wide enough to hold a clothespin doll crosswise, and long enough to hold exactly twenty-five clothespin dolls each. My grandmother had saved her corset boxes to hold torn silk stockings, which she dyed and crocheted into rugs, but my mother persuaded her to give up the corset boxes and keep her stockings in the wicker basket instead. When we stopped making clothespin dolls one afternoon, we had seventeen corset boxes full, and one almost full. We stacked the eighteen corset boxes in the corner of the dining room at my house, where we happened to be that afternoon, and they stayed there for quite a while, along with our three cartons of material, because my mother did not dare hope for a long time that we had really stopped making clothespin dolls.

The making of clothespin dolls is based upon the debatable assumption that a round-headed clothespin looks enough like a human figure to wear clothes. Allowing — as I believe my mother was the first to point out — that the top looks like a little head, and the bottom looks like little feet, clothing the middle part requires only an infinity of patience and a good deal of paste. We began, Dorothy and I, with ladies dressed in wide skirts, and we used cotton for hair, making a figure roughly like those on sentimental valentines. To make the skirts it is necessary to gather a length of crepe paper and paste it onto a strip of heavier paper — we used brown wrapping paper — as a sort of belt which will fit neatly around the middle of the clothespin. Crepe paper will stretch efficiently in one direction, so that if the skirt is cut on the correct bias it is possible to flare it out and even put a neat ruffle around the bottom. A particularly advanced type of female clothespin doll had several skirts of different colors, making for a rather bulky waist but a rich display of petticoats; this doll would of course stand up much more gracefully than one wearing, say, a sheathlike evening gown. The bodice was made of a contrasting color, and a short cape was frequently worn. We made bonnets to go over the cotton hair, with a foundation of more brown wrapping paper, a ruffle of crepe paper, and an occasional decorative rose. The result was as authentic as a clothespin doll can presumably be. My mother was vastly pleased with the first half-dozen clothespin dolls, and set one on her dresser.

In the beginning we did not concern ourselves unnecessarily with style or personality, aiming sensibly at getting as many as possible done and onto my mother's dresser, but with practice small refinements crept in and we began to think more of the product; as a matter of fact, we got so we could set up a cotton-haired lady clothespin doll in about three minutes, and we had to think of something to make it harder. Shoes, we discovered, are impossible on the prongs of a clothespin. The feet could be covered with silver or gold paper, but nothing could make a clothespin's feet look as though they had shoes on, not even buckles. Small pieces of colored string made acceptable belts, the lace edging that used to come on candy boxes was splendid for ruffles and lace collars. We tried arms made of tissue paper, but they usually fell right off.

We used homemade flour paste, because we used a good deal of paste and we had to pay for our own supplies. Almost anything could be molded, I recall, from a combination of crepe paper and homemade flour paste. To make a hat for a clothespin doll we started with a piece of brown wrapping paper cut to the correct size, coated it with paste, added a layer of crepe paper, more paste, more paper, and so on until it was thick and workable and could be shaped to the right style. When we had our hats shaped we used to set them on the windowsill where they dried solid in about fifteen minutes, and one of the things that persuaded my mother to wash her hands of clothespin dolls was a row of brown fedoras on the dining room windowsill; once dried, the paste and crepe paper combination was as heavy and hard as rock; if the hat fit the clothespin doll in the first place no power on earth could shift it once it was on.

Dorothy used this method very successfully to make a pail to go with a milkmaid doll, although it took her all one afternoon to shape the pail so it was symmetrical and no clothespin doll ever born could have carried it with a tissue-paper arm. On the milkmaid doll, and several after that, we used brown yarn for hair, either in long braids ending in a bow, or wound around the top of the head on a coronet. Braiding three strands of brown yarn is remarkably easy compared to anchoring an upswept hair-do on the head of a round-headed clothespin.

We started out making men in about the state of mind which I suppose created them in the first place — we had run out of kinds of women, and had to think of something else. The first man, as I remember, was a soldier, bright in regimental pink and blue, with a silver paper sword and a tall hat never seen outside the pages of Grimm. Dorothy and I had created him together, and we both found him so lovely that we set out to make an army, all in different colors, but gave up after only a dozen or so. Boots were much more practical than shoes; it was possible to make a high, swaggering sort of boot out of silver or gold paper, and this led us of course into the free-lance, or D'Artagnan, type of soldier, with a short cape and a rakish hat trimmed with crepe-paper feathers, and even, in one lamentable case, Cavalier curls.

By this time all odds and ends of material had begun to find their way to us, and when my mother decided to take the sequins off her black evening dress, or when my uncle found himself with a half-used roll of tire tape, or when Dorothy's mother gave up the idea of choosing new wallpaper that year, the sequins and the tire tape and the wallpaper sample book came to us. We tried making black boots with the tire tape, but they were sticky.

Use of crayon or paint was regarded as unworthy, and I remember a patient, infuriating afternoon when Dorothy laboriously made a plaid shirt, weaving the plaid herself out of tiny strips of colored paper. I was usually able to make two or three dolls during the time it took Dorothy to make one, but hers always had something like plaid shirts or ruffled skirts where each ruffle was lace-edged, or a tiny bouquet made flower by flower.

The final stage was, I suppose, inevitable; after we had gone through every conceivable fancy-dress creature imaginable, we fell to copying people we knew; it represented the last point of imaginative decay before the deadly advent of the piano duet. We made a small image of my mother in a purple housedress and one of Dorothy’s mother in a pink dressing gown, and made my father and hers, but there was nothing to put on the fathers except gray business suits, which were extremely difficult to make, and we had to distinguish between the two fathers by their ties. Dorothy’s father had the inevitable plaid tie and I made my father a kind of full cravat with polka dots which he assured me earnestly did not resemble anything he had ever worn or would ever wear or could even, he told me, dream of wearing in his worst nightmares.

The four hundred and thirty-first clothespin doll was, I remember, a lady doll in a wide skirt with cotton hair, and I remember as well Dorothy’s putting her scissors down on the dining room table and saying clearly, “I don’t want to make clothespin dolls any more.”

I think we must have gone directly on from there into piano duets, because I know that although our eighteen corset boxes full of clothespin dolls stayed in the corner of the dining room and then in the hall closet for a long time, the cartons of material got emptied out after a while so we could use the cartons to keep our piano duets in. I also remember that company who used to have to look at four-hundred-odd clothespin dolls now had to listen to Dorothy and me playing “The Charge of the Uhlans,” and “Selections from the Bohemian Girl,” but I cannot remember how long it might have been before my mother decided that eighteen corset boxes full of clothespin dolls were in the way in the hall closet and she told Dorothy and me to please stop playing duets for five minutes and go get rid of those clothespin dolls. She suggested that if we take out the ones we liked best she would be glad to see that the rest were disposed of. Dorothy and I each took one box full of our personal favorites — Dorothy had, by rights, the plaid shirt doll and the milkmaid, and I took several of the soldiers, which I had always fancied, and my best cotton-headed ladies. I put my box of clothespin dolls in my bottom desk drawer, where I afterward kept my book of poetry, and one day my mother drove Dorothy and me and sixteen boxes of clothespin dolls to the Children’s Hospital in San Francisco, and waited outside while Dorothy and I took the clothespin dolls and went in. We were both wearing black patent-leather shoes and white socks, and we had to walk across a polished marble floor and I was desperately afraid of slipping and spilling clothespin dolls all over the lobby.

“I hope they don’t think we’re bringing them your grandmother’s corsets,” Dorothy whispered to me. We left the boxes at the desk with an unpleasant woman who was too busy to say thank you, and who made no move to open the boxes to see what they were. About a week later we got a printed form from the hospital, addressed to Dorothy and me together, since both our names had been on the boxes; the printed form said thanks for our gift, the children in the wards would appreciate it. On the bottom of the form someone had written, “For Indian beadwork.”

I don't suppose, strictly speaking, that after that day clothespin dolls came into my head from one year to the next. When I had to have a place to hide my book of poetry I must have taken the box of clothespin dolls and put them away with the feather fan and the autograph albums and the china dogs. The whole batch of them got sensibly put up into the attic, where they would have stayed in perfect safety, untroubled by any longing of mine for them, if my mother had not gotten to thinking about the old china, which wasn't there anyway, as I could have told her, my brother and I having used it long before that for tea parties in our tree hut.

I was sitting on the living room floor, holding the feather fan and reading through the autograph albums, when I heard the voices of my children outside, on their way home for lunch. I made a frantic effort to scramble all the things back into the carton, but I was too late. "What's *that*?" Laurie said, coming into the living room, and "Let *me* see," Jannie said behind him. Sally came over and sat down on the floor next to me, and possessed herself of the feather fan, which for some reason struck her as irresistibly funny.

"Never *mind*," I said, snatching childishly. "It's *mine*." I was unreasonably angry at Sally for laughing at my feather fan, and then Jannie got hold of the box of clothespin dolls. My mother (at least, I prefer to *think* that it was my mother) had tied a blue ribbon around the box, and before I could stop her Jannie had untied the ribbon and opened the box. "Ooh," she said, and Laurie, peering, said, "Jeeps."

I had forgotten D'Artagnan, I am afraid, and the soldiers in pink and blue, and the cotton hair. I had forgotten the name labels in Dorothy's neatest handwriting; I had forgotten the line of four hundred and thirty-one clothespin dolls going down the long hall at Dorothy's house. I had forgotten the hats and the feathers and the yarn hair and the silver boots.

“Looka *this* one,” Laurie said. “I found one named Linda,” Jannie said. “I want that one with the blue hat,” Sally said.

“Hey,” Laurie said, “this one’s got no name.”

I looked over my son’s shoulder at the green shirt and at the name label which read only “?” and snatched the doll out of his hand. “You let that alone,” I said. I had slept with that clothespin doll under my pillow for several weeks, hoping it might influence my dreams and my future, although I have really no quarrel with my present husband.

“What’d *I* do?” demanded Laurie indignantly. “*I* was only looking at the little doll, *I* didn’t—”

Tenderly I set out the clothespin dolls on the floor, stopping to fluff out Linda’s skirt and adjust D’Artagnan’s feathers. We had builded better than we knew, thanks to our homemade paste. Although some of the hats had come off, not one was dented, not one star had faded from the queen’s cloak, not one sword was tarnished nor one buckle askew. The children, enchanted, helped me stand them up. Then, inevitably I drove off, as my mother had so long ago, with all the children in the back of the car. We bought crepe paper and gold paper and silver paper, and the grocer found a box of round-headed clothespins in his cellar. I remembered how to make the paste, even the pinch of salt which makes it stick better.

When we moved to Vermont into a big house, my mother had offered me the old dining room table, which was made of some incredibly solid substance — perhaps paste and crepe paper — that stood up under my brother and me for twenty years, and is surely good for a hundred more; I have every intention of giving it to Jannie when she marries. My father and mother were always telling my brother and me to keep our feet off the heavy pedestal which is the foundation of the table, and now I sit at dinner with my feet resting comfortably and tell my children to keep their feet off the table. It was with a telescoping of time that made me feel faintly ghostlike that I found myself sitting at the same table with a box of clothespins and a dozen packages of crepe paper. My first fear, that in all these years I had forgotten how to make clothespin dolls, turned out to be unjustified; perhaps making clothespin dolls is not a knack which evaporates with time. "See?" I said to the children, "you take a little piece of brown paper to fit around the doll's waist, and you gather the crepe paper, and you make a little bodice...."

"*That*'s not the way," Laurie said. "What you want to do is, you want to take the clothespin and you drill a hole through it and then you put something like, for instance, a pipe cleaner through the hole, and then you've got arms, see? And that silver stuff's no good for swords, what you need is *plastic*, and then you really *got* something, boy."

"And those *clothes*, Mommy dear," said Jannie. "*Mine* is going to be a lady in a bathing suit."

"Mine's going to be a Martian," Laurie said. "I need the scissors, Mom. You can make yours in a minute."

Sally rode around and around the dining room table on her tricycle, the feather fan proudly displayed on the front. "I'm a airplane," she sang triumphantly. "I'm a old witch riding a broomstick."

"I think real cloth," Jannie said thoughtfully to her brother.

"Plastic," Laurie said firmly. "Anyway, *paper*'s no good." He looked with interest at his sister's doll, which had on the bottom of a two-piece bathing suit. "What you need *there*," he said with enthusiasm, "is *toes*."

After they had given up I made a doll with cotton hair and a yellow skirt and a blue cape, carrying a parasol, and I took it in to my husband in the study.

"What's that?" he asked.

“It’s a clothespin doll,” I said. “I made it for you.”

“It’s very nice,” he said. “How did you happen to think of making me a clothespin doll?”

“I just thought you’d like one,” I said.

“Thank you,” he said, and he put the clothespin doll on the corner of his desk.

I went and picked up the dining room and put all the crepe paper away and washed out the dish with the homemade paste. Later that afternoon my husband, who was clearly very much puzzled, asked me again what had decided me to make him a clothespin doll, although of course he was very pleased to have one, and I said that I used to be quite a hand at making clothespin dolls. “A long time ago,” I told him.

Three

AT ABOUT TEN o’clock on an evening late in February the entire pattern of our collective lives was violently altered. My husband and I, sitting in the kind of companionable stupor that sets in when all children are in bed and presumably asleep, were startled at hearing a sudden astonished “Oh!” from Sally’s room. As we half rose, looking at one another, her voice lifted in the greatest, most jubilant shout I have ever heard: “I can READ! I can READ!”

It turned out she could, too. After we had calmed the other children (“Sally had a bad dream”) and put them back to bed with another piece of candy each, Sally came down and sat in the living room in her red pajamas and read to her father and me the first chapter of *Ozma of Oz*, the book I had been reading *her* before she went, as I thought, to bed. She explained that every night after I had turned out the light and gone downstairs, she had been going over and over the book I had read her, trying to apply the reading knowledge she picked up in kindergarten, and tonight, without effort, the letters on the page had fallen together and become readable; she had gone along for a page or more before she realized that she was reading the words. We listened, congratulated her, remarked on how surprised her teacher would be, and asked what she had been using for light, teaching herself to read up there in bed. After some hesitation she admitted that she had found that it was possible to slant the book so it caught light from the hall, where we always left a nightlight burning. My husband, who used to read at night when he was a boy with a flashlight under the covers, said that inadequate light was harmful to the eyes. I, who used to read at night when

I was a girl by the street light outside my window, said that little girls who stayed awake reading at night were very apt to be sleepy in school the next day. Sally agreed soberly, as befitted one newly admitted to an esoteric society, and went back upstairs with *Ozma of Oz*. When I went up to cover her later she was asleep with her light on and *Ozma of Oz* open on her stomach.

The most immediate impact of Sally's reading was on Laurie. I went into town and bought Sally a bedlight, and Laurie had to put it up. The small bookcase in her room, which had been adequate for picture books and the Oz books I had been steadily reading my way through, starting with *The Wizard of Oz* with each child, and going right on down the line, so that there are, by now, great swatches I can read with my eyes shut — her bookcase turned out to be far too small for the books she confiscated from the rest of us, and Laurie had to build her a new bookcase. Everyone moved up a notch. Sally's collection of picture books went into Barry's room, where Laurie, who was by now asking and getting twenty-five cents a shelf, built another bookcase to hold the books Barry already had, and the collection he inherited from Sally. Sally took over from Jannie an enormous accumulation of fairy tales, Uncle Wiggly stories, Bobbsey Twins books, and *Barnaby*. Jannie, annoyed at the great gaps in *her* bookcase, went into Laurie's room and selected from the books he had gathered those which she felt were suited to her taste and refinement. Jannie thus came to read *Tom Sawyer* and *Treasure Island* and *Little Men*, the last having fallen into Laurie's hands through an accident; he thought, he said bitterly, from the title that it was a book about *boys*. I was disturbed because there were five copies of *Alice in Wonderland* in the house and no child would read it. Laurie was so indignant over the loss of everything except *Little Men* that I went into the bookshop and got him an omnibus Jules Verne, and his father gave him a book of Sherlock Holmes stories. I could hardly buy Laurie a book without getting books for Jannie and Sally, so, because I preferred to keep my own old copies of each, I brought home *Little Women*, and *The Rootabaga Stories*. Just to square everything nicely, I got a gun that shot corks for Barry, which was a mistake.

As I say, the immediate impact was on Laurie. Still reeling under the combined magic of Jules Verne and six dollars earned from building bookshelves, he invested his money in tools and lumber. He replaced a board in the back steps, for fifty cents, put up a set of shelves in the kitchen for two dollars, explaining that his price went up when things had to be anchored to the wall, and built a record cabinet as a surprise for his father, declining payment but accepting the cost of the lumber and nails. With our permission he opened three charge accounts, one at the lumber yard, one at the big hardware store in town, where they sold tools, and one at a little hardware store around the corner from us, where they sold nails and little metal brackets for anchoring things to walls.

He dismissed almost at once the notion of making a flying machine, but he and his friend Rob made a complicated kind of fort in the field next to the barn, with a padlock on the door and an involuntary window where two boards did not quite come together. The boys kept all kinds of treasures in their fort, but lost interest in it abruptly when they discovered that Sally had been going, eel-like, in and out the window of the fort and that she had returned to me, with great amusement, the package of cigarettes and the package of matches she found inside. I told Laurie with some heat that it was perfectly all right with me if he wanted to smoke and stunt his growth and ruin his wind for baseball and basketball and football and ping-pong; it was a silly habit, I told him, and expensive and useless, and if he wanted to smoke he could buy his own cigarettes and stop taking mine. His father suggested a pipe as more manly, and a day or so later in the five-and-ten I found a particularly revolting-looking corncob pipe, and I picked up a tin of tobacco and brought them home and gave them to Laurie to smoke. That did not make him sick, either, so his father gave him a cigar and when he smoked half of that without ill effects we decided that we were attacking this thing in the wrong way, and we told Laurie that he was absolutely forbidden to smoke under any circumstances, and if he did, he would first of all be heavily fined, and then we would close his charge accounts at the two hardware stores and the lumber yard. I do not for a minute suppose that that had any slightest effect on him, but at any rate Sally never found any more cigarettes, and the fort blew away in a particularly heavy windstorm.

With three reading children in the house, competition over Barry, who could be read to, was very heavy. I still retained my post as bedtime reader — I began again with *The Wizard of Oz* — but Laurie and Jannie and Sally found themselves sometimes all reading aloud from different enticing works, each hoping to lure Barry who moved, basking, from one to another. For a little while Jannie forged ahead through a brilliant imaginative stroke; she refused to read aloud, and offered, instead, to tell stories made up out of her own head. This began the Jefry stories, which were about a little boy named Jefry who had an elephant who was called Peanuts because he ate so many... “What?” said Barry. “Cabbages,” said Jannie firmly. Jefry had a bear named Dikidiki, just like Barry, and Jefry irked Sally so considerably that she brought out her boy doll Patpuss, renamed him Jefry, announced that he was her little brother, and commenced telling him stories about a little imaginary boy named Barry, who had a bear named Dikidiki just like Jefry. This became the competing Barry series. One evening Laurie came staggering from the Story Hour in the kitchen, and announced to his father that he had just made up a story about a little boy named Dikidiki who had two imaginary bears, Barry and Jefry, and we had to make a rule that stories must be told one at a time, and last no more than two minutes by the kitchen clock.

Barry resigned from the position of Beekman when he entered nursery school, because everyone there called him Barry again. When it was almost time for him to start, I went up to the closet where I had happily stored all the snowsuits in moth balls. I found the snowsuit Laurie had worn our first winter in Vermont and which Jannie had worn later when *she* entered nursery school; I had taken the hood off and Jannie had worn a little blue furry cap. When I checked it for Barry I found that the wrists were really too frayed to be mended, but I decided to keep it anyway because the snowpants were solid enough and the jacket could probably serve in some emergency. Jannie's second snowsuit, which she had gotten when Laurie took to wearing ski pants and a windbreaker, was too large for Barry and was pink besides. I remembered now that Sally had not been able to wear Laurie's first snowsuit three years before because the sleeves of the jacket had been too frayed *then* to be mended, but that I had kept the snowsuit because it would probably be useful in some emergency. Sally's first snowsuit had been inherited from a friend; it was light blue and had a fur collar and cuffs, and I had passed it on when Sally outgrew it and it was now being worn by a little girl named Anne Elizabeth in West Haven. I tried Laurie's first windbreaker on Barry, and the sleeves hung down and the belt went around his knees, so I went downstairs and told my husband that before Barry started nursery school he would have to have a new snowsuit and my husband said that was ridiculous, there must be a dozen snowsuits up in the closet.

Barry's new snowsuit was brown, and the hat had fur ears, and when I looked at him trying it on to show his father and his brother and his sisters, I realized acutely how strange it was going to be now during the long empty mornings. I asked my husband if he was aware of the fact that for eleven years there had always been one youngest child around the house all the time and he said he was only too aware of it and eleven years was longer than they gave you for anything except barratry and mayhem. Somewhere I found a long red feather. I fastened it to Barry's fur-eared hat, and when it broke I got another and put *that* one on, and I got another one later and put it on the cap he wore in the late spring and another on the little straw hat he wore during the summer, so that from the time he was two and a half he always wore a feather, sometimes red, and sometimes white or black or blue, and people who saw him on the street or in stores or the library or the post office or the bank came to recognize him — and, I suppose, me — by the feather, and on the rare occasions when I went shopping without him, people everywhere would say, "Where's the Indian?" or "the feather boy?" or "Robin Hood?"

Barry also achieved a certain kind of family distinction by becoming the one child who did not care for pudding, but preferred eggs. A lot of the enthusiasm went out of my pudding-making when I knew that while the rest of us were eating pudding for dessert I would have to fry an egg for Barry. I have always been fascinated by the contemplation of growth in the children, the development of small quirks and odd little habits as they change into individuals, but I admit that with six of us going different directions it is sometimes very difficult to set up any kind of an over-all pattern and plan from it; food is perhaps the best example of this. The only actual staples in the house were milk and peanut butter. These were the lowest common denominator in the kitchen; nothing else was common to all six, and yet everyone complained constantly about the food. My husband said that it cost too much, Laurie said that there was not enough variety, Jannie said that we did not have mashed potatoes half often enough, Sally just complained that she had to eat it, and Barry thought that there were not enough eggs. I myself thought that making dinner and cleaning up afterward every night was too great an effort to make if all I was going to get was complaints, and anyone who wanted to live on milk and peanut butter from now on was welcome to as far as I was concerned.

Finally, after a good deal of worry I went out and bought a couple of epicure magazines, and leafed through them all one morning looking for something exciting I could serve for dinner, and I found a recipe for a casserole dish based on stuffed cabbage with ground round steak and cashew nuts which I thought I could try. I could not make it the way the recipe said to, however, because, inevitably, it contained ingredients which were distasteful to my family. I decided to leave out the onion in the recipe because Sally would not eat anything so highly flavored as onions. I could not mix the ground round steak with rice because Laurie loathes rice. My husband could not bear tomatoes in any form, Jannie would not touch cabbage, and no one in the family except me cared for sour cream. When I had finished eliminating from the casserole what I had was a hamburger studded with cashew nuts, which was undeniably a novelty, although I am afraid that on the whole my casserole was not a success. Everyone carefully removed the cashew nuts and set them aside, and Laurie asked irritably if we *always* had to have hamburger for dinner.

The day the spring term of the nursery school opened I thought that Barry had a little cold, so I kept him home, but I had to let him go on the second day, and I took him over and told the teachers about his little cold and hung around for about half an hour, because, as I explained to the teachers, Barry had never been away from me before and I thought he might cry. Finally I got tired of standing in the corner and I went over to Barry where he was working at the sandbox and I told him gently that I thought I would go along back home now. Barry said, “Yep,” and reached out to remove a small truck from the hand of a little girl. “I’ll be going, then,” I said. “Yep,” Barry said. “I’ll see you later,” I said. “Yep,” Barry said. “Well, goodbye,” I said. “What?” said Barry, looking up. “Oh,” he said. “‘Bye.” After a few minutes I tiptoed quietly to the door so he would not notice me and be sad. I waited in the doorway for a minute; he had moved on to the toy trains and when I said again, “Well, goodbye, Barry,” he did not hear me. I drove home very slowly because I had plenty of time before I had to pick him up at eleven-thirty and when I got home at last I went and sat in the study and listened to the refrigerator rattling in the kitchen and the furnace grumbling down cellar and the distant ticking of the alarm clock up on my dresser.

On Wednesday morning, and Thursday, and Friday, I sat in the study and did the crossword puzzles in the morning paper, but on Saturday of course there was no nursery school and I nearly went crazy with Barry tagging along behind me everywhere I went, pestering me while I tried to get things done, and I was very glad when Monday morning came around again and he went back to nursery school. Sally told us one day that she had been sent for into the first-grade room to read to the first-graders. Jannie came bursting into the house the day the first tulip came out to shout that she had been chosen for the part of the Fairy Rosabelle in the third-grade musical play, and she would have to sing one song all by herself, and probably dance. A few days later she brought home her music, and I played it on the piano and Jannie practiced it until everyone in the family was infuriated by finding that we were all humming and whistling it; Barry would sing it at breakfast (“I am the Fairy Rosabelle, I bring the spring’s first floooooowers”) and by lunchtime I would be forcing myself to sing

“Clementine” as resolutely as I could in an attempt to drive the Fairy Rosabelle out of my mind. My husband said that several times he had found himself entering a classroom with the odd little dance step which accompanied the Fairy Rosabelle, and that he had been quite embarrassed when one of his students asked him what was the name of the song he kept whistling.

Before the snow was quite off the ground, the single tulip showing brave and bright against the snow and mud near the barn, Laurie was out in his light jacket, oiling his glove and throwing easy pitches to Rob. The girls received from their grandmother a big box containing two jackets of some plastic material, with silly little matching caps. One jacket was pink and one was blue, and Sally perceived at once that in the jackets she and Jannie looked like Easter eggs, and they capered off to school, singing to the tune of the Fairy Rosabelle that they were two little dancing Easter eggs. Consumption of peanut butter went up that spring to three jars a week. Even Easter egg jackets and the Fairy Rosabelle and the first tulip could not compensate, however, for the pestilence which annihilated our cats, leaving us with only one black kitten, named Yain, who had been the oldest and strongest of the group of Ninki-kittens who traveled with us the summer before we moved into our new house. For a long time Yain went around thinking he was the only cat left in the world, and out of desperation he developed a close friendship with our big dog Toby, who was usually afraid of cats. The vet told us that we must either have the house fumigated or wait several months before getting any more cats, and for a long time while I sat in the study mornings doing crossword puzzles Yain would pace restlessly through the house, looking for another cat.

My husband had by then been teaching for several months, and I was slowly becoming aware of a wholly new element in the usual uneasy tenor of our days; I was a faculty wife. A faculty wife is a person who is married to a faculty. She has frequently read at least one good book lately, she has one “nice” black dress to wear to student parties, and she is always just the teensiest bit in the way, particularly in a girls’ college such as the one where my husband taught. She is presumed to have pressing and wholly absorbing interests at home, to which, when out, she is always anxious to return and, when at home, reluctant to leave. It is considered probable that ten years or so ago she had a face and a personality of her own, but if she has it still, she is expected to keep it decently to herself. She will ask students questions like “And what did you do during vacation?” and answer in return questions like “How old is your little boy now?” Her little pastimes, conducted in a respectably anonymous and furtive manner, are presumed to include such activities as knitting, hemming dish towels, and perhaps sketching wild flowers or doing water colors of her children.

I was not bitter about being a faculty wife, very much, although it *did* occur to me once or twice that young men who were apt to go on and become college teachers someday ought to be required to show some clearly distinguishable characteristic, or perhaps even wear some large kind of identifying badge, for the protection of innocent young girls who might in that case go on to be the contented wives of furniture repairmen or disc jockeys or even car salesmen. The way it is now, almost any girl is apt to find herself hardening slowly into a faculty wife when all she actually thought she was doing was just getting married.

I put in four good years at college, and managed to pass almost everything, and got my degree and all, and I think it was a little bit unkind of fate to send me back to college the hard way, but of course there *were* things I might have done — or, put it, people I might have married — which would have landed me in worse positions. Bluebeard, anyway.

The three big thorns in the faculty wife's ointment are her husband, her husband's colleagues, and her husband's students. Naturally a husband presents enormous irritations no matter what he is doing, and I think it is unreasonable to regard a teaching husband as necessarily more faulty than, say, a plumbing husband, but there is no question but what the ego of a teaching husband is going to be more vividly developed, particularly if he teaches in a girls' college. For instance, when I accompanied my husband to a student party and we were greeted at the door by a laughing group of students who surrounded him, calling out, "Hello, there," and, "You *did* wear the orange tie, after all," and, "Class was simply *super* this morning," I could figure, as I stood alone in the hall moodily looking for a place to put my coat, that it was going to be proportionately more difficult, once home, to persuade my husband to put up the new shelves in the kitchen. He was going to lie back in his chair, flaunting the orange tie, and tell me to get a boy for things like that.

Well, I suppose husbands are all alike, at least the husbands of my friends were. Before my husband commenced professor many of my friends had been from the group of faculty wives, although they were in general understandably reluctant to wander out of their proper setting, and it was pleasant, now, to meet them as a colleague. We usually made a comfortable little group as we gathered in the corner just to the right of the doorway at student parties. "Hello," we cried gaily to one another, "you here *too*? *How* are the children? Did you get to that perfectly ripping affair last night at that other student house? Are the children well? Is there any news of a raise in faculty salaries? And the children — how are *they*?"

Of course, if one of us ever happened to mention that she was getting a new refrigerator, or that her husband had just had an article published in the *Wiltshire Archeological and Natural History Journal*, or that they were turning in the old car on a new convertible, a certain coolness was apt to arise. Someone might come out with the story of a woman *she* knew who got herself hopelessly tangled in the descending top of *her* convertible and was late for a Trustee Tea, or someone would tell about what happened to some friends of hers with their new refrigerator the night they went out and left it alone for the first time, or we might mention with becoming modesty the articles *our* husbands have had in the *Journal of American Ethnobotany*, or the *Physical Culture Quarterly*. These coolnesses developed easily into open quarrels, with consequent feuds and taking sides and the comparative merits of publication in Wiltshire and East Lansing openly discussed, and the husbands bowing distantly in the faculty lounge.

I found, however, that there *were* sizable advantages to our connection with a college community. It was easier to get a piano tuner, for instance, and information, such as how to lay out a basketball court, or how to figure compound interest on a mortgage, was easily obtainable from the reference books in the library. Once, when my husband was out of town and I wanted to start the little wood-burning hot-water heater which was attached to our furnace, I took advantage of living in a seat of learning, and called the chemistry professor and asked him how you started a little wood-burning hot-water heater. He said that he personally lived in a college house which had electricity laid on, but why didn't I try the logic professor, who was accustomed to working out problems and things? The logic professor said that his work was purely theoretical, and the person I really wanted was the natural science man who ought to know how to start fires from camping out looking at ferns and stuff. The natural science man said that everyone knew that forest fires destroyed millions of dollars of animal life every year and if I wanted to start a fire I ought to get hold of the painting teacher who could probably bring over some turpentine and old canvases. The painting teacher said well, he *knew* turpentine was no good, but one of the literature teachers had been at Yaddo once, and *he* ought to know something, after all. The literature professor said that aside from washing himself in steep-down gulfs of liquid fire he managed to keep pretty well away from the stuff. I finally called the college president and he said he had the same sort of gadget in *his* house, and he came down and started it, but it went out.

Unlike faculty wives, students are nice girls who have come to college to get an education. The students I encountered had very little concern with anything outside of getting an education and so could not be expected to waste much time investigating the home lives of their teachers. I never, for instance, met a student who was the least bit interested in my sketches of wild flowers, and their anxiety to know the ages of my children was, to say the least, perfunctory. On the other hand, almost all the students I met were well mannered, civil, and nicely brought up. They were extremely thoughtful, and courteous to the point of chivalry. They were kind to children and to animals. If they slammed a door, it was never knowingly in the face of a stray puppy or a small baby. If they knocked someone down, it was inconceivable that it should be a teacher or another student. If they brought up some date who played professionally for the Green Bay Packers, he would carefully avoid practicing his inside blocking on someone's roommate's mother. I can say, categorically, that I never saw any student, of whatever year, kick a sick cat. They were, as I say, neat, well mannered, and demure. Their clothes were subdued, sometimes so much so as to be invisible. When they gave parties they took pains to invite only the most congenial people, such as their teachers and selected other students. I never, for my own part, found any difficulty in declining an invitation to a student party, if I got one at all, or in leaving, once I was there. I learned to have nothing but admiration for the student's faith in her teachers, and the kind of innocent devotion which was frequently so touching; I am reminded of the student who crept up, one spring dawning, to leave a basket of fresh strawberries upon her teacher's pillow. Or the student who resolutely refused to remove a lilac sweater her teacher had once admired, and became known, by her junior year, as "The Purple Kid," although she dropped out, abruptly, during one Christmas vacation and was only seen once thereafter, in Paris with a retired manufacturer of pinball machines.

Perhaps the only quarrel the faculty wife might have with her husband's students is their spirit of pure scientific inquiry; they were very apt to throw out the baby, as it were, with the bathwater, particularly when baby-sitting. As a matter of fact, I once had a conversation with a student upon this very topic; it was rather late at night, and we were among the dregs of a student party. She was there because she was a hostess and I was there because it was beginning to look as though there was no good way of getting my husband home. I was wearing my "nice" black dress and holding a glass of ginger ale and she was wearing a strapless short evening dress, pink, with gardenias in her hair, and holding and perhaps even drinking a glass of the punch they had been serving at the party, made of equal parts of sweet vermouth, vodka, and cold cocoa. We were sitting on the floor and I had already asked her about her vacation and she had told me she spent six weeks working as a feather duster in a museum, sometimes dusting feathers and sometimes feathering dusters, and that she had found the work very constructive and very useful in influencing her in the eventual choice of her senior program, and I had told her that my little boy was three now. After a short, agonized silence, broken only by the harmonies of six voices doing something from *La Bohème* in another corner of the room, she turned to me and asked, "Listen, when you were young — I mean, before you kind of settled down and all, when you were — well, *younger*, that is — did you ever figure you'd end up like this?" She waved her hand vaguely at the student living room, my "nice" black dress, and my glass of ginger ale. "Like *this*?" she said.

"Certainly," I said. "My only desire was to be a faculty wife. I used to sit at my casement window, half embroidering, half dreaming, and long for Professor Right."

"I suppose," she said, "that you *are* better off than you would have been. Not married at all or anything."

"I was a penniless governess in a big house," I said. "I was ready to take anything that moved."

"And of course you *do* make a nice home for your husband. Someplace to come back to, and everything so neat."

"My spinning lacks finesse," I said. "But I yield to no one on my stone-ground meal."

"And *he's* lucky, too, of course. So many men who marry young silly women find themselves always going to parties and things for their wives' sake. An older woman—"

"He was only a boy," I said. "How well I remember his eager, youthful charm; 'Lad,' I used to say, fondly touching his wanton curls, 'lad, youth calls to youth, and what *you* need—'"

"He's *still* terribly boyish, don't you think?" She bent a tender glance upon my husband, who was waving a cigar and telling an enthralled group of students an expurgated story of how he graded examination papers. "He's always so full of vitality."

"You should see him at home," I said. "We never have a dull moment *there*, I can tell you. Absolutely nothing but boyish vitality and youthful charm all over the place. He's positively faunlike. Why, I could tell you things—"

"I don't suppose," she said, blushing slightly and studying her fingernails, "that he talks much about us students at home, does he?"

"He babbles about you all the time," I assured her, and rose and went over to the noisy group of which my husband was the center. "Hail, ruddy stripling," I said.

"What?" he said, startled.

"Never mind," I said. "You leaving now or do I have to carry you home?"

I decided that I was going to fewer student parties after I ripped part of the sleeve out of my black dress helping a freshman climb a fence. By the end of the first semester, what I wanted to do most in the world was invite a few of my husband's students over for tea and drop them down the well.

On the other hand, I was in sad trouble at the kindergarten over the practice of magic by my daughter Sally. Almost between one day and the next, it seemed, Sally had somehow picked up both the knack and the inclination for doing magic, and although I felt that magic was no career for a girl, and her father felt that Sally showed hardly enough talent to get ahead in the magic game, Sally told all around the kindergarten that the ban against magic, finally, was entirely our fault. Little children five years old cut me dead in the street. There was a rumor that I was going to be expelled from the Lunchtime Mommies. Sally told around the kindergarten that she was being unfairly condemned, that ever since we moved into the house we all knew that someday something had to be done about the gatepost. And she said that the refrigerator was not completely destroyed, the way her father maintained it was, and that anyway we had agreed to say nothing more about the clock and besides that the old man at the door started it, which was probably true.

It had been a rainy Saturday morning, so I knew that the refrigerator door was going to stick. The old man came to the back door not long before lunchtime, and he came — I knew it the minute I saw him — to chat about the gatepost; after a year in the house I could spot them at five hundred yards. He opened by saying well, so they finally got someone to buy the old house, did they? I leaned my head against the doorframe and said oh, yes, they finally got someone to buy the old house. Well, he said with the light coming into his eye, had we fixed on anything yet about that there gatepost?

I winced. Sally was painting at the kitchen table behind me, and I knew she was eavesdropping. Barry was in a corner of the kitchen at his toy table, disassembling a truck, and clearly not interested at present in the gatepost. The rest of the family was lucky enough to be out of earshot. Laurie and Rob were still building their fort at that time, working from the inside out because of the rain, and I could hear, faintly, the sound of hammering. Jannie was in her room, theoretically cleaning out her dresser drawers, but actually doing some kind of an acrobatic dance in front of her mirror, and singing the Fairy Rosabelle. The distant, unwilling sound of a typewriter from the study made it sound as though my husband was working, although I sometimes believe that he has a device (perhaps a woodpecker?) which taps the typewriter for him while he sleeps on the study couch. It was clearly going to rain all day; far away against the barn I could see the small brave orange dot which was still our only tulip.

“Take them *both* out, that’s what *I*’d do,” the old man said at the kitchen door. “Make a nice little fireplace with them stones. Winter, *this* house, you *need* a fireplace.”

“Awfully nice of you to stop by,” I said, pushing at the door.

“Never did think to see anyone *living* here,” he said, nodding profoundly at the broken step which Laurie had promised to fix as soon as they finished the fort. I sneezed, and shivered, and the old man settled himself down on the porch rail and recounted in detail the names, addresses, and contributing neglect attached to the downfall of every gatepost for miles around, then went on to examine the subject of leaning fences, discussed with ardor the striking of trees by lightning, and even digressed slightly to tell me about Morton's chimbley going down brick by brick onto the senior Morton, who was cleaning trout by the rain barrel.

"*Any*one can make things fall *down*," Sally said softly behind me. "It's getting them back *up* again is *hard*."

"Now you take that well Ananias Watkins was figuring to dig," the old man went on relentlessly.

"Yes, indeed," I said with wild finality, "I've got to go and open the refrigerator now."

"There was him and his two boys digging out this rock—"

"Thanks ever so much." I slammed the door and leaned against it.

"That gatepost." Sally shook her head mournfully, and then set down her paintbrush and looked at me. "*Why* can't I?" she asked.

"Because it is a great big gatepost and you are only a little tiny girl and you have made enough trouble with that magic already, what with poor little Jerry Martin afraid to go to bed at night and his mother keeps calling me and calling me to get you to take the spell off again—"

"I won't," Sally said stubbornly. "He called me a name."

"And no amount of teasing is going to talk me into letting you go to work with magic on that great big gatepost because you are only a little—"

"The refrigerator? Can I anyway magic the *refrigerator*?"

"When I want my refrigerator door unstuck I will get hold of a man who can unstick refrigerator doors, or at least your father."

"Suppose I just—"

“No,” I said. “No magic, no no no.”

Murmuring, Sally gathered together her brushes and her paper, and then her eye fell upon Barry, crooning over his truck. “Peabody,” she said to him hopefully, “you want I should turn you back into a rabbit?”

“No, a boy with a truck,” Barry said.

“*No* one *ever* lets me do *any*thing,” Sally said. She thought, and then slid down from her chair and approached Barry. “Peabody,” she said winningly, “my true love?”

“*No*,” Barry said. “Play with this *truck*.”

“Remember,” Sally said, “you always *used* to be a rabbit, and it was only me got you into a baby in the *first* place.”

“Oh,” said Peabody. Reluctantly, he put down the truck and scrambled along after her. “Peabody,” he explained to me as he passed.

“Maybe,” Sally said suddenly, “maybe I will get me another rabbit and make another baby. A little girl.”

“Under *no* circumstance,” I said. “Barry is quite enough.”

“A little *girl*?”

“Girl?” Barry insisted.

“Sally,” I said firmly. “Not one more word.”

“Then can I magic the refrigerator?”

I hesitated, and the day was lost. Sally turned joyfully and hurried into the study, Barry trailing along behind. I could hear Sally telling her father in the study that she and her helper Peabody had some very terrible magic to do for Mommy.

“Very nice,” her father said.

“ — so I need a lot of paper and pencil for me and two pencils for Peabody my helper because he writes with both hands.”

“Magic?” her father said suddenly. “Just a minute now — what about that clock?”

“This is Mommy magic. Peabody my helper and I are going to unstick the refrigerator. Mommy *asked* us to.”

“But when the clock—”

“You suppose I can do all this magic all by myself with just Peabody my helper without a *pencil*?”

I heard the sharpening of pencils only dimly; in order to open the refrigerator on a rainy day it was necessary to hold the sink with one hand and brace one foot against the wall, pulling and cursing. I was pounding the refrigerator door with my fists when Sally and Barry returned to stand and watch me from the kitchen doorway.

Sally chuckled. “You pull and pull and *pull*,” she said, “and here a little girl like me will open it right open with magic for you.” Then, forcefully, she gestured. “Peabody,” she said.

Peabody moved forward, pencils alert. “Now,” Sally said. “Three times backward, singing with me.” She began to march backward around the kitchen table, singing, “Dearest sweetest Sally is the best girl in the world, dearest sweetest Sally, the most magical of all.” Her helper followed her, shuffling uneasily and looking over his shoulder. “Magic magic magic,” he sang, until he broke off abruptly, said, “My truck!” with vast delight, and made for the toy table.

“It’s all right,” Sally said hastily. “I can finish without him.” I sat down on the kitchen stool and reflected upon rain and refrigerators.

When Jannie appeared in the kitchen doorway I thought for one stunned moment that it was something conjured up by Sally’s magic before I recognized the unmistakable earmarks of the Fairy Rosabelle. She was wearing a pink ballet skirt, a quantity of junk jewelry mined from my dresser drawer, and a wreath of artificial roses around her head. She fluttered over to where I sat and bent over me, touching me gently on the head with her wand.

“Why so dreary, lonely mortal?” she inquired. “Is there aught that Rosabelle can offer to brighten thy sad lot?”

“Yes,” I said. “You can set the table for lunch.”

Rosabelle laughed, a little tinkling laugh. “We fairies sip only the dew from early violets.”

“So will the rest of us,” I said darkly, “unless we get the refrigerator open.”

“Yonder approaches an honest woodcutter,” Rosabelle remarked, hovering about six inches over my head. “Mayhap *he* will lend us his stalrit — stal — stal—”

“Stalwart,” I said. “Sally, for heaven’s sake stop that bellowing.”

“I’m through,” Sally said with dignity. “It’s only the magic writing now.” She settled down at the kitchen table and seized her pencil, scowling horribly.

“Hence,” Rosabelle said as the back door opened, “hence, noble woodcutter, wouldst aid a damsel in distress?”

Barry leaped up joyfully. “Laurie,” he shouted, “see my truck, will you fix it together?”

“Don’t get in *my* way, Laurie,” Sally said, “because I’m magicking the refrigerator door and *you* might come unstuck.”

“Laurie,” I said flatly, “go over and open that refrigerator.”

“Dig *her*,” Laurie said, regarding Jannie. “Who’re *you* — the mad fiend from Planet X? When’s lunch?” he asked me.

“I’m the Fairy Rosabelle,” Jannie said.

"*Cra-zy* mixed-up," Laurie said, with the air of one making an original remark. "Hi, Salamander."

"Don't *call* me *Salamander*, because Mommy wants me to magic—"

"Laurie," I said, "go over and open that refrigerator."

"Real cool," Laurie said. "Real real cool. What's the matter with the refrigerator?"

"You know perfectly well if your father hears you talking like that you will be fined, maybe even fifty cents. The refrigerator door is stuck."

"*That* all?" He laughed shortly. "Poor old lady," he said, and patted me on the head as he went by. He took hold of the handle on the refrigerator door and pulled. "*Crazy*," he said, pulling. "This thing is real gone shut."

"Canst Rosabelle aid thee, honest lad?"

"Hah?" said Laurie. "Oh. Why don't *you* pull *me*?"

Jannie took hold of Laurie's belt and pulled, and Barry screamed, "Game, game," and hastened over to tug on the back of the pink ballet skirt.

"Cadabra!" said Sally, but the door did not open.

"Mixed-up," said Laurie, gasping.

The study door opened and my husband came into the kitchen. "When's lunch?" he asked. "What are you doing that for?"

I let go of the back of Barry's overalls. "We're opening the refrigerator," I said. "Why?"

"Nothing," he said. "I just wondered when was lunch?"

"When I get the refrigerator door open," I said.

"Why?"

"Because the milk is inside. And the butter, and the cold roast beef you said you would like to have for lunch today."

"No," he said. "I mean, why do you open it like that? Letting the children play with it? After all, a refrigerator is a complex machine, not a toy.”

“Ooh, that nervous man,” Laurie said.

“Laurence,” his father said sternly, “one more word in that oleaginous jargon and you will pay a substantial fine.”

“Yes, sir,” Laurie said.

“Perhaps,” my husband said condescendingly to me, “perhaps I have never thought to mention this to you before, but the way to deal with a stubborn piece of machinery is to use your intelligence. I cannot understand why you think you can open this refrigerator door by force. Do not attempt to impose your will upon it, do not bang upon this refrigerator, do not shake it. Losing your temper,” he said kindly, “*never* does any good. That is very likely what made it stick in the first place. The thing to do,” he said, still in that patient voice, “is to take hold of the handle gently — *gently*, remember — and use the slightest downward pressure. Then—” and he made a dramatic wide gesture of opening the refrigerator door, which came completely off the refrigerator and fell against him, so that he backed up across the kitchen floor, staggering, with the refrigerator door in his arms.

“Dig *that*,” Laurie said in admiration.

“*Jeekers*,” Sally said, eyes wide. “I went and unstuck the wrong *side*.”

“Please put that down somewhere,” I told my husband with a good deal of annoyance. “When I let you open the refrigerator door I hardly expected that you would go ripping it off and carrying it around the kitchen like—”

My husband set his back against the wall and put the door gently down onto the floor. He stood looking at it without saying anything and the children gathered gravely around him. “I did mean to unstick the *other* side,” Sally said apologetically.

“*Craaaaazy*,” Laurie said. “She ripped it right off the hinges.”

"Sarah," my husband said at last, controlling his voice, "go to your room. Get a man to fix that," he told me tensely. "Not a five-year-old girl with magic. A refrigerator repairman. Call him on the telephone and tell him to come over and fix that refrigerator. Not a five-year-old girl with magic — a man."

He slammed the study door behind him.

The refrigerator repairman said he would come over right after lunch, and all the time I was getting out the roast beef and slicing tomatoes I could hear sounds of lamentation from Sally's room. Her father permitted her to come down for lunch, and when she came to her chair at the table she stopped to whisper in my ear. "I fixed *him*," she said, with an evil scowl at her father. "I'm going to show *him* about how magic is better. He can just *wait*."

I thought of Jerry Martin afraid to go to bed with a spell on him and of little Cheryl whose doll's head was on backward now because she had pushed Sally in the snow, and I said apprehensively, "What?"

Sally laughed. "*Don't* worry," she told me ambiguously. "It's really good," she added, seeing me frown. "Just about how Daddy will know magic is better."

Conversation at lunch was monopolized by Laurie, who was planning a party for his birthday which was still seven months off. He wanted to invite twenty-one friends for lunch and a football game on the side lawn. He thought that it would not be any great inconvenience to put up goal posts, and he would get a can of white paint and do the yard lines himself. I thought that it would be much nicer, since we could not be sure yet what the weather was going to be like in October, if he planned on inviting two friends over for supper, and they could go to the movies. Laurie pointed out that if he invited twenty-one friends he would automatically get twenty-one presents, which was, he felt, real crazy. His father fined him fifty cents. Jannie suggested that it would be nice to have a play or at least a pageant honoring Laurie's birthday, and proposed the Fairy Rosabelle because then, she added prudently, she would not have to bother to learn something new. Sally, hugging herself, said that we were all going to have a wonderful surprise and Daddy would be sorry he had talked so mean about her magic. My husband remarked that the practice of magic was going to cost a certain young lady a considerable amount in fines before very long. Sally smiled mysteriously, and said he would be *glad* when he found out about her surprise. "Anyway," she added, "*Jannie* can still tell time on the clock, sort of."

"But Jannie is left-handed anyway," I said. "Besides, we decided not to say anything more about the clock."

"Maybe I could invite the whole class," Laurie said. "All but the girls, of course. We could have a track meet, or a rifle shoot, maybe. Is it all right to build a campfire?" he asked his father. "We'll promise to pick up the lawn afterward."

I said that unless table manners improved generally *no* one needed to think about birthday parties, and lunch continued as usual, except that Sally occasionally giggled to herself, and declined dessert, which was tapioca pudding, on the grounds that she was too excited about her surprise. Jannie was fined ten cents for elbows on the table, and Laurie talked himself out of a dollar and a half. All fines were remitted when my husband remarked absent-mindedly that his pudding was real cool. Barry was fined one jellybean for feeding tapioca pudding to his truck. Sally said my *goodness*, we were going to be so surprised.

The refrigerator man arrived while I was clearing the table, and he had a pair of hinges which luckily fit the door. Barry was allowed to stay up from his nap to watch the man put the door on again. My husband came out into the kitchen to watch, too, and he and the refrigerator man had a long, learned talk about baseball and what was apt to happen in Brooklyn during the coming summer. Laurie entered the conversation and was fined a quarter for saying that he thought Milwaukee would take the pennant.

I happen to like Milwaukee and so, since I did not have a quarter, I thought I would go upstairs and get the laundry put away. I heard my husband and the refrigerator man telling each other goodbye, and the refrigerator man saying we ought to think about a new refrigerator, really, because this one was getting pretty old and shaky and my husband said he was glad I had gone upstairs before the refrigerator man said that. I heard Sally singing " — is the best girl in the world." I went to the top of the stairs and called down for her to stop it, but I could not make her hear me.

I was putting away pajamas in Barry's room, which is in the front of the house, when I heard a crash which I thought at first was the refrigerator door falling off again, and then I realized that it came from outside and sounded irresistibly like the car of the repairman of the refrigerator backing into a stone gatepost. Almost at once, from the front porch, I heard Sally's voice raised in fury. "*Jeekers*," she wailed, "wrong side *again*."

My husband fined himself five dollars for remarks made upon this occasion. The man who came a few days later about the insurance felt that rather than going to the expense of having both gateposts straightened it would be simpler to take them down altogether, before, as he explained, "they fall down on someone's head and *really* cost you money."

No one around town ever remarked upon the fact that our left-hand gatepost leaned at an angle and our right-hand gatepost was now just slightly off its foundations. I got the impression that there was a general feeling that we ourselves had made the ultimate deadpan joke about the crooked gatepost, and further discussion would be superfluous. I was just as pleased to leave it that way.

We tried to enter Sally in dancing school, but she came right home again. She sulked for a week at home, and stormed around the kindergarten like a mad thing. There were high words in the study after dinner, but all pencils were confiscated, and, even though it was agreed that we were not going to say anything more about the clock, my husband made Sally take the spell off Jerry Martin and turn Cheryl's doll's head around again, and fix it so the teacher's umbrella would open right, the way it used to. We got Sally a pair of roller skates, but she gave them to Jannie. She announced at dinner one night that when she grew up she was going to be a mean mean old lady who lived in a forest and people came to her for advice and spells, except, she added, turning to look directly at her father, except wicked trolls.

The refrigerator door went right on sticking, but I discovered that I could open it by pounding violently on the side of the refrigerator with the frying pan. When I did this Sally liked to sit on the kitchen stool and sneer.

Then, after perhaps ten days, it seemed that she was relenting a little. She agreed to say good night to her father, and they were able to get back to work again in the kindergarten. Before I could do more than wonder at the change, she came down with chicken pox, although I do not believe it was deliberate. Laurie and Jannie had both had chicken pox, so, on the assumption that Barry might as well catch it now as later, I let him play freely with Sally, and during the long afternoons he sat on the foot of her bed, coloring, looking at books, and listening to Sally's stories.

We were coming to have, at that time, a distinct feeling around the family that most of our knotty domestic problems were pellucidly clear to Barry, although he tactfully forbore to comment on them. He had taken to chattering a good deal, a kind of cheerful running series of observations, but he spoke almost entirely in his own language, which bore a disconcerting similarity to our own, so that it was possible to be entrapped into listening closely to him, persuaded that he was communicating something of vital, although cheerful, importance. Consequently I was sure that Sally might safely confide in him and I could sometimes hear his small voice reassuring her in lovely long elegant sentences. As a result of this, of course, Sally became almost the only person able to translate Barry, although I believe that her translations were somewhat free, since Barry seemed so often to be saying exactly what Sally wanted him to.

When Sally's spots had begun to fade and she was allowed to come downstairs, interestingly pale and requiring a good many small services, to lie on the living room couch, she was very sweet to all of us. She permitted her father to bring her little phonograph and set it up beside the couch and she accepted, with a wan smile, the small offerings from the rest of us — *Little Women*, from Jannie, and a little carved dog from Laurie, and paste and colored paper from me; illness, in fact, seemed to have taught her the fruitlessness of anger; we did not perceive at once that something had taught her the usefulness of guile. It was not until her convalescence was almost complete that she showed her hand. One morning Laurie and Jannie had gone off to school as usual, and Sally was enjoying the rare freedom of lingering late over her breakfast while her father and I had our second cups of coffee; because of the imminence of chicken pox Barry had been kept home from nursery school, and he was pushing grains of cereal down to the bottom of the bowl with his cereal spoon and giggling helplessly when they popped up again.

"Sally," I said tactfully, "it is most pleasant to have you well again."

Sally gave me an inscrutable smile. "I have enjoyed being sick," she said. "Thank you very much for letting me."

“Not at all,” I said. “Barry, eat your cereal.”

Barry put down his cereal spoon and regarded me darkly. “You untreat me like a genman,” he said. “Once more, Pudge.”

“*Barry!*” Sally opened her eyes wide. “Dearest Mommy did *not* untreat you like a gentleman, and you went and said Pudge without making the magic sign and that’s *awful*.”

Hastily Barry slid off his chair and turned slowly around three times. “There,” he said.

“Wait,” Sally said. “I did, too.” She got down and circled.

I stared, bewildered, and my husband put down the *New York Times*. “Besides,” Sally said to Barry, “you promised.”

“Can I have a srop?” Barry asked me.

“A srop? What for?”

“Dangerous trees.”

“Sally?” I said, appealing.

She smiled and shrugged.

“What is Pudge?” my husband said.

I shook my head, but Sally and Barry both got down off their chairs and circled slowly.

“*You* better watch out,” Sally told her father. “Or else make the magic sign.”

“Get a srop,” Barry advised.

“Or say something else,” Sally said. “Call him the Great Wizard. Or the Most Powerful One.”

“Great Grizzard,” Barry said.

“All right,” I said, “but *who* —?”

“Well.” Sally leaned back in her chair and took on her storytelling face, eyes wide and looking far away, hands clasped under her chin. “Well,” she said, “when I decided to put together the land of Oz and the country of the hobbits and Rootabaga and Mother Goose Land, because they were all scattered all over and I kept forgetting which book I had to take to get to each country — well, anyway, I decided to put them all together. Fairyland, too, of course. So it’s all called Gunnywapitat now, and Ozma lives there, and all the hobbits, and the Cowardly Lion and the old woman in the shoe, and Peter Pan, and Oberon and the rest, all there where I can get to them easy. Gunnywapitat. And Pudge helped me.”

“Magic sign,” my husband put in nervously.

“Thank you.” Sally got down and turned around. “So I put the entrance to his country right under his tree. Pudge’s tree.” She turned around. “And Barry needs a sword to pertect him because all the other trees have evil spirits trying to get into Gunnywapitat, the big tree and under it all the magic world.”

“Yggdrasil?” said my husband, startled.

“What?” said Sally. “Anyway, we go to visit and it’s always in the middle of the night or else while you’re busy or something and if we go in the day we take weapons, because lots of times children go in and they do not ever come out except maybe after — oh, ten years or so. And then they’re old and everything has changed and all their friends are gone and their mothers and fathers.” She gave her father a brief look. “And down there *every*one does magic,” she said.

“So I need a srop,” Barry said.

“And we have parties with lots of candy and cookies. And the entrance is guarded by lagatours and dragatours.”

“And policemans.”

“Of course,” she said, glancing again at her father and then at me, “*you* couldn’t go.”

"*I* am Trixie Pixie," Barry said smugly. "A lepercorn."

"There is one whole city made of chocolate," Sally said. "Even the houses and the cars and the dogs and cats, all chocolate."

"Can I unfinish? My cereal?"

• • •

Sally spent most of the morning drawing me a map of Gunnywapitat, showing the chocolate city (Mishmutat) and the river of wild animals (Cody Wop) and the upside-down section (Gilywimpis) and Pudge's capital city (Gunypostafall); in Gilywimpis, she told me disturbingly, even the birds had wings. In the afternoon the sun was shining and it was so pleasant that I said that she and Barry might play outdoors for a while if they stayed near the house and Sally was careful not to get herself tired, or chilled, or excited. Barry asked to be put into a long-sleeved shirt because they were going to play Gunnywapitat, and he made himself a srop out of a twig. For quite a while I was in the kitchen, cleaning the refrigerator and then scrubbing the kitchen floor, which I had not had time to do while Sally was sick, and I heard them playing happily outside. "Lagatours!" Sally shouted once. "Charge!" "Avaunt!" Barry cried, and charged, presumably brandishing his srop.

Later, when I went upstairs to straighten Sally's room and make the bed, because I thought that probably she would not want to stay up for dinner after playing outdoors, I could still hear them distantly for a while, but when I moved on to pick up the crayons from Barry's floor they were out of earshot. I decided to straighten Barry's bookcase, and so I stayed upstairs longer than I had thought to, and when I came down to the kitchen again I went to call them in for fruit juice and cookies, and they were not there. I went outside and looked up and down the driveway, and out across the lawn, calling them, and then went and looked in the barn, calling them, and then behind the barn, still calling, and then I went all around the outside of the house. Anywhere farther than that was out of bounds, as they both knew.

I sat down on the back steps and tried to think. I knew they could not have come to any harm because our big dog Toby was lying comfortably in the sun in the barn doorway and even though Toby has never growled at anyone except the laundry man I was fairly sure that he would do *some*thing if any danger approached, even if it was only to come into the house and try to hide behind me. Toby's presence also argued that they were nearby. I called again and again, and Toby lifted his head and looked at me wonderingly, as though Sally and Barry were right in plain sight and he could not understand the increasing agitation in my voice. I did not like to go in and call my husband at the college; when I saw Laurie come up the street on his bike I got up and went to meet him with as little appearance of concern as I could manage.

"Laurie," I said, "Sally and Barry have wandered away somewhere. I can't find them."

"Pudge's tree, probably," Laurie said. He rode past me and toward the barn door, going swiftly, directly at Toby. Toby yawned and closed his eyes, and Laurie braked the bike an inch from Toby's nose. "You lazy dog," he said. Toby yawned again. "Go look in Pudge's tree," Laurie called back at me.

"Where *is* it?"

He took his bike into the barn, wheeling it carefully past Toby, and reappeared. "I thought *you* knew," he said. "Want a cookie?" he asked Toby, and Toby, alert, rose and followed him toward the back door.

"Laurie," I said, "*listen*."

"Sure," he said. "Don't you worry. Pudge'll bring them back okay."

Jannie came along a few minutes later, lingering and giggling with her friend Carole; Jannie said that Sally and Barry were almost certainly in Pudge's tree, and Carole added that her little sister Jeanie had often told all of them at their house about Sally's friend Pudge and his magic tree. "Jeanie says that Sally goes there *lots*," Carole said, and Jannie added, "Pudge takes good care of them, it's all right," and they went on into the house to join Laurie and Toby at the cookie jar.

For almost half an hour, only the combined efforts of Laurie and Jannie, and Carole's offers to go home and get Jeanie and ask *her*, prevented me from telephoning my husband at the college, or our local policeman, or at least my mother in California. Then we heard laughter from behind the barn, and Sally and Barry wandered toward us, holding hands and chatting happily.

They refused to say where they had been. I held on to them, and stumbled questions, trying to keep my voice gentle, and Sally shook her head and smiled. "I said I wouldn't tell about it," she explained. "You *can't*, with a magic country, because then they won't let you come back, ever. Were we gone for ten years? Because everyone looks about the same."

"Barry," I said, "where did you go? With Sally?"

"Cookies," he said, grinning. "Many happy cookies, and the flowers on a queen."

"He says he won't tell," Sally said hastily.

The next morning, when I got up after a night spent checking on Sally and Barry every half hour, I found a great tub full of spring flowers on the back porch, tulips and daffodils and pussy willows. There was a note tucked in among the stems, and it read: "Thanks so much for letting the children come; delighted with their little visit. Tell Barry I'll send him a 'flinky' one of these days. Hope you like their flowers. 'Pudge.'"

I showed the note to my husband privately, and we decided that perhaps it was not altogether healthy to let Sally fill her mind with these fancies, and we would say no more about it. However, later, when Barry stopped in the bathroom doorway to watch his father shaving, it seemed a good moment for a diplomatic question, and his father said carelessly, “By the way, when you went to Pudge’s yesterday, what was he wearing?”

“Crown,” said Barry.

“Was anyone else there?”

“Trixie Pixie?”

“No,” said his father. “Where did you go?”

“You are the daddy,” said Barry reassuringly, “and I am the Barry, and Sally is the Sally, and Jannie is the Jannie and Laurie is the Laurie and Mommy is the Mommy.”

• • •

When I married the man who is at present my husband and the father of my children it did not occur to me to specify that his behavior should in no way prevent my buying an evening paper. It is not a usual request to make during such a ceremony, for one thing, and, for another thing, the possibility of my being unable to buy an evening paper if I wanted one seemed, to say the least, remote.

Actually, it was only for about three days that we had to do without the paper. Thanks to a fortunate hurricane which took part of the cornice off the First National Bank most of the affair was quickly forgotten, and since my husband’s cigarette lighter broke almost at once, the subject largely died down, to be revived only by the most tactless and humorous of our friends. I wonder sometimes if things could have been handled differently in some way, but of course there is not much use worrying about it now. If, perhaps, I had refused to call Mr. Williams back in Burlington? If I had neglected to answer the phone at all?

Whenever the phone rings I have of course the quick wonderful thought that some remarkable and astonishing surprise is going to happen. ("Lonesome for you in California; plane tickets arriving special delivery..." "Investigation proves you only surviving heir...") However, what I always expect is a kind of surprise for *me*, too. When I answered the phone on a bright morning when the sun was really warm and the trees were really green and the air had that authentic scent of flowers, it was a call for my husband, from a man with a pleasant, although unfamiliar, gentlemanly voice. He asked for my husband by calling him "the Professor," which is perhaps a legitimate title for a teacher in a girls' college, but which is a title rarely, if ever, used except by the kind of friend who thinks that sort of thing is terribly funny. At any rate, I held out the phone and remarked that it's for you, Professor, and my husband grudgingly put down a gold *moidore* he was checking for precise weight and went to the phone.

I heard him say "Hello?" and then "What?" and then "*What?*" Then he sighed and said, "All right, all right. And what did you say your name was?"

There was a long silence and then he hung up.

"Yes, dear?" I asked, hovering. ("Paris concern offering all expenses you and family...")

"Look," he said. "I want you to pick up that telephone and call a man named John Williams, at the *Gazette*, in Burlington, Vermont. Person to person. Collect."

"Why?"

"Never *mind* why. He just said that if I thought it was a practical joke I could hang up and call him right back and prove he was a real person."

“Why should you have to prove—”

“Never *mind* why,” my husband said again. He laughed shortly. “Prominent local educator!” he said.

Eying my husband apprehensively, I took up the phone and put through a call, person to person, collect, to John Williams, Burlington *Gazette*, Vermont. Because Burlington is only a hundred miles from the small Vermont town where we live my call went through smoothly, unlike a call to New York City, for instance, when — because of course New York City is not in Vermont — it is sometimes necessary to spell out everything, beginning with N for Norman, E for Edwin, W for Wilfred, Y for Yolanda, and so on. When I heard the same pleasant unfamiliar voice on the other end of the line, and he agreed that he was indeed John Williams, I said, “Hello, Mr. Williams?”

“Right,” he said cheerfully. “Give us the Professor.”

I might say that I have rarely seen such an expression on my husband’s face. Delighted, he was, and yet incredulous. He kept saying, “I can’t believe it,” and, “This *must* be a joke.” He and Mr. Williams talked for a long time, and every few minutes my husband would give a little giggle.

When he finally said, “Well, I’ll see you on the fifteenth, then,” and hung up, there I was, right next to him, curious, and — I had been married for fourteen years — deeply suspicious.

“Well?” I said in a voice used by wives who have been married for fourteen years. “Well?”

“Well,” my husband said, putting his shoulders back and pulling in his stomach. “*Well.*”

I followed him into the study and resisted a strong impulse to slap the gold *moidore* right out of his hand. “*Well?*” I said.

My husband looked at me out of the corners of his eyes and opened and shut his mouth several times. “Now I want you to be reasonable,” he said at last.

I prepared myself to be reasonable. I sat down quietly in a chair, clenched my fists, and smiled tightly. “It’s only,” my husband said, “that I have to go to Burlington.”

“So?”

“Well,” he said hesitantly, “I’m going to Burlington, is all.”

“How perfectly splendid,” I said. “I know how you’ve longed to see Burlington.”

“*I* don’t know why they picked on me,” my husband said. “A prominent local educator is what Mr. Williams kept telling me. It certainly isn’t anything *I* ever thought of doing. And of course,” he finished brightly, “it might *still* be a practical joke.”

“You are going to *have* to stop twisting your hands like that,” I said. “And if you give that evil chuckle once more I will gag you with a dish towel.”

“I can’t help it,” my husband said, “I feel like a fool.”

“Hah,” I said eloquently, and got up and headed for the kitchen and the breakfast dishes. “Look,” my husband wailed despairingly. “I *got* to go, I *said* I would, and besides it’s *not* what you think.”

“I bet it is,” I said.

“It is *not*,” he said, coming after me. “It’s only a kind of contest, sort of. I’m a judge, sort of. And even if I am a judge it doesn’t necessarily mean —”

“Yes?” I said, when he stopped abruptly.

“Well,” he said.

"If I may presume to ask just one question," I said carefully. "If I am not too presumptuous, if I am not in any way interfering with your private affairs — and please believe that I would not for a moment dream—"

"Look," he said.

"If you are absolutely sure that I can be trusted with your secret mission, may I just possibly ask — what *are* you judging?"

"Girls," he said.

"What?"

"They want me to be a judge in the beauty contest to choose Miss Vermont, so she can enter another contest and be Miss America."

I am genuinely sorry for the way I acted then. I have tried to explain to my husband but of course there is really no way of explaining, or at least none that would help the situation any. I am really sorry, though. I was sitting on one of the kitchen chairs with the tears running down my cheeks and my sides aching and my husband standing there looking offended and saying, "Well, I didn't really think it was as funny as all *that*," when the back door slammed open and Laurie trotted in, shedding jacket and hat as he came. He was always the first child home at lunchtime, because he rode his bike to school. Moreover, although not overly endowed with personal dignity, he had a strong and uncompromising estimate of what was proper and fitting, particularly in a parent.

"Where's lunch?" he said. "What's wrong?" He looked from me to his father, and said, "Hey?"

"Laurie," I said feebly, "Daddy is going to judge a beauty contest."

"*Dad*," said Laurie, turning purple.

"Prominent local educator," my husband said defensively.

"Oh, my gosh," Laurie said. "Oh, my gosh, my gosh. Does anyone *know* about it?" he demanded of his father.

"Look," my husband said.

"What about my friends?" Laurie said. "Suppose someone finds out?"

"It's an honor," my husband said. "For heaven's sake, you'd think someone in this house would think it's an *honor*."

"Here come the girls," I said, in a hushed voice. "They will have to be told, I suppose."

"Yeah," Laurie said bitterly, "the whole *world's* probably going to be told. Oh, my gosh. Yeah," he said to the girls as they came through the door, "get out the old man's bathing suit. He's a crazy, mixed-up daddy."

I went out onto the porch and captured Barry, who had finally been prevailed upon to accept the notion of a nursery school car pool, and rode home three days a week with a neighbor, but then still had to be dragged and pushed and wheedled up the back walk to the lunch table.

"They was muskets in my school this day," Barry told me, as one reporting a grievance, "muskets."

He came through the door and made directly for his father, to whom he announced insistently, "They was muskets in my school this day, muskets."

"Mouses," Sally said softly, "mouses in his school."

"Look, Dad," Laurie said confidentially, "you got to realize that there are fellows in this town would *love* to get a thing like that on me. I can see Ernie Smith now." And he closed his eyes and shuddered.

The only person in the family immediately delighted was, of course, Jannie, who had taken to putting red polish on her toenails secretly, and had gotten three valentines from friends of Laurie's in sixth grade. Jannie perceived that she had all this time been seriously underrating her father, the Beauty Contest Judge, and she asked most ingratiatingly if she might be allowed to sit next to him at lunch.

“Daddy is going to see a lot of girls,” Sally told Barry. She turned to me. “Daddy likes to look at girls, doesn’t he?”

There was a deep, enduring silence, until at last my husband’s eye fell on Jannie. “And what did you learn in school today?” he asked with wild enthusiasm.

“Daddy is a Chinese temple gong,” Barry remarked. “Daddy may ride on my steamroller.”

“He did not,” Sally said, amused. “Daddy is a *nice* man.”

“*I*’m going to be in beauty contests when *I* grow up,” Jannie said, reaching dreamily for the bread and butter. “I bet I win, too.”

“Somebody goofed,” Laurie said drearily.

Three days before my husband was to leave for Burlington there was a prominently placed article in our local afternoon paper about the beauty contest. It included a picture of my husband, identified by name and address. Laurie announced that he had a bad cold, a headache, an undefined pain somewhere in the middle of his back, and a blister on his heel, and was, as a result, forced to stay home from school for at least a week. Jannie brought eleven members of the Starlight 4-H Club home to compare her father in real life with his picture in the paper. Many of our female friends telephoned to ask what their chances might be if they decided to enter the beauty contest. Since my husband’s students are all girls, there was a certain amount of oblique comment in his classroom, and he was compelled to confess that he found it inexpedient to enter the faculty dining room. The article in the paper said, “Prominent Local Educator to Judge Statewide Beauty Contest.”

It turned out that one of the contestants came from nearby, and she offered to drive my husband up to Burlington. The offer was made through Mr. Williams, and my husband told me reluctantly that Mr. Williams had assured him that there would be no improper influence brought to bear upon him during the ride. I told him how rare a man he was, to be able to preserve an absolutely impartial opinion upon such controversial matters, and went off in a surly mood to the grocery, where I met a friend who said *she* would be *scared* to let *her* husband judge a beauty contest.

"Might as well move out of *this* town," Laurie kept telling his father grimly.

On the morning of the day that he was to leave my husband was not able to eat any breakfast. He sat at the table in his best suit, wearing a tie someone had brought him from Italy, toying with a little piece of waffle, and telling the children over and over that they must behave themselves and be good children and he would bring them all something from Burlington.

"At least you could be considerate enough to leave at *night*, at least," Laurie said. "This way, you go right through the center of town in broad daylight."

My husband stirred nervously. "I was thinking," he said to me. "You know, I don't even know how they judge these things. What standards they use, or anything."

"As a prominent local educator," I said unkindly, "you were probably expected to do your own research."

"It's a real public disgrace," Laurie said.

The children and I crowded unashamedly onto the porch to gape at the possible Miss Vermont when she drove up. She seemed a very nice girl, rather shy, and quite pretty. She had a good-looking car.

Under the enigmatic gaze of his family my husband descended the steps and greeted the maiden and her escort, a formidable-looking creature who was apparently a combination chaperon and attendant, since she kept giving little hitches to her charge's clothes, and adjusted a scarf carefully over the shining golden curls before the two of them got into the car.

"I hope you win," Laurie said grudgingly as they went down the walk. "I bet *she's* the prettiest girl there," he added with unexpected local patriotism.

"I hope you win, Daddy," Sally said, and Jannie gazed with rapture on the golden curls.

"Going Daddy," said Barry mournfully, and we all came indoors.

During the day there were eleven telephone calls from people wanting to know if he had really gone. Most of them had thought of something funny to say. The afternoon paper had another picture of my husband and a long story about the festivities he would encounter in Burlington. They included an imposing list of guest appearances and a Pageant of Beauty.

Laurie still flatly refused to go to school, and during the afternoon he made the serious tactical error of deciding instead to accompany me to the barbershop to get Barry's hair cut. Several of my husband's colleagues had stopped by to chat with the barber. Luckily, Barry had decided that this was not the day he had selected to have his hair cut, and Laurie and I were too busy holding him down in the chair to hear more than a fraction of what was said.

"How come you didn't go along?" someone asked Laurie, and someone else said, "How do you ever *get* a job like that, anyway?"

"He spent years studying," Laurie said grimly. I was holding both of Barry's ears tight so the barber could get it even across the front. Barry was shouting, "Too early! Too early!" which Sally told me meant that he wanted everyone to be quiet and wait a minute.

"You think he's ever coming back?" the barber asked me humorously.

The grocery was worse. A number of acquaintances of ours were doing their shopping, and both Laurie and I had the clear feeling as we entered that all conversations all over the store had stopped, while everyone turned to look at us. People told Laurie, and told me, and then told us both together, that my, what an odd hobby my husband had, and did we think he was ever coming back, and was he going to make a career of this kind of thing. As a small consolation I got Laurie and Barry each a popsicle, and did a lot of split-second planning to ensure that I would not have to shop again for four days.

Although I am not ordinarily nervous when my husband is away from home, I found it extraordinarily difficult to occupy myself that first evening. I put the children to bed and wandered around the house straightening things. I washed out a couple of the girls' dresses and a pair of stockings of mine, and waited for the phone to ring. I did not really suppose that there had been an accident, of course — our possible Miss Vermont looked like a cautious driver — but I finally made a batch of cookies and then sat down with a book, within reaching distance of the phone. By the time my husband called I was almost asleep.

"How are you? How is everything?" I asked, bemused.

"Very nice," he said. "The hotel is nice and we had a nice dinner. She's a very nice girl."

"Fine," I said. "Just fine. I was in the barbershop this afternoon and—"

"Except," he said, "I spilled coffee on my gray pants."

"Wash it out right away," I said. "In the barbershop—"

"She already did," he said. "There's going to be a Pageant of Beauty."

"I know. It was in the paper. Pete said—"

"We judge them in evening gowns and in bathing suits and for compatibility."

"Really?" I said. "I'm so glad you're glad you decided to go."

"What?" he said.

“Nothing,” I said. “I got Barry’s hair cut.”

“Fine,” he said. There was a long silence. “How is everybody?” he asked finally.

“Fine,” I said.

“I’m very glad to hear it,” he assured me. “Well, I have to get up early. There’s a breakfast.”

“How exciting,” I said. “Goodbye.”

The children and I had a lovely time the next day. Laurie resolutely declined going to school, and he and I spent the morning making a cheese soufflé for lunch. When the girls came home in the afternoon and Barry got up from his nap all of us sat around the kitchen table and made things out of colored paper. Laurie and I felt strongly that there was no point in going down for the afternoon paper, particularly since the news shop is always crowded around the time the paper comes out, and there would be a lot of people standing around and gossiping. Laurie pointed out, in addition, that the morning paper had already been delivered, and that he personally found a second paper superfluous. I myself felt that I had read all I cared to about the Pageant of Beauty, although I have heard since that the article that evening was little short of overwhelming.

When my husband called that night he was a little bit upset. “It didn’t come out,” he said immediately, “that coffee stain.”

“That’s too bad,” I said.

“I’ve got to wear it to the Pageant. But Charmian says no one will notice. All the girls were very nice about it.”

I asked with restraint, “Have you found out what standards apply?”

“You know something?” he said. “One of the girls here used to live in Brooklyn.”

“Have her put some baking soda on it,” I said.

"That's what Sandy suggested. She was the one in the pink dress who gave me a bandage for this scratch on my finger." There was a long silence. "How are the children?" he asked.

"All fine. And you?"

"Say," he said, "there's an interesting fellow here, another judge. Used to judge cattle. Did you know that you can tell a cow's age by the rings on the horns?"

"No," I said. "I didn't."

"Nice fellow. *He* likes Barbara for Intellect."

"A number of people have called you," I said.

"Is there any mail?"

"Yes," I said with malice. "There are a lot of new coins from that place in Chicago."

He sighed. "I wonder if I should give up coins," he said. "Start collecting something else for a while."

The next day was Saturday and the children and I took a long drive out into the country and had hot dogs for lunch at a diner in the next town. We got back late, too late, we agreed, to bother to go down and get the afternoon paper, which was probably sold out anyway. My husband called while the children were having dinner.

"I'm on my way to the Pageant," he said. "That coffee stain doesn't show at all."

"Your father called," I said. "I told him where you were."

"We do the judging tonight," my husband said happily. "I guess I'll be home tomorrow."

"That will be nice."

"Thirty-four and a half inches," my husband said to someone on the other end of the phone. "You tell her I don't care *what* her mother said."

“Your *father* said—”

“What?” said my husband. “Just a minute. No,” he went on to whoever was talking to him, “I’m calling my *wife*.”

I closed my mouth tight, so I would be sure not to say another word, and hung up very gently.

I was sound asleep when my husband came home. He arrived at four that morning, wrinkled, scratched, coffee-stained, and irritable. Our local entry had not won, and, disgruntled, had loaded my husband into her car and come home in a huff, dropping him off on the corner with his suitcase. “Woosh?” I said when I opened my eyes and saw him coming into the room.

“Fine, fine, oh fine,” he said. “Anything happen while I was gone?”

“Hm? Oh. Nothing, except Laurie is never going to speak to you again and your father says to call him the minute you get home, no matter what time it is.”

“You’ll have to send this suit to the cleaner’s,” he said. “Look, I got a cigarette lighter. It says JudgeMissVermont-BeautyContest. Look.”

I leaped back as he flashed the lighter under my nose. “A memento of your day of glory,” I said with a gentle smile.

“That reminds me,” he said. “Got to make a note to write that girl Linda. Turns out she’s very much interested in coins.”

Wearily I sat up and reached for a cigarette. “Well,” I said, “who won the beauty contest?”

“Hm?”

“Who won the beauty contest?”

“Oh, I don’t know,” my husband said vaguely. “Some girl.”

• • •

The next morning, Sunday, Laurie gathered his courage together and called his friend Rob; either Rob was superlatively tactful or he had a short memory, because Laurie invited him over and they spent the day in Laurie's room playing jazz records. Jannie and Sally and Barry made mudpies in the dirt near the barn, and late in the afternoon Laurie and Rob, emerging from Laurie's room, volunteered to build a sandbox, which pleased the smaller children, although the sandbox, complete, turned out to be ten feet square and to hold, as I subsequently discovered, a staggering amount of sand. My husband was in the study all that day, arranging the coins from the place in Chicago. Although Laurie did not speak to his father, he did not actually *not* speak to him, and passed him the salt at dinner with an air almost friendly.

The next morning everyone went back to school. It was my morning on the nursery school car pool, so about eleven-thirty I left my kitchen by the back door, after checking to see that the stove was turned off, except for the oven on "warm" where the lunch casserole was waiting. The table was set, the bread sliced, the cake ready on a plate, and my decrepit old refrigerator was rattling and grumbling to itself; since the weather had turned warmer, it opened more easily, but it had developed a kind of excited cackle which it turned on every twenty minutes and which made it alarmingly difficult to — say — count spoons in the kitchen, or figure how many baked potatoes, or hear what anyone was saying from the next room. My husband was lunching at the college, the three older children were due home from school at various times up until twelve-fifteen, and everything was ready for my return with Barry. On the corner I encountered Sally, who got out of school early because the kindergarten children were escorted by their teacher past the bad train crossing in the center of Main Street, and who tended to get home around a quarter of twelve, after stopping off at Pudge's tree with Jeanie. I persuaded Sally into the car, stopped briefly at the store to get a carton of cigarettes, collected Barry, tired and sandy-faced, from the nursery school, and reasoned and enticed into the car the two neighboring children who are the other members of the car pool. I dropped the two other children off at their separate front doors, and drove home. I made this identical trip three days a week, keeping to a consistent time and route.

Once in our own driveway, I escorted Sally and Barry from the car up the walk to our back door, opened the door, and we went in. Sally said at once, “If what I smell is lunch I don’t want any,” and fell to coughing wildly. Barry choked, and I gasped, with tears in my eyes. I have never smelled anything like it before — it was dreadful; sickening, and almost visible in the quiet kitchen. In wild haste I shoved Barry and Sally back out onto the porch, thought of the oven, and, with my hands over my face and my eyes full of tears, dashed across the kitchen and turned the oven off.

The odor seemed less strong near the stove, but I opened the oven anyway and looked in, to make sure nothing was burning inside, although I had never before made a macaroni and ham casserole that turned into poison gas. Sally and Barry peered interestedly through the kitchen window. I soaked my handkerchief at the sink, and covered my face with it; I thought of fire — although heaven only knew what could be burning to smell like that — and hurried through the downstairs rooms, sniffing and looking into corners, but it was clear that the gas existed mainly in the kitchen. The other rooms had a faint trace of that frightful odor, but I could breathe naturally in them, and it was only when I came back into the kitchen that it caught me by the throat again, and I fell to coughing and choking.

The rattling and creaking of the old refrigerator was so much a familiar part of the kitchen that it was a minute before I realized that a good part of my uneasiness was its silence. Then, understanding that the refrigerator was mute, I went to it quickly, opened the door, and got such a lungful of the gas that I reeled wildly over to the back door and out onto the porch. “What’s for *lunch*?” Sally asked as, tearful and strangling, I clung to the porch rail.

Since Barry was too little to leave under Sally’s dubious supervision on the porch, I thought that the wisest thing was to put both of them back into the car. Barry was considerably disturbed at the notion that he was about to be taken back to nursery school without any lunch or dinner or breakfast the next day, but I told Sally to sing to him, and, as her voice rose quaveringly in the kindergarten health song, I went around the house and in through the front door to the telephone in the hall. I called the refrigerator people and got the repairman on the phone. “My kitchen is full of some terrible gas from the refrigerator,” I said.

There was a short, nervous silence, and then the repairman, his voice unsteady, asked, “Anyone in the house?”

“Well, the children are coming home for lunch—”

“*Children?*” said the repairman.

“I took them outside,” I said, bewildered.

“Thank heaven,” said the repairman.

“Is there something wrong, then?”

“Where’s the refrigerator?” he asked.

“In the kitchen,” I said.

“Near a door?”

“Well, there’s a back door out onto the porch. But is there something—”

“Can we back a truck up there?”

“I guess so. My rosebush—”

“This is no time to worry about *rosebushes*,” he said. “We can get a crew together and be over there in about an hour. Meanwhile, don’t let anyone go in the house. Better get the children well away. Don’t go lighting any matches.”

With trembling fingers I put out the cigarette I was smoking.

"Lock the doors till we get there," he was going on.

"But is there something *wrong*? I have lunch all ready, and it's after twelve now, and the children have to be back at school by one, and the table is set—"

"Look," he said, his voice rising, "you still *in the house*?"

"I had to telephone," I said.

"You hang up and you get out of that house as fast as you can go," he said and so, abandoning my kitchen and my casserole and — as my husband pointed out later — his coin collection and the garnet sunburst my grandmother gave me, I fled.

Sally was reciting the Pledge of Allegiance when I got back to the car, and Barry was reading Jannie's library book, which was overdue because I had carried it around in the car for three days, meaning to return it. Sally broke off as I approached to ask what was for lunch. I found a crayon in Barry's jacket pocket and, deciding that desperate measures were to some extent justified, tore the flyleaf out of Jannie's library book and wrote on it a note saying POISON GAS DO NOT ENTER which I put on the back door with a pin from my shoulder strap. Locking the house seemed silly, since all the keys were hanging on a hook next to the refrigerator. Through the kitchen window I could see my pocketbook, where I had set it down on the kitchen table. Everything looked very quiet and peaceful inside, with the bright plates on the blue tablecloth and the villain refrigerator presiding silently. A faint whiff of that appalling odor seeped through the crack of the kitchen door, however, and I hastened down the walk to the car.

Since it was several minutes after twelve, I started off with Barry and Sally, intending to pick up Laurie and Jannie and take everyone to the soda shop for lunch. I found Laurie with no trouble; he was on the corner, fighting furiously with Rob. I blew the car horn and Laurie, disheveled and snarling insults over his shoulder, got into the car. “My *mother’s* here,” he remarked viciously, rolling down the car window and putting out an evil face, “but you just wait’ll later. Can I learn to play the trumpet?” he asked me.

“No,” I said.

“But Rob’s learning clarinet and Stuart and Willie are learning drums and the music teacher says I got a talent.”

“It’s too noisy,” I said. “Trumpets cost too much and besides the house is full of poison gas.”

“I’ll practice outside,” Laurie said. “In the barn, maybe. And I can pay you off from my allowance. Besides,” he said with deep pleasure, “I got a talent.”

“The house is full of poison gas,” I said.

“All *right*,” Laurie said. “I *told* you I’d practice in the *barn*.” He leaned his head again out of the car window and shouted, “You *better* run, you rat — you just wait’ll I get back, you rat.”

Jannie was not in sight, so I drove on to the school. There was no sign of her there, so I turned around and drove back home, with Laurie and Sally and Barry fidgeting in the back of the car, and watching both sides of the street for Jannie. When I got home I turned around in the driveway and drove back to the school again, and then — Laurie by now threatening to leap bodily out of the car and make his own way, lunchless, back to school before he was hopelessly late — back home again. Then, struck by an idea, I ran up and opened the back door, which still said POISON GAS DO NOT ENTER, and shouted, “Jannie?”

“Yes?” she said, from upstairs. “Where is everybody?”

“You get out of this house at *once*, do you hear me?”

“Why?”

“Come downstairs,” I howled, beginning to cough again.

“All right,” Jannie said. She came down the back stairs and I snatched up her hat and coat from the kitchen chair and grabbed her by the wrist and hauled her outdoors. “What’s the *matter*?” she kept saying.

“Did you see that sign?” I pointed to POISON GAS DO NOT ENTER.

“Sure,” she said, “but I had to change to my pink skirt because this morning Kate wore *her* pink skirt and I told her this afternoon I’d wear *my* pink skirt too.”

“That sign says do not enter,” I said.

“Sure,” Jannie said, “but I didn’t think you meant *me.*”

“Didn’t you *smell* anything?”

“No,” she said. “Only lunch cooking.”

Glancing back through the kitchen window I saw my pocketbook still on the kitchen table.

When I stopped the car in front of the soda shop it was a quarter to one, and our dog Toby, who had been made very nervous by having everyone leave the house when they should have been in having lunch, and then going away and coming back and going away and coming back, had concluded that some general catastrophe had occurred and we were planning to leave him behind to face it alone. He consequently followed the car to the soda shop and refused to be left outside. He was far too big to fit comfortably under those little wire tables they have in soda shops, and ordinarily he would have perceived this, sooner or later, but having been abandoned once had so upset him that he was wholly deaf to threats and orders; every time I led him outside he waited till someone opened the door and then sneaked in again and came and tried to get into my lap, his comfort when the whole world has gone wrong.

The soda shop was, as usual during lunch hour, full of high school students, who regarded all of us, and particularly the dog going in and out, with extreme curiosity, and caused Laurie agonies of embarrassment. “Let’s go home,” he kept saying to me in an urgent undertone. “I don’t *care* what it’s like.”

All four of the children ordered banana splits for lunch, and I asked for a cup of coffee. Just as the waitress was putting down my coffee, one of the high school students, pushed by another, came crashing down onto our table, knocking the dog off my lap and upsetting Barry, who began to cry.

“That was the *captain* of the *football* team,” said Laurie, purple. “Let’s go *home*.”

I restored Barry, indicating his banana split, and sat down. The dog got onto my lap again. I gave up my coffee, since I could not reach the table anyway. Because my pocketbook was still on the kitchen table I had to borrow a check from the man in the soda shop and make it out and ask him to cash it. I also called my husband at the college and told him he had better come home because the house was full of poison gas.

When I got back to the table Laurie was propped up nervously, half standing and half sitting, talking to the music teacher from the school. “Here’s my mother,” he said with relief. “Can I learn to play the trumpet?” he asked me.

“No,” I said. I sat down and the dog got on my lap. The high school students had begun to wander out, on their way back to school.

“We like to think that all children have an instinctive love of music,” the music teacher said to me.

“We can’t even get in the *house*,” I said. “How could he take trumpet lessons?”

"The trumpet only costs a hundred and twenty-five dollars, and he will enjoy it all his life," the music teacher said. "Lessons and music extra, of course."

"I had to cash a check to pay for these banana splits," I said.

"I will enjoy it all my life," Laurie said hopefully.

"Small weekly payments," said the music teacher.

" — talent," said Laurie.

"The house is full of poison gas," I said.

"I'll practice in the barn," Laurie said.

"The house is full of—"

"He *said* he'd practice in the barn," the music teacher added sharply.

"His father doesn't even know about the *refrigerator* yet," I said. "How can I tell him it's a trumpet too?"

"I'll send you an illustrated brochure," the music teacher said.

"Well, *you* sure weren't very polite to *her*," Laurie said to me as the music teacher went out the door of the soda shop. "All she wants is to develop my talent."

• • •

I took the children back to school half an hour late. Barry and Sally and the dog and I came home, to find that the refrigerator people were already there. They had a huge truck and a dolly for carrying the refrigerator, and they backed the truck over the lawn and over my rosebush to the back steps, and they put handkerchiefs over their faces and went in and got the refrigerator with a good deal of grunting and complaining. The dog and Barry and Sally and I stood on the porch watching. I felt a pang, seeing the old refrigerator go — I had had it for thirteen years, after all — but with the back door open I could smell that horrible smell clearly, and the dog put his head into the kitchen once and then went back and climbed in through the car window and sat in the car for the rest of the afternoon. Just as they were wheeling the refrigerator across a bridge of planks and onto the truck my husband arrived in a taxi. “Is everyone all right?” he asked me, and I said yes, everyone except the dog, although I personally did not think my head would clear for several days. My husband put his head inside the kitchen door and breathed deeply and then backed up, coughing. “Golly,” he said.

“It’s much better now,” I told him. “The man opened all the windows and doors and it’s clearing out fast.”

“What are you going to do with it?” my husband asked the men, who were settling the refrigerator onto the truck.

“Take it down to the dump and throw it in,” one of the men said grimly. “This kind of thing is *dangerous.*”

“But wait a minute,” I said, suddenly realizing that it was my refrigerator going off like this. “What about the milk and the butter and the eggs and the cold chicken? And the fruit juice and the cheese—”

“You wouldn’t want *this* food no more, lady,” the truck man said. He slapped the side of the refrigerator and laughed. “I wouldn’t even want to *show* it to you.”

“Oh, dear,” I said helplessly. The men got into the truck, and as it started to pull away from the porch the car of the salesman from the refrigerator company turned into the driveway.

Since I had been talking about a new refrigerator for a number of years, I was able, unhesitatingly, to put my finger on the precise one I wanted; I even knew the page in the catalogue where its picture was. They let us go back into the house so my husband could write a check. We kept all the doors and windows open and by the time they delivered the new refrigerator late that afternoon the gas was almost gone. My husband, shaken and pale, was sitting in the study looking at his checkbook. The new refrigerator was glittering and bright, rich with shelves that pulled out and pushed in, and freezing compartments and little plastic boxes for keeping things and racks and bottle holders and vegetable bins and it was absolutely silent. Experimentally, the children and I put a jar of jelly on the top shelf. Finally, I went timidly into the study and explained to my husband that all our food had gone away with the old refrigerator and I was terribly sorry but I was afraid that I needed some money because otherwise there would not be anything for dinner; and I knew he had been dined so well in Burlington.

The refrigerator man had told me to boil all the dishes on the table, and anything else which had been exposed to the gas, and after I had boiled all the dishes I was prepared to take a fairly strong stand on the subject of a dishwasher, since the refrigerator people handled dishwashers too and would give us quite a nice discount if we bought them both at once, and there was, in fact, the exact dishwasher I had been wanting for so long, only a page or two past the refrigerator in the catalogue. I went into the study diffidently and told my husband all this, adding that I was terribly sorry but I was afraid that I needed a dishwasher because my hands were so red and rough from washing all those dishes that I was probably not going to be able to do anything else for a long time, and besides, I told him thoughtfully, it did not become a professional beauty contest judge to have a wife with hands toil-worn from housework.

When the dishwasher was installed the next day I went to work and washed all the dishes I owned; it took six loads. It was nice to have everything so clean and sparkling, but the children and I felt that although the refrigerator and the dishwasher looked nice in the kitchen, and there is nothing really shabby about our nice kitchen range, although it is six years old, the kitchen floor, which was done by a previous owner in dark red and brown linoleum, was disgraceful. It quite took away the charm of the acres of white porcelain in the kitchen. I went into the study and told my husband that the kitchen linoleum was shocking, and suppose some of his new friends should decide to visit him, how would he feel about the shocking kitchen floor? We decided on a nice light green, with red and blue and yellow polka dots, and I got a new tablecloth to match it. Laurie and I decided that during the following winter we would paint all the kitchen woodwork yellow.

What with all the installations and getting the linoleum down it was nearly two weeks before we were back to normal, but one Saturday morning at last I was in my bright kitchen, putting dishes into the dishwasher and wondering why I had not had a dishwasher long ago, when Laurie came unhappily down the back stairs and into the kitchen. “Listen,” he said.

“Yes?”

“Dad home?”

“He’s gone down to get a haircut. Why?”

“Well, look.” Laurie shuffled his feet, ran his fingers through his hair, and sighed. “Look,” he said.

“Well?” I said.

“You know the sodium bisulphite Dad gave me to do in my chemistry set?”

“Yes. I mean, I guess so.”

“Well.” Laurie hesitated. “I lost it,” he said.

“That’s too bad.”

“I put it in a pan with the acid I was using and put it on the radiator there and you remember how cold it was just before we got the new refrigerator because we all said it was too cold for late spring? And the radiator must of gone on? And now I found the little pan but it’s *empty.*”

I turned around slowly and looked at him. “Laurie,” I said, “that sodium what-do-you-call-it and the other stuff mixed together — what would they do?”

“I don’t know,” Laurie said. “That’s what I was going to find out. Why — you know where it is?”

I looked around at my lovely kitchen, with the polka dots on the floor and the new refrigerator glowing, its great shelves heavy with the fancy foods I had never been able to fit into the old one, at my dishwasher and my new tablecloth. “Maybe you’d better just not mention it to Dad just yet,” I said.

“You think he might worry?”

“Well, yes,” I said. “I think he might.” I closed the dishwasher affectionately.

“You think he’d take away my chemistry set?”

“I’m almost certain of it,” I said.

“*Then* can I learn to play the trumpet?”

• • •

Before the children were able to start counting days till school was out, and before Laurie had learned to play more than a simple scale on the trumpet, and even before my husband’s portable radio had gone in for its annual checkup so it could broadcast the Brooklyn games all summer, we found ourselves deeply involved in the Little League. The Little League was new in our town that year. One day all the kids were playing baseball in vacant lots and without any noticeable good sportsmanship, and the next day, almost, we were standing around the grocery and the post office wondering what kind of a manager young Johnny Cole was going to make, and whether the Weaver boy — the one with the strong arm — was going to be twelve this August, or only eleven as his mother said, and Bill

Cummings had donated his bulldozer to level off the top of Sugar Hill, where the kids used to go sledding, and we were all sporting stickers on our cars reading “We have contributed” and the fund-raising campaign was over the top in forty-eight hours. There are a thousand people in our town, and it turned out, astonishingly, that about sixty of them were boys of Little League age. Laurie thought he’d try out for pitcher and his friend Billy went out for catcher. Dinnertime all over town got shifted to eight-thirty in the evening, when nightly baseball practice was over. By the time our family had become accustomed to the fact that no single problem in our house could be allowed to interfere in any way with the tempering of Laurie’s right arm, the uniforms had been ordered, and four teams had been chosen and named, and Laurie and Billy were together on the Little League Braves. My friend Dot, Billy’s mother, was learning to keep a box score. I announced in family assembly that there would be no more oiling of baseball gloves in the kitchen sink.

We lived only a block or so from the baseball field, and it became the amiable custom of the ballplayers to drop in for a snack on their way to the practice sessions. There was to be a double-header on Memorial Day, to open the season. The Braves would play the Giants; the Red Sox would play the Dodgers. After one silent, apoplectic moment my husband agreed, gasping, to come to the ball games and root against the Dodgers. A rumor got around town that the Red Sox were the team to watch, with Butch Weaver’s strong arm, and several mothers believed absolutely that the various managers were putting their own sons into all the best positions, although everyone told everyone else that it didn’t matter, really, *what* position the boys held so long as they got a chance to play ball, and show they were good sports about it. As a matter of fact, the night before the double-header which was to open the Little League, I distinctly recall that I told Laurie it was only a game. “It’s only a game, fella,” I said. “Don’t *try* to go to sleep; read or something if you’re nervous. Would you like an aspirin?”

“I forgot to tell you,” Laurie said, yawning. “He’s pitching Georgie tomorrow. Not me.”

“*What?*” I thought, and then said heartily, “I mean, he’s the manager, after all. I know you’ll play your best in *any* position.”

“I could go to sleep now if you’d just turn out the light,” Laurie said patiently. “I’m really quite tired.”

I called Dot later, about twelve o’clock, because I was pretty sure she’d still be awake, and of course she was, although Billy had gone right off about nine o’clock. She said she wasn’t the least bit nervous, because of course it didn’t really matter except for the kids’ sake, and she hoped the best team would win. I said that that was just what I had been telling my husband, and she said *her* husband had suggested that perhaps she had better not go to the game at all because if the Braves lost she ought to be home with a hot bath ready for Billy and perhaps a steak dinner or something. I said that even if Laurie wasn’t pitching I was sure the Braves would win, and of course I wasn’t one of those people who always wanted their own children right out in the center of things all the time but if the Braves lost it would be my opinion that their lineup ought to be revised and Georgie put back into right field where he belonged. She said *she* thought Laurie was a better pitcher, and I suggested that she and her husband and Billy come over for lunch and we could all go to the game together.

I spent all morning taking movies of the Memorial Day parade, particularly the Starlight 4-H Club, because Jannie was marching with them, and I used up almost a whole film magazine on Sally and Barry, standing at the curb, wide-eyed and rapt, waving flags. Laurie missed the parade because he slept until nearly twelve, and then came downstairs and made himself an enormous platter of bacon and eggs and toast, which he took out to the hammock and ate lying down.

"How do you feel?" I asked him, coming out to feel his forehead. "Did you sleep all right? How's your arm?"

"Sure," he said.

We cooked lunch outdoors, and Laurie finished his breakfast in time to eat three hamburgers. Dot had only a cup of coffee, and I took a little salad. Every now and then she would ask Billy if he wanted to lie down for a little while before the game, and I would ask Laurie how he felt. The game was not until two o'clock, so there was time for Jannie and Sally and Barry to roast marshmallows. Laurie and Billy went into the barn to warm up with a game of ping-pong, and Billy's father remarked that the boys certainly took this Little League setup seriously, and my husband said that it was the best thing in the world for the kids. When the boys came out of the barn after playing three games of ping-pong I asked Billy if he was feeling all right and Dot said she thought Laurie ought to lie down for a while before the game. The boys said no, they had to meet the other guys at the school at one-thirty and they were going to get into their uniforms now. I said please to be careful, and Dot said if they needed any help dressing just call down and we would come up, and both boys turned and looked at us curiously for a minute before they went indoors.

"My goodness," I said to Dot, "I hope they're not nervous."

"Well, they take it so seriously," she said.

I sent the younger children in to wash the marshmallow off their faces, and while our husbands settled down to read over the Little League rule book, Dot and I cleared away the paper plates and gave the leftover hamburgers to the dog. Suddenly Dot said, "Oh," in a weak voice and I turned around and Laurie and Billy were coming through the door in their uniforms. “They look so — so — *tall*,” Dot said, and I said, “Laurie?” uncertainly. The boys laughed, and looked at each other.

“Pretty neat,” Laurie said, looking at Billy.

“Some get-up,” Billy said, regarding Laurie.

Both fathers came over and began turning the boys around and around, and Jannie and Sally came out onto the porch and stared worshipfully. Barry, to whom Laurie and his friends have always seemed incredibly tall and efficient, gave them a critical glance and observed that this was truly a baseball.

It turned out that there was a good deal of advice the fathers still needed to give the ballplayers, so they elected to walk over to the school with Billy and Laurie and then on to the ball park, where they would find Dot and me later. We watched them walk down the street; not far away they were joined by another boy in uniform and then a couple more. After that, for about half an hour, there were boys in uniform wandering by twos and threes toward the baseball field and the school, all alike in a kind of unexpected dignity and new tallness, all walking with self-conscious pride. Jannie and Sally stood on the front porch watching, careful to greet by name all the ballplayers going by.

A few minutes before two, Dot and I put the younger children in her car and drove over to the field. Assuming that perhaps seventy-five of the people in our town were actively engaged in the baseball game, there should have been about nine hundred and twenty-five people in the audience, but there seemed to be more than that already; Dot and I both remarked that it was the first town affair we had ever attended where there were more strange faces than familiar ones.

Although the field itself was completely finished, there was only one set of bleachers up, and that was filled, so Dot and I took the car robe and settled ourselves on top of the little hill over the third-base line, where we had a splendid view of the whole field. We talked about how it was at the top of this hill the kids used to start their sleds, coasting right down past third base and on into center field, where the ground flattened out and the sleds would stop. From the little hill we could see the roofs of the houses in the town below, half hidden in the trees, and far on to the hills in the distance. We both remarked that there was still snow on the high mountain.

Barry stayed near us, deeply engaged with a little dump truck. Jannie and Sally accepted twenty-five cents each, and melted into the crowd in the general direction of the refreshment stand. Dot got out her pencil and box score, and I put a new magazine of film in the movie camera. We could see our husbands standing around in back of the Braves' dugout, along with the fathers of all the other Braves players. They were all in a group, chatting with great humorous informality with the manager and the two coaches of the Braves. The fathers of the boys on the Giant team were down by the Giant dugout, standing around the manager and the coaches of the Giants.

Marian, a friend of Dot's and mine whose boy Artie was first baseman for the Giants, came hurrying past looking for a seat, and we offered her part of our car robe. She sat down, breathless, and said she had mislaid her husband and her younger son, so we showed her where her husband was down by the Giant dugout with the other fathers, and her younger son turned up almost at once to say that Sally had a popsicle and so could he have one, too, and a hot dog and maybe some popcorn?

Suddenly, from far down the block, we could hear the high school band playing "The Stars and Stripes Forever," and coming closer. Everyone stood up to watch and then the band turned the corner and came through the archway with the official Little League insignia and up to the entrance of the field. All the ballplayers were marching behind the band. I thought foolishly of Laurie when he was Barry’s age, and something of the sort must have crossed Dot’s mind, because she reached out and put her hand on Barry’s head. “There’s Laurie and Billy,” Barry said softly. The boys ran out onto the field and lined up along the base lines, and then I discovered that we were all cheering, with Barry jumping up and down and shouting, “Baseball! Baseball!”

“If you cry I’ll tell Laurie,” Dot said to me out of the corner of her mouth.

“Same to you,” I said, blinking.

The sky was blue and the sun was bright and the boys stood lined up soberly in their clean new uniforms holding their caps while the band played “The Star-Spangled Banner” and the flag was raised. From Laurie and Billy, who were among the tallest, down to the littlest boys in uniform, there was a straight row of still, expectant faces.

I said, inadequately, “It must be hot out there.”

“They’re all chewing gum,” Dot said.

Then the straight lines broke and the Red Sox, who had red caps, and the Dodgers, who had blue caps, went off into the bleachers and the Giants, who had green caps, went into their dugout, and at last the Braves, who had black caps, trotted out onto the field. It was announced over the public-address system that the Braves were the home team, and when it was announced that Georgie was going to pitch for the Braves I told Marian that I was positively relieved, since Laurie had been so nervous anyway over the game that I was sure pitching would have been a harrowing experience for him, and she said that Artie had been perfectly willing to sit out the game as a substitute, or a pinch hitter, or something, but that his manager had insisted upon putting him at first base because he was so reliable.

"You know," she added with a little laugh, "*I* don't know one position from another, but of course Artie is glad to play anywhere."

"I'm sure he'll do very nicely," I said, trying to put some enthusiasm into my voice.

Laurie was on second base for the Braves, and Billy at first. Marian leaned past me to tell Dot that first base was a *very* responsible position, and Dot said oh, was it? Because of course Billy just wanted to do the best he could for the team, and on the *Braves* it was the *manager* who assigned the positions. Marian smiled in what I thought was a nasty kind of way and said she hoped the best team would win. Dot and I both smiled back and said we hoped so, too.

When the umpire shouted, "Play Ball!" people all over the park began to call out to the players, and I raised my voice slightly and said, "Hurray for the Braves." That encouraged Dot and *she* called out, "Hurray for the Braves," but Marian, of course, had to say, "Hurray for the Giants."

The first Giant batter hit a triple, although, as my husband explained later, it would actually have been an infield fly if the shortstop had been looking and an easy out if he had thrown it anywhere near Billy at first. By the time Billy got the ball back into the infield the batter — Jimmie Hill, who had once borrowed Laurie's bike and brought it back with a flat tire — was on third. I could see Laurie out on second base banging his hands together and he looked so pale I was worried. Marian leaned around me and said to Dot, "That was a nice try Billy made. I don't think even *Artie* could have caught that ball."

"He looks *furious*," Dot said to me. "He just *hates* doing things wrong."

"They're all terribly nervous," I assured her. "They'll settle down as soon as they really get playing." I raised my voice a little. "Hurray for the Braves," I said.

The Giants made six runs in the first inning, and each time a run came in Marian looked sympathetic and told us that really, the boys were being quite good sports about it, weren't they? When Laurie bobbled an easy fly right at second and missed the out, she said to me that Artie had told her that Laurie was really quite a good little ballplayer and I mustn't blame him for an occasional error.

By the time little Jerry Hart finally struck out to retire the Giants, Dot and I were sitting listening with polite smiles. I had stopped saying "Hurray for the Braves." Marian had told everyone sitting near us that it was her boy who had slid home for the sixth run, and she had explained with great kindness that Dot and I had sons on the other team, one of them the first baseman who missed that long throw and the other one the second baseman who dropped the fly ball. The Giants took the field and Marian pointed out Artie standing on first base slapping his glove and showing off.

Then little Ernie Harrow, who was the Braves' right-fielder and lunched frequently at our house, hit the first pitched ball for a fast grounder which went right through the legs of the Giant center-fielder, and when Ernie came dancing onto second Dot leaned around to remark to Marian that if Artie had been playing closer to first the way Billy did he might have been ready for the throw if the Giant center-fielder had managed to stop the ball. Billy came up and smashed a long fly over the left-fielder's head and I put a hand on Marian's shoulder to hoist myself up. Dot and I stood there howling, "Run run run," Billy came home, and two runs were in. Little Andy placed a surprise bunt down the first-base line, Artie never even saw it, and I leaned over to tell Marian that clearly Artie did not understand all the refinements of playing first base. Then Laurie got a nice hit and slid into second. The Giants took out their pitcher and put in Buddy Williams, whom Laurie once beat up on the way to school. The score was tied with two out and Dot and I were both yelling. Then little Ernie Harrow came up for the second time and hit a home run, right over the fence where they put the sign advertising his father's sand and gravel. We were leading eight to six when the inning ended.

Little League games are six innings, so we had five more innings to go. Dot went down to the refreshment stand to get some hot dogs and soda; she offered very politely to bring something for Marian, but Marian said thank you, no; she would get her own. The second inning tightened up considerably as the boys began to get over their stage fright and play baseball the way they did in the vacant lots. By the middle of the fifth inning the Braves were leading nine to eight, and then in the bottom of the fifth Artie missed a throw at first base and the Braves scored another run. Neither Dot nor I said a single word, but Marian got up in a disagreeable manner, excused herself, and went to sit on the other side of the field.

"Marian looks very poorly these days," I remarked to Dot as we watched her go.

"She's at *least* five years older than *I* am," Dot said.

"More than that," I said. "She's gotten very touchy, don't you think?"

"Poor little Artie," Dot said. "You remember when he used to have temper tantrums in nursery school?"

In the top of the sixth the Braves were winning ten to eight, but then Georgie, who had been pitching accurately and well, began to tire, and he walked the first two batters. The third boy hit a little fly which fell in short center field, and one run came in to make it ten to nine. Then Georgie, who was by now visibly rattled, walked the next batter and filled the bases.

“Three more outs and the Braves can win it,” some man in the crowd behind us said. “I don’t *think*,” and he laughed.

“Oh, *lord*,” Dot said, and I stood up and began to wail, “No, no.” The manager was gesturing at Laurie and Billy. “No, no,” I said to Dot, and Dot said, “He can’t do it, don’t let him.” “It’s too much to ask of the children,” I said. “What a terrible thing to do to such little kids,” Dot said.

“New pitcher,” the man in the crowd said. “He better be good,” and he laughed.

While Laurie was warming up and Billy was getting into his catcher’s equipment, I suddenly heard my husband’s voice for the first time. This was the only baseball game my husband had ever attended outside of Ebbetts Field. “Put it in his ear, Laurie,” my husband was yelling, “put it in his ear.”

Laurie was chewing gum and throwing slowly and carefully. Barry took a minute off from the little truck he was placidly filling with sand and emptying again to ask me if the big boys were still playing baseball. I stood there, feeling Dot’s shoulder shaking against mine, and I tried to get my camera open to check the magazine of film but my fingers kept slipping and jumping against the little knob. I said to Dot that I guessed I would just enjoy the game for a while and not take pictures, and she said earnestly that Billy had had a little touch of fever that morning and the manager was taking his life in his hands putting Billy up there in all that catcher’s equipment in that hot shade. I wondered if Laurie could see that I was nervous.

“*He* doesn’t look very nervous,” I said to Dot, but then my voice failed, and I finished, “does he?” in a sort of gasp.

The batter was Jimmie Hill, who had already had three hits that afternoon. Laurie’s first pitch hit the dust at Billy’s feet and Billy sprawled full length to stop it. The man in the crowd behind us laughed. The boy on third hesitated, unsure whether Billy had the ball; he started for home and then, with his mother just outside the third-base line yelling, “Go back, go back,” he retreated to third again.

Laurie’s second pitch sent Billy rocking backward and he fell; “Only way he can stop it is fall on it,” the man in the crowd said, and laughed.

Dot stiffened, and then she turned around slowly. For a minute she stared and then she said, in the evilest voice I have ever heard her use, “Sir, that catcher is my son.”

“I beg your pardon, ma’am, I’m sure,” the man said.

“Picking on little boys,” Dot said.

The umpire called Laurie’s next pitch ball three, although it was clearly a strike, and I was yelling, “You’re blind, you’re blind.” I could hear my husband shouting to throw the bum out.

“Going to see a new pitcher pretty soon,” said the man in the crowd, and I clenched my fist, and turned around and said in a voice that made Dot’s sound cordial, “Sir, that pitcher is *my* son. If you have any more personal remarks to make about any member of my family—”

“Or mine,” Dot added.

“I will immediately call Mr. Tillotson, our local constable, and see personally that you are put out of this ball park. People who go around attacking ladies and innocent children—”

“Strike,” the umpire said.

I turned around once more and shook my fist at the man in the crowd, and he announced quietly and with some humility that he hoped both teams would win, and subsided into absolute silence.

Laurie then pitched two more strikes, his nice fast ball, and I thought suddenly of how at lunch he and Billy had been tossing hamburger rolls and Dot and I had made them stop. At about this point, Dot and I abandoned our spot up on the hill and got down against the fence with our faces pressed against the wire. “Come on, Billy boy,” Dot was saying over and over, “come on, Billy boy,” and I found that I was telling Laurie, “Come on now, only two more outs to go, only two more, come on, Laurie, come on....” I could see my husband now but there was too much noise to hear him; he was pounding his hands against the fence. Dot’s husband had *his* hands over his face and his back turned to the ball field. “He can’t hit it, Laurie,” Dot yelled, “this guy can’t hit,” which I thought with dismay was not true; the batter was Butch Weaver and he was standing there swinging his bat and sneering. “Laurie, Laurie, Laurie,” screeched a small voice; I looked down and it was Sally, bouncing happily beside me. “Can I have another nickel?” she asked. “Laurie, Laurie.”

“Strike,” the umpire said and I leaned my forehead against the cool wire and said in a voice that suddenly had no power at all, “Just two strikes, Laurie, just two more strikes.”

Laurie looked at Billy, shook his head, and looked again. He grinned and when I glanced down at Billy I could see that behind the mask he was grinning too. Laurie pitched, and the batter swung wildly. “Laurie, Laurie,” Sally shrieked. “Strike two,” the umpire said. Dot and I grabbed at each other’s hands and Laurie threw the good fast ball for strike three.

One out to go, and Laurie, Billy, and the shortstop stood together on the mound for a minute. They talked very soberly, but Billy was grinning again as he came back to the plate. Since I was incapable of making any sound, I hung on to the wire and promised myself that if Laurie struck out this last batter I would never never say another word to him about the mess in his room, I would not make him paint the lawn chairs, I would not even mention clipping the hedge.... “Ball one,” the umpire said, and I found that I had my voice back. “Crook,” I yelled, “blind crook.”

Laurie pitched, the batter swung, and hit a high foul ball back of the plate; Billy threw off his mask and tottered, staring up. The batter, the boys on the field, and the umpire, waited, and Dot suddenly spoke.

"William," she said imperatively, "*you catch that ball.*"

Then everyone was shouting wildly; I looked at Dot and said, "Golly." Laurie and Billy were slapping and hugging each other, and then the rest of the team came around them and the manager was there. I distinctly saw my husband, who is not a lively man, vault the fence to run into the wild group and slap Laurie on the shoulder with one hand and Billy with the other. The Giants gathered around their manager and gave a cheer for the Braves, and the Braves gathered around *their* manager and gave a cheer for the Giants, and Laurie and Billy came pacing together toward the dugout, past Dot and me. I said, "Laurie?" and Dot said, "Billy?" They stared at us, without recognition for a minute, both of them lost in another world, and then they smiled and Billy said, "Hi, Ma," and Laurie said, "You see the game?"

I realized that my hair was over my eyes and I had broken two fingernails. Dot had a smudge on her nose and had torn a button off her sweater. We helped each other up the hill again and found that Barry was asleep on the car robe. Without speaking any more than was absolutely necessary, Dot and I decided that we could not stay for the second game of the double-header. I carried Barry asleep and Dot brought his dump truck and the car robe and my camera and the box score which she had not kept past the first Giant run, and we headed wearily for the car.

We passed Artie in his green Giant cap and we said it had been a fine game, he had played wonderfully well, and he laughed and said tolerantly, "Can't win 'em all, you know." When we got back to our house I put Barry into his bed while Dot put on the kettle for a nice cup of tea. We washed our faces and took off our shoes, and finally Dot said hesitantly that she certainly hoped that Marian wasn’t really offended with us.

“Well, of course she takes this kind of thing terribly hard,” I said.

“I was just thinking,” Dot said after a minute, “we ought to plan a kind of victory party for the Braves at the end of the season.”

“A hot-dog roast, maybe?” I suggested.

“Well,” Dot said, “I *did* hear the boys talking one day. They said they were going to take some time this summer and clean out your barn, and set up a record player in there and put in a stock of records and have some dances.”

“You mean...” I faltered. “With *girls*?”

Dot nodded.

“Oh,” I said.

When our husbands came home two hours later we were talking about old high school dances and the time we went out with those boys from Princeton. Our husbands reported that the Red Sox had beaten the Dodgers in the second game and were tied for first place with the Braves. Jannie and Sally came idling home, and finally Laurie and Billy stopped in, briefly, to change their clothes. There was a pickup game down in Murphy’s lot, they explained, and they were going to play some baseball.

Four

THAT SUMMER WAS one of the hottest we had ever had, and I got sunburned sitting on the hill over third base. The day Laurie pitched a no-hit shut-out I thought I had sunstroke. In the middle of the fifth inning, when people began murmuring in the bleachers, and counting every strike, I went up over the top of the hill and down the other side to where there was a tree and some grass and I sat there; I could not see the ball field, but I could hear the umpire's calls and, then, the excitement rising. I sat in the shade and figured out that there were only seventeen more days before school started. Sally and Jannie were going to need new winter coats; a year from now I would be getting Barry ready for kindergarten. The first winter we were in our new house, when Laurie used to go sledding on this hill, he could stand just about where I was sitting now, and see our back porch, and I used to signal him that it was time to come home by hanging a dish towel over the porch rail; I could not see the back porch now because the trees were still thick. In another few weeks, I thought, the leaves would be coming down again. School, birthdays, Thanksgiving, Christmas, the long spring days, and then another summer. I could hear cheering from the ball field. The years go by so quickly, I thought, rising; he used to be so small.

The last few days of summer go faster, though, than any other time of year. In honor of Sally's entrance into second grade, and Jannie's triumphant arrival at fifth grade, I sat them down one evening and, with my husband's help and much advice and laughter from Laurie and Barry, cut their hair short. Both girls, enchanted with their light heads, admiring each other, feeling incredulously at the cut ends, began to cry when they saw their own hair which I carefully put away in a package in my dresser. At that time Laurie was wearing his hair long, and cultivated into a careful wave over his forehead, by means of the adhesive assistance of several evil-smelling compounds. “Hello, little girl,” Sally said repeatedly to Laurie, and, to Jannie, “Hello, little boy.” Barry asked for a set of cowboy holsters for his approaching fourth birthday. Dikidiki, old and shabby but still perceptibly blue, slept now in a small bed made for him by Laurie, with a pillow sewed by Jannie and a coverlet decorated with crayon pictures by Sally. Dikidiki slept almost all the time, day and night, until something troubled Barry, or angered him, and then he would go to his room and get Dikidiki and they would retreat together to the far corner of the guest room and sit behind the window curtain. Sally and Jannie were allowed to buy one book a week each, from their allowances, and Laurie one popular tune arranged for the trumpet.

Toby, who was finding the summers hotter than they used to be when he was a puppy, suffered a good deal, walking back and forth to the ball field after Laurie. In addition to a certain amount of stiffness in his old joints, a malady which my husband and I regarded with ready sympathy after a summer of sitting on the car robe on a grassy hill over the ball field, his fear of thunderstorms, always acute, increased with advancing age. He could sense thunder long before it was audible to the rest of us, and all that summer the first intimation that the ball game might be rained out was Toby, heading home in a black streak.

Yain had been rudely jolted out of his fool’s paradise by finding that there was another cat in the world, after all; one day Jannie came home from the ball field with a tiny, frightened black kitten which had been wandering pathetically around the refreshment stand. Could we keep it, she wanted to know, it would be her cat and she would promise to take care of it all by herself and no one else wanted it and it would *die* and if she promised to take care of it could she keep it for her very own? I said that I supposed it would be all right because our quarantine on cats was nearly ended. After a couple of days of heavy cream and fresh meat and raw eggs beaten in milk, and regular brushing with Jannie's doll hairbrush, the little kitten was sleek and shining, and wholly unafraid of Yain, who loathed him. Jannie named the kitten Stardust, but the rest of us called him Gato.

"You see," Laurie explained to Jannie, "Stardust is all right for a name for *people* and stuff, but a cat should have a decent name."

"I used to have a cat named Creampuff," I said defensively.

"I bet you did, too, kid," Laurie said. "And you never learned to ice skate, or to sled."

"I *couldn't*," I said. "There wasn't any *snow*." I thought, staring out the kitchen window reminiscently, "The first snowsuit I ever saw was the one Laurie had when he was a baby. I used to read about snow, and I saw pictures of it, but until I was grown up and came to live in the East I couldn't really imagine what it was like." Looking out at the lawn, I thought of the drifts piling up against the hedge, and the wind whipping past the back door, and the icy sidewalks, and I shivered. "I didn't know when I was well off," I said.

Jannie prompted me, softly. "And you used to live next door to a candy factory...."

"To a man who *owned* a candy factory. Mr. Thompson. And just before Christmas every year he would take my brother and me to visit his candy factory."

" — and he would tell you to eat all you wanted—" Jannie went on.

"And on the first floor," Laurie came in, "were the people making little hard Christmas candies, and ribbon candy, and candy canes, and you and your brother always tried to remember not to take a candy cane because they lasted so long you had to leave out some other things—"

"And on the second floor they were making caramels, with big pots boiling and if you took a caramel you had to keep chewing on it and you missed the fudge—" Jannie said.

"And on the third floor they were making little mints, peppermint and lemon and orange and cinnamon, and if you took a cinnamon one it was so peppery you couldn't taste anything for a long time—" Laurie continued.

"And on the *top* floor," Jannie said, "were the ladies dipping chocolates, and when you got way up there you were so full of candy canes and cinnamon mints and caramels you couldn't eat any chocolates."

"But he always gave us a little box to take home with us," I said. "We used to put the little boxes under the Christmas tree. He was very nice, Mr. Thompson."

"Everything was much nicer in the olden days," Jannie said.

Sally said, "Uncle Louis says that when *he* was a little boy they had to chase him to school with a stick."

"They're going to have to chase *me*, boy," Laurie said grimly. "Only two weeks from Tuesday. Golly."

"Uncle Louis said when someone gives you a hamburger it isn't polite to look inside to see if they put a two-inch salute firecracker in, and so Uncle Louis didn't, but Mr. Feeley already had, and Uncle Louis got relish in his hair when it blew up."

"You know what I think?" Laurie said, coming to look out the window with me, "I think next summer maybe I'll get a job, like down at Mike's delivering groceries. I bet I could earn plenty that way, and then someday when I had enough I could get a little sports car. Boy," he said. "Dig me driving a red and white M.G. to school."

• • •

By the Saturday before Labor Day a decided atmosphere of cool restraint had taken over our house, because on Thursday my husband had received a letter from an old school friend of his named Sylvia, saying that she and another girl were driving through New England on a vacation and would just *adore* stopping by for the weekend to renew old friendships. My husband gave me the letter to read, and I held it very carefully by the edges and said that it was positively touching, the way he kept up with his old friends, and did Sylvia always use pale lavender paper with this kind of rosy ink and what was that I smelled — perfume? My husband said Sylvia was a grand girl. I said I was sure of it. My husband said Sylvia had always been one of the nicest people he knew. I said I hadn't a doubt. My husband said that he was positive that I was going to love Sylvia on sight. I opened my mouth to speak but stopped myself in time.

My husband laughed self-consciously. "I remember," he said, and then his voice trailed off and he laughed again.

"Yes?" I asked politely.

"Nothing," he said.

I set the letter down tenderly in the center of his desk and said well, I guessed I had better get along to the breakfast dishes and he said that reminded him. "Sylvia," he said. "She's always so neat. *You* know. Nail polish, and things like that."

I put my hands in back of me and said yes, I understood.

"I would take it as a personal kindness if things looked a little better than usual this weekend when Sylvia comes. Sort of spruced up — maybe wash the children and stuff. Everything nice." He gestured. "*You* know," he said.

"By all means," I said warmly. "I wouldn't for anything in the world have Sylvia see the house looking the way it usually does. I shall go at once and mend that broken board in the front steps."

"What?" my husband said, but I closed the study door softly behind me, stood in the hall, and counted to a thousand. Then I stamped up to the guest room, where I swept the cobwebs off the ceiling as though I were pulling hair and completely wrecked what little nail polish I had opening the side guest room window so I could shake the mop out over the open study window just below. I took the guest room curtains down to wash and the curtain rod fell on my head. I scrubbed the bathroom floor and cleaned out the closet and washed down the hall woodwork and cleaned all the upstairs ashtrays and then I took a shower and came downstairs and made dinner. I was feeling very righteous and forgiving until my husband glanced down at his veal cutlet and asked absently if he had remembered to tell me that his friend Sylvia was a marvelous cook.

On Friday morning I vacuumed all the downstairs rooms and washed down more woodwork and did the kitchen curtains and scrubbed the kitchen floor and polished the copper bottoms on the saucepans and dusted the living room and washed the glass in the front door and cleaned off the top of my desk and carefully put my leaking fountain pen down on my husband's class notes. Then I put furniture polish on the dining room table and the two sideboards and washed the piano keys and cleaned all the downstairs ashtrays. I washed all the clock faces and the television screen. I arranged my husband's collection of canes in the front hall. I swept the front porch and the back porch and went out with a damp cloth and cleaned off the lawn chairs. I called the grocer and ordered two ducklings to roast for Saturday dinner and said I would take two dozen ears of corn if it was fresh picked. Then I took a shower and came downstairs and made dinner and remarked to my husband that we were having roast duckling for dinner on Saturday night and at first he looked pleased, then he said in a worried voice that lots of people didn't care for roast duckling and maybe I'd better make it rib-roast or something instead because he didn't want Sylvia to get a wrong impression.

On Saturday morning I woke up with my fists clenched and my teeth grinding and got out of bed telling myself that today I was not going to say an unnecessary word to anybody and I was going to smile all day long and I was going to keep my temper, keep my temper, keep my temper. I sang a careless little French song while I dressed myself and brushed my hair and then I let up the shade with a snap that was sure to wake my husband with a jolt. I stopped singing and nearly went back to bed, because it was raining outside. The last Saturday morning before school started, Labor Day weekend, summer's closing, and it was raining. Laurie was supposed to play baseball that afternoon. Jannie had engaged to walk down to the library with her friend Carole, where the two of them were permitted to check books in and out if their hands were clean. Sally had been invited to visit a neighbor's sandbox. I had thought to put Barry outdoors riding his bike while I finished up the housework. Laurie had his trumpet lesson on Saturday morning and this meant that I would have to drive him and trumpet there and back. For a minute I wondered whether I had left the guest room curtains out on the line, but of course I had.

" — Saturday?" my husband inquired drowsily.

"Saturday," I confirmed, using no unnecessary words. "Rain."

"Sylvia's coming."

I kicked his slippers under the bed and started downstairs. Barry fell in behind me as I passed his doorway; he must have seen that it was raining, because he was carrying Dikidiki. Sally capered out of her room singing her song about Harf, Booney, and Ray, three giants whom I did not ordinarily find tiresome and revolting. Our guests were due about two o'clock. Sally and Barry had been washing paintbrushes in the clean bathroom.

Behind me on the stairs Barry was making plans. "Because today is his *birthday*, Dikidiki Bear, and we will have a party for him, and all the bears and rabbits and dolls and even Skunk will come."

"And Mommy will make Dikidiki Bear a little cake," Sally said joyfully. "And we will wrap little presents and Mommy will make some lemonade to put in the doll dishes and a little cake and we can all have some candy."

Without employing an unnecessary word I plugged in the coffeepot and sent Barry up to wake his brother and Sally up to wake her sister, and I let the dog out and the cats in. I gathered up the dripping morning paper and declined to answer when my husband came downstairs and remarked that it *would* have to rain this weekend. I did not speak when Laurie smashed down the stairs into the kitchen and pointed with a furious finger to the rain running down the kitchen window. I closed my eyes in patient silence when Jannie remarked from upstairs that it always rained, *always*, when she had something planned and this just settled it, that was all. My husband told Sally and Barry about the nice lady who was coming to visit and added that if they behaved quietly and docilely all weekend they would each have a present on Monday morning, and Dikidiki Bear, too. Jannie came downstairs carrying her raincoat and her library books and remarked drearily that this was the kind of thing that always happened to her, *always.* My husband went to the kitchen window and looked out and then turned to me.

"Do you think it will rain all weekend?" he asked.

"Yes," I said.

After breakfast Sally and Barry retired to the playroom to brush and beribbon Dikidiki and his relatives. I drove Laurie to his trumpet lesson and came home and gathered up the breakfast dishes and put them in the dishwasher, trusting that I would get down to sweep the kitchen floor before two o'clock, and trudged upstairs to finish off my housework.

It was the morning to change all the sheets and because I detest changing sheets I wanted to get it done quickly so I could make a lemon pie for dinner and maybe even get a chance to sit down for a few minutes before two o'clock. I gathered up ten clean sheets and six pillowcases and went first into Barry's room, where I removed six teddy bears — cousins of Dikidiki Bear not yet invited to the party — a green rabbit, two hidden lollipops, and a wooden train from the bed, shifted the bed very cautiously in case Yain had been chasing Gato again and Gato was hiding here, and stripped and made the bed, neglecting square corners in favor of speed. Then I took up my armload of linen and made my way into Sally's room, sighed, and removed from her bed a stack of coloring books, a disintegrated box of crayons, two dolls, and an Oz book; under her pillow was a half-finished drawing she was doing on commission for her father. It was called "Two Witches Drinking Tea in a Cave," and it puzzled me for a minute until I realized that the blue-faced witch on the left was a vivid likeness of the dentist's nurse. I put the drawing on her desk, stacked the rest of the stuff on the floor where she would be sure to fall over it, and stripped and made the bed quickly, checking first in case Gato had been chasing Yain and Yain was hiding here, and dispensing with square corners.

When I came into Jannie's room, I perceived at once that she had been washing her own sweaters again, because her red nylon sweater, still sopping, fell from the top of the door onto my head. There was another wet sweater over the end of the bed and the box of soap flakes which she had bought with her allowance had spilled on the floor. I thought of how efficiently the washing machine did sweaters, and picked up *Little Women*, closed it, and put it back in the bookcase. On Jannie's bed were half a dozen fashion magazines, a box of popcorn left over from the movies, all the clothes she had taken off for the past week, and a little girl's make-up kit. I put the clothes in a heap near the door where *she* would be sure to fall over them, with the box of popcorn plaintively on top, and piled the rest of the things on the bookcase so she could not get to *Little Women* without putting them away. Under the desk I found what seemed to be a letter, addressed in Jannie's handwriting to "Charles J." with a heart drawn in one corner. I put it on top of the make-up kit, took the wet sweaters to hang over the edge of the bathtub, checked for Gato and Yain, and stripped and made the bed, with no square corners.

In order to get into the magpie's nest which Laurie called his bedroom, it was necessary to pass a series of forbidding signs which read "Private" and "Keep out — this means YOU" and "No admision without my permision." Once inside, there was a narrow passageway between the electric train table and the wall, if the closet door was shut. Beyond that, a quick turn past the end of the bookcase, an agile twist around the dresser, and you were in, knee-deep in old handicraft magazines and pictures of baseball players. I knew the way because I came in once a week to change the sheets. It always took a minute to find the bed. Underneath the bed were half a dozen cartons of odds and ends, an Erector set half built into a parachute jump, and three or four heavy boards with which he was someday going to make either a surfboard or a pool table. Reflecting that after making the bed of a twelve-year-old boy week after week, climbing Everest would seem a laughable anticlimax, I checked for Yain and Gato and made up the bed, standing on a carton of camp souvenirs and reaching with care around the parachute jump. I did not bother with square corners, and it was not possible to put the bedspread on, because it was draped over the window to make a kind of darkroom where Laurie had apparently been developing his own film. Because he had been to a school dance the night before his best pink shirt was over the lampshade and his black string tie was wound around the neck of the china rabbit on his dresser. After feeling around on the floor for a few minutes I found his good gray pants, which I put on a hanger and in the closet. His baseball uniform was hung up on the closet door, in perfect order, brushed and even, next to a picture of Don Newcombe. I lifted a corner of the bedspread over the window to check what I already knew, which was that the rain was still coming down, gray and dismal.

I gathered up all the used sheets and put them in the hamper, checking to make sure that Yain and Gato were not hiding in the hamper first, and got the laundry listed and ready to go. It was time to pick up Laurie and his trumpet, and I still had a lemon pie to make. On the way downstairs I stumbled over Sally's doll dishes, neatly arranged for a party on the bottom step.

It was not possible, in any case, to say an unnecessary word to Laurie on the way home, because he explained ceaselessly and with great rage that if this crummy rain didn't stop there would be no baseball game. "How we going to *play*?" he demanded of me indignantly, "how we going to play baseball in this *rain*?" He flexed his right arm. "It's already stiff," he told me drearily, "that's all I *need*, for heaven's sake." He stamped into the house and up the back stairs. "Who messed up everything in my room?" he howled.

It was a quarter to twelve. I opened the cabinet to get out the peanut butter and Laurie remarked from the kitchen doorway " — never get to play baseball, so can I please have Jannie's goldfish to dissect for my microscope?"

"No."

"But how'm I ever going to use my microscope if you won't let me *dissect* anything and it's just an old goldfish?"

"No."

"But I can't play—"

An idea came to me. "Sally," I said.

"Dissect Sally? You tipped?"

"No." I threw unnecessary words far and wide. "I want a sheet of her big drawing paper and a black crayon."

"What for?"

"Never mind."

He stared at me for a minute and then he said, "I got a picture upstairs she made me take, of a prince killing a wicked dragon and you can use the back."

"Get it."

Looking back at me over his shoulder, he went to the stairs and up to his room. He came back with the picture and a heavy drawing pencil. I spread the paper out on the kitchen table and with Laurie breathing heavily on my neck I wrote in big letters:

ULTIMATUM

"What does that mean?" Laurie asked.

"It means I have a headache," I said, and wrote:

BECAUSE OF GENERAL CONDITION OF BEDROOMS, WHINING,
AND ALTOGETHER DISTASTEFUL AND INFURIATING HABITS,
ALSO BECAUSE I AM TIRED OF HOUSEWORK AND CLEANING
AND PICKING UP AFTER EVERYBODY:

No movies for anyone until further notice.

No guests for ANY meals, including ballplayers, even when it’s too far to go home for lunch.

All allowances cut in half.

Television one hour per person per day.

Bedtime for everyone until further notice is 8:30. EIGHT-THIRTY.

The system of fines will be rigidly enforced for:

disorderly rooms

uncared-for clothes

shutting cats in rooms unless hiding

teasing Barry

properties left on stairs

All goldfish to be kept under lock and key.

“Hey,” Laurie said. “Hey.”

Jannie was home from the library. We could hear her out in the driveway saying goodbye to her friend Carole. “And I’m not ever going to speak to *you* again, either,” Jannie was saying, “and you can go swimming this afternoon with someone else, see if *I* care.” She came up onto the porch and called loudly, “And I’m going to tell Charlie Johnson every single word you said, and tell him who said it, too. Hi,” she said, opening the door, “what’s for lunch? Daddy’s company here yet?”

"I bet *you* sure thought you were going to see a baseball game today, I bet. I bet you're sure going to see some baseball game *today.*"

"I was going swimming anyway," Jannie said unsympathetically, "except it's raining real hard out. What're you doing?"

"I am reforming this household," I said.

"Yeah," Laurie said.

I took my ultimatum and tacked it up on the kitchen wall where it was clearly visible to anyone sitting at the table for lunch. "That just makes this just a perfect day," Laurie said.

"What's the matter with *her*?" Jannie asked Laurie.

"She's tipped," Laurie said with conviction.

"I think it's Dad's company coming," Jannie said perceptively. "I think she's sore because Dad's got company coming and she hasn't got any."

"It is not," I said. I had forgotten to get lemons.

"But *eight-thirty*," Laurie said.

Sally came into the kitchen and stopped, looking at me plaintively. "You know that big doll of mine that Jannie wrote all over with crayon?"

"I didn't, it was Laurie and he wrote my name."

"You did so write on it, I saw you. Because it was the day Mommy said she would take you to get new shoes if you didn't do one single more thing bad all day and you did and she didn't take you."

"She did so take me and I got sneakers."

"Because anyway," Sally went on, addressing me, "you know that big doll? Because I was making a house and playing very nicely for Dikidiki Bear's birthday." She turned to Jannie. "We're going to have a party and no bad girls can come if they write on dolls."

"See if I care."

"What is it?" I turned to Laurie, who was poking me urgently.

" — goldfish?"

"No."

"So *anyway* I *told* him not to and he did anyway. So," Sally went on insistently, "I think you better come and get him out."

"Who?"

"*Barry.* I been *telling* you."

"Barry?"

"Yes, because he's *stuck* in the *toy* box."

As I headed wearily for the stairs Laurie was saying with heavy disgust, "You see what she's gone and done, there on the wall? All because you girls leave your room in a mess, my goodness, and always fighting, and *now* look."

Barry was head down in the toy box, feet waving cheerfully. I picked my way carefully through thousands of little plastic cars and trucks, unwedged Barry, breaking a fingernail on the top of the toy box, and promised Dikidiki Bear an extra cookie if Barry would give me five minutes of his time to pick up the playroom. There was a sudden great shout of laughter from the kitchen below. With Barry's unwilling co-operation I scooped up handfuls of little cars and trucks and dumped them into the wooden box where they belonged. By the time I had the floor almost cleared Barry had uncovered a box of jigsaw puzzles and poured puzzle pieces in a heap; while I was gathering up the puzzle pieces, he went and got Jannie's doll house. I picked up Dikidiki, retied his pink ribbon, and sat down on the toy box with him in my lap. Gato came to the doorway, moving fast, saw me, and veered toward Laurie's room and safe cover.

"Barry," I said, "you know what I would like to do more than anything?"

Barry bent over the doll house. "Here is the baby doll named Barry," he said. "And his mommy is putting him to bed. He is *already* in his pajamas."

“Mexico, maybe,” I said. “Someplace where it’s hot and I don’t need to talk to anyone because I can’t understand a word they say.”

Far away the phone rang. “I’ll get it,” Laurie shrieked; Jannie howled, “It’s for meeeee”; “*I* want to,” Sally yelled.

“Hello?” Barry said into the doll-house telephone.

Downstairs, the study door opened. “Company here?” my husband inquired.

Then, without warning, a great shout arose, from Jannie in the kitchen, Laurie at the phone, my husband in the study, Sally somewhere out front. Barry lifted his head and nodded wisely. “Sunshine,” he pointed out. The rain had stopped, the clouds were blowing off, and the sun was out, in that unbelievable unexpected brightness which makes the electric lights look faded. Barry and I started downstairs and we could hear Laurie in the study saying, “Signed Sylvia, and it said very sorry car broke down Albany must return maybe next year.”

“Car broke down Albany?” My husband sounded puzzled.

My ultimatum on the kitchen wall was gone, hidden now behind a second sheet of Sally’s big drawing paper, on which was written in black crayon:

OUR TERMS. If preveleges are returned we agree to —

take care of our rooms except Barry

wip feet

brush all teeth dayly

pick up things except not in rooms like clothes read to Barry and put him to bed and dress him unless he bites

praktice music lessons

remeber to set table

only Barry has got to leave other peoples things alone

also if Barry bites we can bite back

and after this if Dad has got company coming Mommy has got to have a
guest too because otherwise she gets grouchy

This document was signed by the three older children and gave Barry a good deal of honest amusement because, as he pointed out, he only bited when other people bited him first. My husband came to the lunch table, informed me of the telegram and the cancellation of our guests, and I told the children magnanimously that all privileges would be restored and they could have one more chance on keeping things neat. Sally and Barry decided to postpone Dikidiki's birthday party to the next rainy day. Jannie telephoned Carole and they decided to go berrying, so I said I would make a raspberry shortcake for dessert. Laurie came downstairs in his uniform and invited us all to come and see him play baseball, and my husband said we would, if Mother was not too tired from doing all that housework.

Laurie's ball team won easily. In the bottom of the fourth inning, when Laurie hit a double with the bases loaded, I turned to my husband and said in a forgiving kind of voice, "I'm sorry that your friends couldn't make it."

"Maybe it's just as well," my husband said. He broke off to address Laurie. "Slide, you lunatic, *slide*," he yelled. "Thinking about it," he went on to me, "I'm not so sure you *would* have liked her, after all."

• • •

Laurie’s baseball team came in second for the summer, and Laurie and Billy and Artie and a dozen others graduated officially from the Little League because they would be too old to play another year. Everyone went off for the first day of school, bright in new shoes and jackets. After the first few mornings of fruitless railing at the alarm clock I became reconciled to getting up at seven again. One evening at the end of the first week of school I was sitting in the study unhappily fidgeting with a tooth which had contained a gold inlay until an entanglement with a salted peanut about five minutes before. My husband, who has no gold inlays, was eating salted peanuts and trying to read the evening paper. Laurie was up in his room with all the doors shut between him and us, practicing “When the Saints Come Marching In” on his trumpet. Jannie was playing the first line of “Flow Gently, Sweet Afton” over and over on the piano, making the same mistake each time. Sally was in the front room off the study watching a children’s program on television; every now and then a hoarse, inhuman voice would rise in a shout of demonic laughter and announce, giggling, that all the little girls and boys watching the program must be sure and tell their mommies that they wanted only some crispy crunchy oh-so-good delicacy at the store. A little red caboose named Barry passed through the study regularly on his bicycle route, which went from the kitchen through the dining room through the hall through the study and back to the kitchen again.

I took my tongue out of the hole in my tooth, and said to my husband, “What I would like more than anything else in the world is about three days in a hotel in New York City. Where it’s quiet.”

I spoke in the low, vibrant voice which will carry best at that hour of the evening, and my husband answered me in the same tone. “You probably ought to get to the dentist," he said.

"If I went to New York I could go to the dentist, because the dentist who put that gold inlay in in the first place is in New York."

Jannie lifted her hands from the piano keys, the trumpet stopped, the television set snapped off, the bike crashed into the kitchen table and stalled, and my voice rose clearly through the sudden silence. "In a hotel in New York—" I was saying, before I stopped.

"What was that?" Laurie called down from upstairs.

"Hey," said Jannie, swinging around on the piano bench.

"Mother was only talking," my husband said hastily, but Laurie was leaping down the last five steps and Jannie had reached the study and Barry, hopping, came in from the kitchen and Sally was already hanging over the back of my chair.

"We can see some movies, and maybe Dad and I can get to one of the last ball games if we write for tickets now, and never mind about the first few weeks of school, because we don't get report cards until—"

"And Mom and I can go shopping—"

"We'll get a big room in the hotel, because six beds—"

"Wait, wait," I said.

"What about Sally and Barry?" Jannie asked Laurie.

He considered. "They're pretty young," he said. "The dog can go stay at the kennel, and I'll ask Rob to come over and feed the cats, but I suppose Sally and Barry—"

"Sally will have to get a new hat."

"Oh, we'll *all* have to get *clothes*. But never mind about *clothes*. Mom can just stay in the hotel room until *she* gets something to wear, and Dad and I don't need much for ball games and things, and the little kids must have a lot of junk to wear. But the Statue of Liberty—"

"It's too cold," I said. "And in the first place I was only speaking to your father, and in the second place any mention of New York was with reference to my going to the dentist, and in the third place—"

"We can't afford it," my husband said.

"And maybe we can get in to see a television show being broadcast," Jannie said to Laurie.

"Mom can't drive down, that's for sure," Laurie said. "Not with all of *us* in the car."

"Barry," Jannie cooed, "would you like to *ride* on a *train*?"

"Yup," said Barry.

"I'm going to have sirloin steak and chocolate ice cream every night, boy."

"Hah," said my husband.

"Sally, would *you* like to go to New *York* and *stay* in a *hotel*?"

Sally lifted her chin sleepily from my shoulder. "Go where?" she said.

In terms of actual physical transportation, getting to New York from our home in Vermont is almost unsurmountably difficult. Even if I could drive to New York with the children in the car, I could certainly not drive *in* New York, due to an uncontrollable tendency toward wiggling the wheel back and forth when I find myself surrounded by cars traveling in different directions. Naturally people are leaving our town all the time, going everywhere, and even sometimes coming back again, but none of them, we found, will answer a direct question about transportation. There is no train coming or going from our town; the nearest train is in Albany, fifty miles away. There is a bus which goes from our neighboring town, which is only six miles away, but that bus only goes farther into Vermont; occasionally a rogue bus gets off toward Albany, but of course it would be pretty silly for six of us to go sit in the bus station hoping that a bus might be going to

Albany that day. Our local taxi would take us to Albany, but then, after we got to Albany, we would have to turn around and come home again, having run out of money. Finally, after a good deal of family discussion, in which the only fact that emerged clearly was that Barry was going to ride on a train, my husband remembered a fellow coin-collector who was desperately anxious for an 1877 Indian Head penny, and who agreed to drive us to Albany in return for the one in my husband's collection. All of us except my husband were amused at the notion that it was only going to cost us a penny to get to Albany. Laurie suggested that the coin collection be doled out, coin by coin, to pay our expenses in New York, and his father said gloomily that it was probably going to turn out to be like that, anyway.

Although none of us had any clothes to wear in New York, we took five suitcases. I also had a little black bag holding candy, handkerchiefs, crayons, coloring books, six volumes of fairy tales, the latest handicraft magazine, two jigsaw puzzles, and a bottle of cough medicine. Barry had Dikidiki. Sally had a new gray knitted hat with a fringed tail hanging down the back. Laurie and Jannie had looks of pleased anticipation.

It has long been my belief that in times of great stress, such as a four-day vacation, the thin veneer of family unity wears off almost at once, and we are revealed in our true personalities; Laurie, for instance, is a small-town mayor, Jannie a Games Mistress, Sally a vague, stern old lady watching the rest of us with remote disapproval, and Barry a small intrepid foot soldier, following unquestioningly and doggedly. The two nervous creatures hovering in the background, making small futile gestures and tending to laugh weakly, are, of course, unmistakable. They are there to help with the luggage. These several personalities began to emerge in the car driving to Albany, and Sally's hat began to unravel.

So long as we were within familiar territory, the circle of about ten miles which I cover regularly and of which I know every path and house, I was fairly comfortable, remarking at intervals, “I’m sure no one will get into the house,” and, “Does anyone remember whether we finally put in the little black bag?” When we got out into the world, and the hills were no longer at the same angle and the road turned past bewilderingly strange trees and houses, my hands began to tremble, and I said things like, “Hadn’t we just better go back and see if—” and, “I’m almost sure I forgot to—” My husband kept asking Barry, “Well, are you going on a *train*?” and Barry kept saying, “Yup,” and clutching Dikidiki tighter. “Are you going to ride on a *train*?” I asked him, and Barry said, “Yup,” but Dikidiki turned pale.

Jannie and Laurie, smooth and sleek in their best clothes, devoted themselves to reassuring the rest of us; halfway to Albany my husband stopped asking Barry if he was going on a train and started asking me if I had remembered to find out what time the train left, and I kept telling him that I thought I had left the light on in the cellar. “Don’t worry,” Laurie said repeatedly, “it doesn’t *matter*; *is* this a vacation or *isn’t* it?”

“Now everybody *smile*!” Jannie cried gaily.

Sally is so often silent that no one thought to watch her particularly; if I noticed the little slip of gray wool in her hand it made no impression on me. As a matter of fact, I *had* gotten the time of the train wrong, but we made it, and the conductor was very nice about catching my husband’s arm. We put Barry and Laurie in one seat, Sally and Jannie in the next seat, and then Barry had to move to sit with Jannie so Dikidiki could sit between them, and by the time Laurie had his coat off and up on the rack Sally had gotten herself somehow wedged between the two seats with her coat half off. While I was untangling Sally, Jannie and her father were taking off Barry’s coat so I took off my own coat. There was by now no room to put it up on the rack over our seats, so Laurie took it across the aisle to where there was an empty space on the rack, and when he tried to put it up, it fell down on an old man reading science fiction. When everyone was sitting down again, Dikidiki decided that he had to sit next to the window, so Laurie changed with Jannie and then Sally thought that she would like to look out of the window, too, so Jannie changed with Sally. Then the old man reading science fiction got up and went and sat down at the other end of the car, so Sally thought she would sit over in his empty seat instead. "Are you on a *train*?" my husband asked Barry; "Is this a *train*?" Laurie asked, and I put in, "*Look*, we're all on a *train*." "Yup," Barry kept saying. "Yup."

"Listen," Laurie said, leaning forward to talk to his father and me. "Now, the diner's three cars up and I figure we better get into the diner early because there are such a lot of us. Jannie and I will sit at a table by ourselves because they only have tables for four, and you two can take care of the kids. And I better have the tickets, because if they get lost..."

We were really on the train, with our children, our suitcases, and Dikidiki; we were going to New York. That was, I believe, my last clear, co-ordinated thought. From that moment until I came back through our own front door again, four days later, nothing happened in any kind of reasonable or logical order; nothing made sense. I know that we reached Grand Central Station, and it was my fault that Barry fell down the crack between the train and the platform; I was looking back over my shoulder counting heads and Barry stepped into the crack, but the porter unwedged him. Then the porter vanished as we assembled on the platform with our suitcases, so that, at last, my husband carried two suitcases, Laurie carried two, Jannie carried one, and Sally carried the little black bag. Barry carried Dikidiki and I was supposed to lead Barry with one hand and Sally with the other; Laurie and Jannie followed us, and my husband brought up the rear, stopping every few feet to put down his two suitcases and pick up Dikidiki.

“Look at all the cars there were on our train,” I told Barry, and Barry said, “Yup.”

Sally giggled. “I bet *that* train doesn’t get very far,” she said, and showed me the long thread of gray wool following us. “I tied the end to the seat in the train,” she said. “I’d like to see *that* train get away.”

In Vermont we do not have revolving doors. Laurie finally had to go in and get Sally out; we estimated that with the expanse of the station and the length of the train platform and the number of times she had been around in the revolving door we had lost nearly three miles of gray thread. The hat was by now only a little beanie-type which sat on top of Sally’s head. Because the end of the thread was caught in the revolving door, Barry and Jannie and I stood in fascination while Laurie and my husband tried to get a taxi, watching the hat unraveling off Sally’s head. The last knot disappeared out the taxi window when we were about halfway to the hotel.

I remember the hotel because we had a suite of three bedrooms and a kind of foyer in the middle; nothing was where it is at home. “I guess we’re here,” my husband said. “I wish I could remember whether I left the study window open,” I said. I had carefully put Barry’s pajamas in the top of one of the suitcases, but he and Dikidiki were asleep before I could get it open. Sally and Laurie and Jannie went around and around the three rooms, moving restlessly, surveying beds and dressers and pictures and admiring the array of towels in the bathroom and reading all the little notices out loud.

We were awakened bright and early in the morning by the chambermaid, who had found Barry in the hall, clad in the top half of his pajamas. He had locked himself out of the room, and when the chambermaid came by he was standing there pounding furiously on the door. “Monsters,” he was screaming, purple-faced, “monsters, monsters!”

At breakfast Laurie and Jannie endeavored to map out our plans for the time in New York. “I don’t want to take the kids into any more restaurants than we can help,” Laurie said. “Maybe from now on we could get some bread and peanut butter and milk and stuff and Mom could kind of fix some meals here in the hotel room.”

“Indeed Mom could not,” I assured him earnestly. “One of the things I came to New York *for* was to go to restaurants and have steak and pork fried rice and hot tacos and shishkebab and veal cutlets parmigiana and wiener schnitzel and shrimp curry and—”

“Don’t you want to do anything except *eat*?”

“No,” I said, with my eyes shut. “And cheese blintzes and sukiyaki and —”

Laurie said to Jannie, “Well, if Dad and I go to a ball game, you’ll have to take Sally and Barry and Mom and go shopping or something. *You* know, clothes and stuff. Maybe take Barry on buses.”

“Mother has to go to the dentist,” my husband said.

“Oh, *Dad* — she can do that at *home*.”

“Certainly,” I said. “So then it’s settled; Jannie and Sally and I will go shopping and I will get myself a new housecoat, black, and I think a pair of lizard shoes. Or snake-skin.”

“No,” my husband said.

“And Laurie and Dad can go to the ball game.”

“Sally will need a new hat,” Jannie said. She turned to Barry, and said lovingly, “Now I want you to be *sure* not to fall out the window of the bus.”

“What do *you* want to do in New York, Perfessor?” Laurie asked Sally.

Sally lifted her head from her coloring book. “Where?” she said.

The children retired to their several rooms to dress, and a spirited argument began between Jannie and Sally. Jannie injudiciously pointed out that Sally would sure be excited when she saw the big stores. And the tall buildings. "New York," Jannie said, "has the tallest building in the world."

That was precisely the kind of statement to arouse Sally, in whose world nothing was ever so stable as to warrant a superlative. "I just *bet*," she said.

"Laurie?" Jannie called. "Isn't the tallest building in the world right here in New York?"

"Empire State," Laurie said.

"I *bet*," Sally said. "I better just *see* this tallest building in the world, I just guess."

"Daddy?"

"Indeed, yes," my husband said. "The very tallest. Mother," he said, "will take you in an elevator right to the top."

"No, she won't," I said, shuddering.

"I don't need to go to the *top*." Sally was amused. "If it really *is* the tallest there's no sense going all the way to the *top*. But even from the *bottom* I just bet it's not the tallest."

"Well," said Laurie, nettled, "the people in New York certainly *think* it is, anyway. They tell *every*body."

"I just *bet*," Sally said direfully.

It turned out, Jannie and I subsequently discovered when we were shopping, that Sally was also not prepared to believe in escalators. "No," she said, standing at the bottom and clutching Barry firmly. "No. Not for me or for Barry neither. Stairs are hard enough by theirselves, not moving."

"I'll carry you," I said desperately. "I'll carry you up and then come back down and get Barry."

"It's *easy*," Jannie insisted. "I've done it lots of times."

"Nope." Sally pressed back against the crowd around us. "I don't know where it goes," she said.

"Just to the top — see the people getting off?"

"But," Sally said, "those are not the same people as the ones getting on down here. The people get on and go somewhere but the people who get off are just the ones that old staircase *lets* get off. And look coming down over there — all different."

I am afraid of elevators. "Look, Sally," I said, "I *promise* you—"

"*You* can get on if you want to," Sally said. "Me and Barry will go back and tell Daddy where you went."

I think that was the day that Jannie wanted to look at wedding gowns, or perhaps that was the day after. One day Laurie and Jannie went to Radio City with their father, so that must have been the day I took Sally and Barry to the zoo, and Barry and Dikidiki stood and looked silently at the polar bear and the polar bear stood and looked silently at Barry and Dikidiki. Sally was perplexed because the animals were not in cages when so many of the people in the city *were*. "*Why* are they all in cages," she asked insistently, moving along beside me, "in stores and restaurants and movies and everything, they have someone in a cage? But the big stone lions we saw are just standing right out there and the people in cages?"

"Look at the rhinoceros," I said.

"And in the hotel, in cages? Do they eat people, like children? Is that bear going to eat Dikidiki? Do baby birds have tiny toy eggs to play with?"

It must have been the same day, because I had Barry and Sally, that we stood, craning our necks, with people passing by smiling at us, three country innocents gaping at the topless towers of the Empire State Building.

"See?" I said to Sally.

She shook her head mournfully. “Poor New York people,” she said. “Going around saying *this* is the tallest.”

“Well, it *is*,” I said.

Sally sighed. “When even a little girl like me can come here and see lots taller right in the same city.”

“It says in the books—”

“How do books know? Just looking around *any*one can see lots taller, and wider too.”

“Well,” I said compromisingly, “maybe you better just not say anything about it. It’s not polite to come here from Vermont and start finding fault. And if the people here want to think this *is* the tallest, it’s not up to a little girl like you to get them all upset about it.”

“But if I tried to tell someone that Daddy was the smartest man in the world and it said so in a book, you would say I was not telling the truth? Why do they have all those cars in the street but everybody walking? Can Barry and I each have a present because we’ve been good? Can Barry have a little fire truck?”

I had Sally with me most of the time because it made her father very nervous when she was talking because he had no answers for her questions, but when she was not talking he was always worrying over what she was probably thinking. Consequently, it must have been on the third day of our visit that Laurie and his father and Barry were on a ferryboat, and I agreed to Jannie’s eager proposal that we take Sally to lunch in the Automat. Once, for a very brief period of my life, I worked selling books in Macy’s, and although they have remodeled the book department since my time, and I can no longer direct anyone to the section devoted to books on psychiatry and reincarnation, I can still recall, poignantly, the rare flavor of the cafeteria lunch. I was able to explain to Sally, standing before the cafeteria rail in the Automat with the usual little group of amused cynics listening, how you got something to eat in a cafeteria. Sally accepted the concept of a cafeteria, with reservations, but when I then directed her to the little cubbyholes with their glass fronts she balked absolutely. “No,” she said.

“I’ll show you,” I said.

“No,” Sally said flatly, regarding a nesselrode pie. “It won’t work.”

“*Other* people—”

“Like that tall building. They just *think* so, is all.”

“But look at Jannie.” Jannie’s tray held a little pot of baked beans and a glass of milk; she was going slowly back and forth before the fairyland of desserts, eyes bright and nickels clutched firmly.

“Jannie’s just lucky,” Sally said. “They didn’t grab it first.”

“Who didn’t grab what?”

“The people in the cages,” Sally said. “On the other side of that glass where the people are, in the cages.”

“There *are* people back there, surely. But they put things *in*. *We* take them *out*.”

“Well, they’re not going to get any of *my* nickels,” Sally said. She reached up and opened the little glass door and took out the piece of nesselrode pie.

“No,” I said. “Sally, no, that’s *not* the *way*. You *have* to put the *nickels* in.” I flapped my hands helplessly at the little glass door, swinging open. “Put it back,” I said.

“No,” Sally said. “On the other side, in the cage, they put *their* nickels in, and I just reached and grabbed fast. If I,” she added complacently, “had of put *my* nickels in first, and if *they*’d been quicker, then *they*—”

“Jannie,” I said, and skidded down to where Jannie was trying to balance a piece of chocolate nut cake and two cinnamon buns on her tray. I took the tray away from her and got it to a table, and she followed me, insisting, “Wait, wait, I didn’t get *half* the things there were, I got to get—”

I told her to stay right at the table and not move, and went back for Sally, who was remarking patronizingly to a gentleman trying to get to a parkerhouse roll, “ — might *think* it’s the tallest, but even a little girl—”

• • •

There came one moment in our New York visit when we all sat wearily in the hotel room together. I had taken my shoes off, and my husband was trying to read his paper by the bedlight. Laurie, flung over the desk chair, observed suddenly that, golly, tomorrow night was band rehearsal at home. Jannie said that she hadn’t practiced “Flow Gently, Sweet Afton” for days and days and *days*. Sally lifted her head from her jigsaw puzzle to ask if people in New York stayed there all the time, or only came when we did, and Barry, on the floor pushing his fire engine half-heartedly, said, “You know there was a big white house where we used to live before we lived here and maybe sometime we can go and visit *there* again for some days in a little while.”

My husband telephoned his coin-collector friend that night and offered him an ancient silver dollar if he would meet us in Albany the next afternoon.

When I walked in through our own front door and Yain and Gato came to cross back and forth between my ankles I put my little black suitcase down on the floor and said to my husband, “You know, I didn’t get to the dentist after all.”

In the morning, at my own breakfast table, where the coffee was decently strong and the toast was hot and crisp, I told my husband that we had come off pretty well, considering. “We lost Sally’s hat, of course,” I said, “and that glove of mine and the bottom half of Barry's pajamas in the hotel room."

"I forgot to mail the postcards," my husband said. "You'll have to drive around today and deliver them."

"Dikidiki went on a train," Barry said.

"We only saw two movies," Laurie said. "I figured we'd see more."

"Sally," I asked, "did you have a good time in New York?"

Sally lifted her chin from the edge of the table. "Where?" she said.

• • •

The next morning was Monday and everyone went off to school again, world-bemused travelers. I picked up Toby at the kennel, which of course meant that on Monday we had two cats and one dog. Toby is actually the second oldest child in the family, being, we estimate, one year younger than Laurie. He has been Laurie's personal dog ever since the bright spring morning when Laurie was four and a half and we were still recovering from the impact of our first Vermont winter. When Laurie came through the back door that sunny morning, asking as he came, "Can I have a dog?" my husband and I both, staring at the great embarrassed creature trying to edge through the door behind him, said, with one voice, "No." "Don't let that beast in here," my husband said, putting down his coffee cup; "Shoo," I said. The dog, horribly upset, tried to curtsy ingratiatingly, put his left hind foot into an empty milk bottle, mistook the dining room doorway for a way out, and, hurrying, sideswiped a dining room chair, skidded on the milk bottle, and brought up sprawled flat against the buffet, wagging his tail and smiling in a sheepish manner.

"I want to name him Toby," Laurie said, regarding his dog with pride.

When my husband attempted to herd the dog outside again, the dog clearly interpreted the anxious, brushing motions as friendly overtures; with a wriggle of pure delight he rose, put his front paws on my husband's shoulders and put his head down and licked my husband's ear.

"Go away," my husband said, looking up into the dog's face. "Heel. Play dead."

"Down, sir," I offered.

"Come on, Toby," Laurie said. "I'm going to teach you some tricks."

After nearly ten years, Laurie was still trying to teach Toby some tricks. Toby was amiable, sentimental, and desperately anxious to please, but the simplest command got lost somewhere in that big head. We had a neighbor with a female dog and a glass-paned back-porch door, and one night my husband figured out that what with the amount Toby ate, and replacing the glass panes in our neighbor's back door twice a year, Toby's mean annual cost was only slightly less than Laurie's, even figuring in Laurie's allowance.

When I got Toby back from the kennel on the Monday after we came home from New York, I had to pay for the wire fence he had broken down, and the vet remarked wanly that although Toby was getting on in years he really seemed to be getting bigger. I disengaged myself from Toby's welcoming embrace and said tartly that we were none of us getting any younger, although when I got Toby home I could not help noticing that he was getting to be a venerable old man, with touches of gray at his temples and a little extra weight around the middle. I pointed this out to my husband and he put back his shoulders and pulled in his stomach and said that you had to figure that every year of a dog's life was equal to seven years of a person's life, so that Toby was nearly seventy. I said that Toby had followed the car when I went shopping one afternoon recently. Just out of curiosity I had checked him going up the big hill and he could still run thirty-five miles an hour, and I just hoped that when I was seventy *I* could run thirty-five miles an hour going uphill. My husband said it would probably depend on what I was chasing.

On Tuesday the senior cat, Yain, absent-mindedly turned his back on the spaniel from across the street, and Laurie and I took him to the vet's to be hospitalized for a mangled ear. Laurie swore that he saw the junior cat, Gato, walk down to the end of the driveway and shake hands with the spaniel, but I was inclined to doubt this, since Gato did not usually trouble himself to walk any farther than the distance between wherever he happened to be sleeping and the dish where he got his food.

On Wednesday, Toby was badly frightened by the last grasshopper of the season and took the back screen door off its hinges trying to get in fast and crawl under the piano, where he hid whenever he was attacked by fiends, such as grasshoppers, wedging himself in head first with his eyes tight shut, hoping that no one would notice the piano shaking and the great dog feet tucked in under the pedals.

On Thursday I went into the kitchen and opened the drawer where I kept hair barrettes and odd buttons and skate keys; I was looking for a pair of shoelaces for Barry, and when I opened the drawer a mouse jumped out. I was considerably startled, probably because it had been so long since I had seen a mouse in the kitchen, and I gave a kind of a howl and slammed the drawer, catching the mouse by the tail so that he hung head down, cursing and waving his fists at me. Although a mouse hanging upside down by the tail and calling names was not something I saw every day, I left the kitchen in some haste, reeling through the dining room and crying out something incoherent which may very well have been "Help, help!" as Laurie maintained. It sent Toby scuttling under the piano and brought my four children, armed with baseball bats, parasols, and rocket guns, into the kitchen.

“Get a *cat*, for heaven’s sake,” Laurie yelled, and while he stood with his baseball bat raised menacingly, I tiptoed across the kitchen — there was actually no need to tiptoe, as I realized later, since of course the mouse could see me perfectly well; he was by then smiling tightly and tapping his fingers irritably against the drawer — and poked around in the washing machine until Gato put his head out, yawning, and looked at me inquiringly. I pulled him out and, still tiptoeing, carried him over to the drawer, told him, “Look, Gato, mouse, *mouse*,” and set him down on the floor. Laurie opened the drawer, I howled, and the mouse fell on Gato’s head. There was a musical crash as Jannie’s first-year exercise book fell off the piano rack onto the keys. Barry giggled, Sally and Jannie clung to one another wordlessly, and Laurie put his baseball bat down very gently onto the kitchen counter.

“Boy,” he said at last, turning to look at Gato fastidiously washing his head on top of the refrigerator. “Boy, what a cat, a positive carnivorous wild beast. Get down off that chair,” he said to me. “You look silly.”

“I was just standing here,” I said, coming down much slower than I went up. “Where’s the mouse?”

Laurie gestured at the kitchen cabinets, where there was a great stirring and squeaking, as of some smart-aleck mouse telling his guffawing friends about the funny thing that happened to him a few minutes ago. “Boy,” said Laurie helplessly, and he took up his baseball bat and went out to hit practice grounders.

On Thursday evening I went into the kitchen about eleven o’clock to make my husband a cold pot-roast sandwich and when I reached for the light cord a mouse ran down my arm and my husband had to come into the kitchen and lead me out. Gato, who had been sleeping on the waffle iron, arose in great indignation and went upstairs to sleep on Jannie’s doll bed, after several pointed remarks about people who kept decent cats awake all night with their mice.

On Friday morning there was a mouse in the breadbox and around lunchtime on Friday my husband discovered a mouse on the dining room buffet eating a dish of salted almonds my husband had been saving for himself. It was at that time that the question of a new cat first arose. My husband announced shrilly that he personally would be prepared to pay any amount of money for a cat who was a *cat* and caught mice instead of spending all his time sleeping in the oven and eating his head off. This provoked Gato into coming out of the oven with icy courtesy and going across the kitchen and upstairs without even a glance at any of us. He spent the rest of the day sulking in Sally's toy box and therefore did not attend the animated family meeting which began almost immediately.

"A cat," my husband said over and over. "A cat that will catch and kill and get rid of mice. A *cat*, not a furry lounge lizard." He shook his fist wildly after Gato.

"Well, how about a dog, then?" Laurie asked.

"Oh, *yes*!" Jannie clasped her hands ardently. "He could help Toby guard the house, and we could teach him cute little tricks—"

"A tiny puppy," Sally said with joy.

"A tiny puppy," Barry confirmed, "and *I* will teach him to play baseball."

"Females are the best mousers," I said, as one who has spent years of study on the subject. "Besides," I went on, "maybe a pretty lady cat would be so gentle and nice she would influence Gato and Yain and they would stop quarreling all the time."

"Well, a *dog*, now," Laurie said.

My husband was looking at me curiously. "Is it your opinion—" he began.

“ — tricks?”

“ — that females of any species whatsoever—”

“ — and dress him in doll clothes and a little bonnet—”

“ — have *any* such effect?”

“ — and name him Pal.”

Discussion continued through lunch. Then, as the result of a wholly dispassionate vote in which my husband and I were inevitably outnumbered four to two, I drove in to the local newspaper office and left two advertisements for the paper. The first ad read:

Wanted to buy: female cat, kitten or half grown, good mouser. Call 5679.

The second ad read:

Wanted to buy: puppy, mongrel large breed preferred. Call 5679.

The paper came out at two o’clock on Saturday afternoon. At about two-fifteen Laurie’s friend Rob came by on his bike and dropped off our copy of the paper. While we were all gathered around the kitchen table, admiring the appearance of our ads in print, the phone began to ring.

On Saturday evening, then, we had two dogs and three cats. One dog, Toby, was under the piano. One cat, Yain, had been unexpectedly returned, convalescent, by the vet, who said he was to be kept warm and quiet and away from other animals, since he was still extremely touchy on the whole subject of ears and spaniels. Yain, then, was down cellar, where I had hurried him without attracting Gato’s attention. Gato was pacing ceaselessly back and forth, talking to himself, in front of the door which led to the back apartment. In the back apartment was an elegant gray golden-eyed lady cat. In the barn, howling remotely, was a great wriggling grinning brown puppy who gave irresistible evidence of planning to grow up to be exactly like Toby. Laurie had put a sign on the barn door saying “Do not open!! Dog!!” and Jannie had put a sign on the kitchen door into the back apartment saying “Do not open cat” and Sally had put a sign on the cellar door saying “DO K SALLY THIS IS FROM ME.”

The next morning the children were up early, to take the puppy his breakfast, and they got me out of bed rather before my usual Sunday morning hour of arising to report that the puppy would not eat cornflakes. When I came unwillingly downstairs Gato was lying in a great black heap on top of the broom closet, which commanded a full view of the door to the back apartment; he glanced at me with a look that said clearly that after he had taken care of the gray cat he would have a word or two to say to the rest of us, and it crossed my mind that Gato did not know, yet, about either the puppy or Yain’s return.

I put milk into Gato’s dish and into Toby’s, and then took down three more bowls and filled them with milk. While Gato and Toby were drinking their milk I gave Laurie one bowl to take out to the puppy in the barn, and eased the cellar door open a crack so Jannie could squeeze through and take a bowl of milk down to Yain. However, when I opened the door of the back apartment to let Sally go in there with the third bowl of milk the gray cat slipped through and into the kitchen, where she went directly to Toby’s dish and began to drink his milk while Toby stepped back, looking with indignant anger from me to the gray cat and back again. Gato lifted his chin and stared incredulously, and the gray cat began a growl that started somewhere near the floor and broke off in a high register as I grabbed her up and carried her, struggling, back into the back apartment to her own bowl of milk. The barn door slammed as Laurie backed out, and down cellar Yain began to howl dismally.

“*That* was a dirty trick,” Jannie said, shocked. “That cat *scared* Toby.” Toby sniffled in corroboration.

“Why’d we *get* all these cats and dogs, anyway?” Sally asked. “Seems like it would be easier just having *mice* for pets.”

During breakfast, while Yain wailed down cellar and the puppy yapped in the barn and Gato prowled back and forth before the back apartment door and my husband said half a dozen times that he personally planned to spend the entire day in the study with the door shut, the children and I mapped out a kind of plan whereby our several pets might become acquainted and enjoy a morning’s lighthearted play together. It went without saying that this must happen outdoors; aside from the probably harrowing effect upon the mice of sitting in upon the introduction of three cats to two dogs, I keep my French salad plates and my grandmother’s Italian decanter set and the ashtray Sally made in kindergarten on shelves in the kitchen. In any case the children ought to be out enjoying the sunlight instead of wasting away indoors. Therefore, I sent Sally and Barry out to settle in the sandbox, on the lawn near the back door. I planned to run Yain directly outside, from the cellar through the kitchen through the side hall to the side door, with no stopoffs, and Jannie was posted at that side of the house with the particular aim of herding Yain away from all other animals. Laurie was to ride around and around the house on his bike, doing courier service, and I was to be stationed on the back porch with the back door open behind me to serve as a retreat or as a temptation in case the sunny weather lured any mice out for a morning stroll.

I began by letting Toby out the front door onto the front porch; he was mildly surprised, since it is not his usual door, but there seemed to be nothing outstandingly menacing on the front porch, so he went out and sat down on the steps. Gato was established on the kitchen table and refused to move, which barred the way of exit for Yain from the cellar. I went first into the back apartment and let the gray cat out of that outside door, which aimed her directly toward the back of the house, around the corner from the sandbox and directly opposite Toby on the front steps. Then, after another attempt to unwedge Gato from the kitchen table, I was forced to fall back on guile and to use a piece of cantaloupe, of which he was passionately fond, to lure him out of the kitchen and into the study, where my husband was peacefully reading his morning paper. “I just want to leave Gato in here for a minute while I get Yain out of the cellar,” I explained.

My husband nodded, I dropped the piece of cantaloupe and raced for the study door, slamming it just as Gato flung himself against it from the inside. “Eat your cantaloupe,” I heard my husband saying.

I opened the cellar door to catch Yain and get him out the side door, which would put him on the fourth side of the house, with Toby at the front, the gray cat at the back, the children in the sandbox by the back porch, waiting to bring out the puppy, Jannie on the side front, and Laurie riding swiftly past shouting, “Toby okay on front steps!” or, “Gray cat washing face by back apartment door!” or, “Barry shovelful sand down Sally’s back!”

I opened the cellar door and Yain hesitated. I called and called, and Toby, hearing my voice, began clamoring to get in the front door. Just as Yain came easing through the cellar door into the kitchen I heard my husband come out of the study and go to let Toby in the front door — a gesture so automatic and frequent with all of us that we can, and often do, manage it sound asleep. “No, no,” I yelled to my husband, diving for Yain, who doubled sideways and headed up the back stairs.

“Gato came out of the study. What shall I do?” my husband asked, coming into the kitchen with Toby following him.

“Where?”

“Up the front stairs. His cantaloupe—”

I thought quickly. “Put Toby out the back door so the children can watch him. I’ll head off Yain before he meets Gato upstairs, so if you can get Toby outdoors I’ll put Gato back in the study.”

My husband, looking perplexed, went to the back door and Toby, looking perplexed, followed him. My husband said, “The gray cat’s here. Shall I let her in?”

Just then Laurie opened the front door to shout, “Toby gone; gray cat heading back door!”

I scurried up the back stairs and found Gato, moving with measured steps across the jungle of the playroom toward Yain under Jannie’s bed. With a fast racing dive I captured Yain just as he moved, wheeled, and hurled myself down the back stairs again, Gato following yearningly. My husband and Jannie and Toby were at the back door. “Put Toby out the front door,” Jannie was saying urgently.

“He just came *in* the front door,” my husband said.

“Then shut him in the study,” Jannie said. “I can’t catch the gray cat with Toby because he’s scared of her.”

“Don’t put Toby in the study, because I want to put Gato in there,” I said. “Don’t let Gato out the back door if the gray cat’s out there.” I turned wildly, holding Yain. “I’ll put Yain in Toby,” I said.

My husband went into the study and slammed the door and I came right after him. “I’ll put Yain in here for a minute now,” I said. “We’re just having a little trouble keeping them all straight.”

“It’s like the old League of Nations,” my husband said obscurely, and picked up his newspaper.

Laurie rode by to report that the gray cat had gone back around the house and was meowing at the back apartment door to be let in, so I took Toby by the collar and put him, bewildered and evidencing a strong desire to get under the piano, out on the front steps again. Gato followed and I picked him up and put him on the front steps with Toby. “Stay there,” I said severely. Then I started for the back apartment to let the gray cat in but my husband opened the study door and said I simply had to get Yain out of there because he was sitting on the desk in a fury chewing pencils, so I gathered up Yain and put him out the back door, which was of course the wrong door for Yain, but by then it hardly seemed to matter.

A quick inventory showed that everyone was outside except my husband who was now, judging from the sounds, engaged in pushing his desk across the study door. I went out onto the back porch, leaving the door open behind me. Sally had knocked over Barry’s pail of sand and then left the sandbox to establish herself on the swing beyond the driveway. Barry was irritably refilling his pail, talking to himself about bad bad bad girls. Jannie had come around the house and stood in the driveway with Toby pressed nervously against her. The puppy was wailing hideously from the barn, so when Laurie passed the next time I stopped him and said he might as well get Toby’s old leash and start getting the puppy ready to come out, and Laurie got the leash and headed for the barn. After a minute the gray cat slipped, smokelike, around the corner of the house and leaped to the second porch step where she settled uneasily. Gato leaned insolently against a tree, the tip of his tail twitching. One single evil snarl betrayed Yain under the hedge. I sat down on the porch rail and lighted a cigarette, trying to look casual; I had an uneasy sense of baleful eyes regarding me and I was acutely aware that I did not know who was going to jump first, or when, or from which direction. Barry began to make a noise like a dump truck, Sally sang, and the spaniel from across the street turned in through the gateposts and started up our driveway.

I jumped to my feet and shouted, “Get that dog *out* of here, someone!” Toby, confused — or perhaps the hijacking of his milk still rankled — wheeled sharply and made for the gray cat, who stood for a moment dumfounded and then, leaving one long scratch across Toby’s nose, disappeared under the porch. Jannie started across the driveway, yelling and waving her arms, and the spaniel skittered sideways toward the hedge where Yain was waiting; with one great triumphant halloo Yain cleared the hedge and followed the shrieking spaniel down the driveway. Wild with success, Toby turned on Gato, who, still leaning against his tree, looked Toby straight in the eye and spoke once; skidding, Toby turned and without losing speed went in through the open back door and across the dining room and the living room and under the piano. From the barn came a single mournful yelp. “Any mice come out yet?” Sally called.

Jannie came back, panting, and I asked her to go under the porch and get the gray cat out so that I could put her back into the back apartment, but Jannie said that the only cat at present under the porch was Yain, who had apparently circled around the house and seemed to have eaten something large and satisfying, because he was half asleep and purring. Gato, humming to himself, trotted up the back steps and into the kitchen and up to the kitchen counter, where he ate the half cantaloupe I had left there.

Laurie called that he was coming out of the barn with the puppy, and Sally decided that since the barn door was going to be opened this would be a good time to go in and get her tricycle to ride, and Barry agreed. Jannie thought that at the same time she would get her stilts, so when Laurie was sure he had the puppy firmly leashed, Sally and Barry went in and came out riding their bikes and Jannie followed them, very tall and unsteady. Laurie came last with the puppy, who had clearly never been on a leash before. The two bikes went down to the end of the driveway, turned, and started back up again, and Gato stepped out onto the porch, where he settled to wash after his breakfast. Toby heard the puppy barking and hurried out to see what was going on; he and Laurie and the puppy began a sort of minuet up and down the driveway, with the two bikes turning and following them and Jannie stalking along beside. While Laurie held the leash in both hands, Toby came gravely forward and bowed to the puppy, and the puppy did a little tango step. Toby then crossed over and the puppy crossed under, taking the leash between Laurie's legs. While Laurie turned in a half circle, Toby and the puppy, *andante maestoso*, bowed and crossed again, then reversed in an allemande left, leaving Laurie perilously balanced on one foot. Gato watched, grinning, from the porch.

Then, without warning, the gray cat came down from the porch roof and charged Toby; Toby went "blip" and cleared the steps in one bound on his way to the piano, he jostled Gato, who went after the gray cat, who went under the porch and Yain came out, rudely awakened, and saw the puppy, whom he clearly mistook for the spaniel. Yain's charge upset Laurie completely and the puppy went through the stilts as through a doorway and down the driveway with Yain after him. The puppy lost a little ground because he cut sideways to go around the bikes, but Yain went clean over Sally and then, hardly touching the ground, clean over Barry, and we watched in silence as the puppy and Yain went up the hill and then off into the fields.

"He runs good, that puppy," Sally said at last. "We better call him Speedy."

Gato slouched lazily into the house and went to the washing machine for his nap. Jannie volunteered to search the yard for the gray cat, so I put Sally and Barry into the car, and Laurie took his bike, and we went off to look for the puppy. After hours of wandering and calling and knocking on strange doors we found our several ways back home, to discover that not only had Jannie failed to find any trace of the gray cat, but Yain had not come home, although Gato and Toby showed up for their dinners exceedingly chipper and affable. We spent that evening telephoning neighbors and speculating uneasily upon the probable fate of a four-month-old puppy lost in the country at night, and reminding one another that we had promised to give him a good home.

The next morning, which was Monday again, I sadly delivered three more ads to the local paper, and on Monday evening we were slightly embarrassed to discover that, since our first ads had been scheduled to run for a week, we now occupied the entire want-ad page except for the personals. Our ads now read:

Wanted to buy: female cat, kitten or half grown, good mouser. Call 5679.

Wanted to buy: puppy, mongrel large breed preferred. Call 5679.

Lost: female cat, gray tiger. Call 5679; reward.

Lost: shepherd puppy, brown and white. Call 5679; reward.

Lost: male cat, black, bandaged ear. Call 5679; reward.

On Tuesday morning the phone rang and when I answered it a man said, “You the person advertised for a pup?”

“I certainly am,” I said. “Why, have you found him?”

There was a silence. Then the man said, “What reward you giving?”

“I thought two dollars,” I said. “You see, we only paid five dollars for him in the first place, and—”

“That your ad to *buy* a dog, too?”

“Well, yes. You see, we put in the ad to *buy* a dog, and then we lost the dog we bought, so we put in another ad—”

“You must have quite a hand with dogs, lady,” the man said.

“Look,” I said, “this phone has been ringing steadily for four days. So if you have found—”

“Way *I* see it,” he said, “you’re paying five for a new dog? And only two if I found the one you already got?”

“Not at all,” I said sharply. “Have you found—”

“Nope. What *I* got, lady,” he said, “is a dog to sell.” There was another pause and then he added reflectively, “Must look *some* like the one you lost, though.”

I thought about it for a while and then I took the odd three dollars out of my housekeeping money and went off to get the dog. It took me most of the morning to find the farm where the puppy was and when I did I was not particularly surprised to see how strongly the new dog resembled the puppy we had lost. I remarked on this to the farmer, holding my five dollars uneasily in my hand, and the farmer laughed and took the five dollars and said it was a caution sometimes how two dogs could get to look alike. He put the five dollars into his back pocket and pointed out that naturally I didn’t need to buy this dog unless I wanted to, but it was an uncommon good breed of dog for the price. I said I certainly hoped that *this* dog wasn’t going to get lost, or, if he did, that I could find *him*, because it was quite a drain on my housekeeping money to have to go buying new dogs all the time. The farmer said soberly that well, a dog was man’s best friend, especially children, thanked me for the five dollars without turning a hair, and helped me get the puppy into the car to bring home.

The children were just coming home from school for lunch, and they were delighted with the puppy, whom they clearly regarded as the one they had lost, and I did not feel that it was necessary to tell them or my husband that I had had to buy a new dog. I canceled all the ads in the papers, because the next morning Yain and the gray cat, whom we named Ninki, wandered up onto the back porch to share a bowl of milk and a good laugh with Gato. The gray cat was covered with burrs and Yain had lost his bandage somewhere. The spaniel from across the street did not come home for three days. On Tuesday morning there was a mouse in the sugar canister.

Gray Ninki was the first non-black cat we had ever owned, and for a while it used to give me quite a turn to see her moving soundlessly through the house; I kept thinking she was a ball of dust. When it became clear that she was going to have kittens we were all very much excited over the probable colors to be produced, fondly supposing that the father of the kittens was either Yain or Gato. However, when the kittens were born, four of them were gray, like Ninki, and the fifth one was green, a kind of olive drab shade. We gave away the four gray kittens and Ninki, who had never liked any of us much anyway, moved into a house about two blocks away and refused to come home, so we had Yain and Gato and the green kitten, whom we named Green Shax. Because our kitten was green we had less difficulty in reconciling ourselves to the local insistence that our puppy was not brown, but red, and that referring to such a fine red dog as “brown” was both offensive and misleading. The question of a name for the puppy was a matter of high dispute, and was only solved when my husband one morning cut out of the newspaper an account of a dog show in New York.

“*Here* are some good names,” he said, at the breakfast table. “Now we can find something to call it by.”

“He doesn’t come *any*way,” Jannie said. “We might as well go on calling him Puppy.”

“But he won’t *be* a puppy forever,” I said. “After a while it will begin to sound silly, especially the way he’s growing.”

“Well,” said my husband, consulting the paper, “how about Clifford Eidelweis? Quibble Baby? Tiny Trinket?”

“Clifford is nice,” Jannie said. “I like Clifford.”

“Won Ton Pearmain? Kreplach MacIntosh? Those all seem very fine dogs,” my husband said. “In the paper.”

“Why not Pal?” Jannie asked. “I thought we were always going to name him Pal.”

“Why name him Pal,” my husband asked, “when there are names like Hasty Pudding Put and Take? Or Silver Reuben of Iradell?”

“Pudding,” Barry said eagerly. “A dog named Pudding.”

“Squirrel Run Kentucky Boy? Shagbark Gimmel? Merriebert Ethelbeast?”

“Seems to me,” Laurie said critically, “that a family with one cat named Yain and one cat named Gato and one cat named Green Shax had better get a dog named something like, maybe, Spot. Or Prince. Or Rover.”

“Or Pal.”

“I used to have a dog named Jack when I was a little girl,” I said. “I’d like to have another dog named Jack.”

“Champion Red John of Green Shax Farm,” my husband said.

“Pal?”

“Jack. Red Jack.”

“Red Pudding,” Barry said softly.

• • •

It was very late, and I came in very quietly through the back door and closed it behind me without a sound. I went through the kitchen and dining room and living room and into the hall, guided by the hall light my husband had left on, took off my coat and left it on the stair rail, turned off the hall light and made my way upstairs softly in the dark. Toby, on the living room couch, lifted his head as I went by, and thumped his tail once. Upstairs, I slipped off my shoes and in my stocking feet went through the guest room and down the hall to Laurie's room, saw that he was covered, and then into Jannie's room, where Gato lay hugely on the foot of her bed. Jannie stirred and said "M?" when I covered her, and I slipped out quickly before she woke. By the thin glow of the nightlights I found my way back through the guest room and into Sally's room; Sally's blankets were all heaped at the foot of her bed and she was sprawled over them. I took her extra blanket and put it over her, and she said "Hey!" indignantly. A small protest made me realize that Green Shax had been curled next to Sally and I had covered him, too; I moved the blanket and he poked his head out and closed his eyes again. Yain was sleeping on the hall chair, and purred once as I went past. Barry lay exquisitely asleep, blanket smooth, pillow straight. Jack was lying asleep across the doorsill of Barry's room, and Dikidiki was in bed with Barry, which argued that Barry had gone unwillingly to bed. Dikidiki stared at me unwinking, Jack groaned and sighed deeply.

I had thought to get undressed without turning on the light, and I found my dresser, where there was supposed to be a package of matches. I found my comb and a pair of earrings and what seemed in the dark to be some small furry animal; after a gasping minute I succeeded in identifying it as one of Sally's slippers, although I could not imagine what it was doing on my dresser unless Sally had been dancing up there in front of the mirror again.

"Who's that?" said my husband suddenly in the darkness.

"It's the Good Fairy," I said. "Didn't you leave a tooth under your pillow?"

"Oh," he said. Then, after a minute, "How was the poker game?"

"If you're going to chatter," I said, "I'll turn on the light and stop falling over the furniture." I turned and tossed Sally's slipper to him. "Here," I said.

“Ark,” said my husband, thrashing.

“It’s only Sally’s slipper,” I said. I turned on the light. “You don’t have to kill it,” I said. He had the slipper under his pillow and was beating it with his fist.

“Why aren’t you asleep?” I asked. “It’s late.”

“I *was* asleep,” he said. He doubled his pillow, put it against the headboard, and sat back comfortably. “How was the poker game?”

“We had the most *marvelous* food,” I said. “Peggy brought some of those little hot sausage rolls, and Helen brought that shrimp stuff she makes, of course, and—”

“Did you win?”

“And everyone *loved* that cucumber mix *I* took, and I had to give Jean the recipe because she was so crazy about it, and Linda brought a kind of sour cream and clam soufflé stuff but I thought it had too much horseradish in it.”

“Did you *play* poker?”

“Don’t be silly — why would we have a ladies’ poker game and not play poker? I *like* horseradish, ordinarily, but when you’ve got other things with it, it shouldn’t be so strong, even though of course you can *always* taste clams.”

“Did you win?”

“Shh,” I said. “You’ll wake the children.”

I was brushing my hair, and he went and got a drink of water and when he came back I said, “Listen, does three of a kind beat a flush?”

“What?” he said. “Oh. Well, no, it doesn’t.”

“Well, that’s what I *said*,” I told him, “and I kept arguing and arguing, but Helen said *she* knew perfectly well, and we were going to call up you or one of the other husbands and ask *them*, but you know how Linda always gets to crying at the least little thing? So of course there was nothing we could do, but anyway I'm glad to know I was right."

"Did you win?"

"Listen," I said, "when you come home late from a poker game and you're tired and the house is all dark and you try to get undressed in the dark and you're all worn out, do *I*—"

"Okay," he said. "Good night."

"Good night," I said.

• • •

Day after day after day I went around my house picking things up. I picked up books and shoes and toys and socks and shirts and gloves and boots and hats and handkerchiefs and puzzle pieces and pennies and pencils and stuffed rabbits and bones the dogs had left under the living room chairs. I also picked up tin soldiers and plastic cars and baseball gloves and sweaters and children's pocketbooks with nickels inside and little pieces of lint off the floor. Every time I picked up something I put it down again somewhere else where it belonged better than it did in the place I found it. Nine times out of ten I did not notice what I was picking up or where I put it until sometime later when someone in the family needed it; then, when Sally said where were her crayons I could answer at once: kitchen windowsill, left. If Barry wanted his cowboy hat I could reply: playroom, far end of bookcase. If Jannie wanted her arithmetic homework, I could tell her it was under the ashtray on the dining room buffet. I could locate the little nut that came off Laurie's bike wheel, and the directions for winding the living room clock. I could find the recipe for the turkey cutlets Sally admired and the top to my husband's fountain pen; I could even find, ordinarily, the little celluloid strips which went inside the collar of his nylon shirt.

That was, of course, entirely automatic, like still remembering the home telephone number of my college roommate and being able to recite “Oh, what is so rare as a day in June”; if I could not respond at once, identifying object and location in unhesitating answer to the question, the article was very apt to remain permanently lost. Like Jannie’s pink Easter-egg hat, which disappeared — let me see; it was the day Laurie got into the fight with the Haynes boys, and the porch rocker got broken — make it the end of October. We had many small places in our big house where an Easter-egg hat could get itself hopelessly hidden, so when Jannie asked one night at dinner, the end of October, “Who took my Easter-egg hat?” and I found myself without an immediate answer, it was clear that the hat had taken itself off, and although we searched halfheartedly, Jannie had to wear a scarf around her head until the weather got cold enough to wear her long-tailed knitted cap.

Laurie’s sneaker was of considerably more moment, since of course he could not play basketball with a scarf tied around his left foot. He came to the top of the back stairs of a Saturday morning and inquired gently who had stolen his sneaker. I opened my mouth to answer, found my mind blank, and closed my mouth again. Laurie came halfway down the stairs and bawled, “Mooooooom, where’d my *sneaker* get to?” and I still could not answer. “I neeeeeed my *sneaker*,” Laurie howled, “I got to play baaaaaaasketball.”

“I don’t know,” I called.

“But I *need* it,” Laurie said. He crashed down the stairs and into the study where I sat reading the morning paper and drinking a cup of coffee. “I got to play basketball, so I need my sneakers. I can’t play on the basketball court without sneakers. So I need—”

“Have you looked? In your room? Under your bed?”

"Yeah, sure." He thought. "It's not there, though."

"Outdoors?"

"Now what would my sneaker be doing outdoors, I ask you? You think I get dressed and undressed out on the lawn, maybe, for the neighbors?"

"Well," I said helplessly, "you had it last Saturday."

"I *know* I had it last Saturday, you think I'm foolish or something?"

"Wait." I went and stood at the foot of the back stairs and called, "Jannie?"

There was a pause and then Jannie said, sniffling, "Yes?"

"Good heavens," I said, "are you reading *Little Women* again?"

Jannie sniffled. "Just the part where Beth dies."

"Look," I said, "the sun is shining and the sky is blue and—"

"You seen my sneaker?" Laurie yelled from in back of me.

"No."

"You *sure*?"

Jannie came to the top of the stairs, wiping her eyes with her hand. "Hey," she said, "maybe some girl took it. For a keepsake."

"Wha?" said Laurie incredulously. "Took my *sneaker*? Who?"

"Like Mr. Brooke did Meg's glove, in *Little Women*, because he was in love with her and they got married."

"*Wha?*" For a minute Laurie stared at her, and then he turned deliberately and went back to the door of the study. "My sister," he announced formally to his father, "has snapped her twigs."

"That so?" said his father.

"I ask you." Laurie gestured. "Junk from books," he said.

"Well, he did," Jannie insisted, coming down the stairs. "He took it and hid it for ever so long and when Jo found out she—"

"Sally, Barry," I was calling from the back door. "Has either of you seen Laurie's sneaker?"

Sally and Barry were dancing on the lawn, turning and flickering among the last fallen leaves; when I called they circled and came toward the house, going "cheep-cheep." "We're little birds," Sally explained, coming closer. "Cheep-cheep."

"Have you seen Laurie's sneaker?"

"Cheep-cheep."

"Well?"

Barry thought. "I have unseen it," he remarked. "I did unsee Laurie's sneaker a day and a day and a day and a day and *many* mornings ago."

"Splendid," I said. "Sally?"

"No. But don't worry. I shall get it back for dear Laurie, dear Mommy."

"If you mean magic you better not let your father hear you, young lady. No," I said over my shoulder to Laurie, "they haven't."

"But I will find it, Laurie dear, never fear, Laurie dear, I will your sneaker find for you."

"Yeah. So what'm I gonna do?" he asked me. "Play basketball in my socks or something?"

"Are you *sure* you looked under your bed?"

He looked at me in the manner his favorite television detective reserves for ladies who double-talk the cops. "Yeah," he said. "Yeah, lady. I'm sure."

"Daddy won't notice," Sally said busily to Barry. "All this will take is just a little bit of golden magic and Daddy will never notice and there will be dear Laurie's sneaker just right here."

"Can I do magic too?"

"You can be my dear helper and you can carry the shovel."

I went into the study and sat down and Laurie followed me. “And he kept it for weeks and weeks next to his heart,” Jannie was explaining to her father, “and she was looking for it just like Laurie but Mr. Brooke had it all the time.”

“How about that little dark-haired girl?” my husband asked Laurie. “The one who keeps calling you so much?”

“Nah,” Laurie said. “She’s tipped, anyhow. Besides, how could she get my sneaker?” He slapped his forehead. “A veritable madhouse,” he said. “Lose a sneaker and they start criticizing your friends and trying to make out she stole it. Bah.”

He flung himself violently into one of our good plastic leather chairs, which slid back across the floor and into the bookcase. “Bah,” said Laurie. He threw his arms dramatically into the air and let them fall resignedly. “Never *find* anything around here, that’s the *big* trouble,” he explained. “Nothing’s ever where you *put* it. If *she*—”

“If by *she* you mean *me*—” I began ominously.

“Always coming and picking things up and putting them away where a person can’t find them. Always—”

“If you’d put things away neatly when you take them off instead of just throwing everything under your bed—” I stopped to think. “Have you looked under your bed?” I asked.

Laurie stood up and threw his arms wide. “Why was I ever born?” he demanded.

Jannie nodded. “In *Beverley Lee, Girl Detective*,” she pointed out, “when the secret plans for the old armory get lost, Beverley Lee and her girl friend Piggy, *they* look for clues.”

“A broken shoelace?” my husband suggested.

"Well, when did you see them last?" I asked reasonably. "Seems to me if you could remember when you had them last, you might remember where you put them then."

"Yeah. Well," Laurie said, scowling, "I *know* I had them last Saturday. But then I took them off and I remember they were on my bookcase because I had to remember to make that map for geography and that was for Wednesday when we had gym — say!" He opened his eyes and his mouth wide. "Gym. I wore them Wednesday to school for gym. So I had them on Wednesday."

"And Wednesday," I put in, "was the day you were so late getting home from school because you were hanging around Joe's with that pack of juvenile delinquents and—"

"I told you six times already, those girls just happened to come by there by *accident*, how'd *I* know they'd be around Joe's? And anyway you got no right to go calling my friends—"

"And you never got your chores done and I kept dinner till six-thirty."

"That girl called, too," my husband put in.

"And I must of had my sneakers on all that time, because I never had time because *she* made me do my chores and then I had to rush through dinner because — because—"

"You were going to the dance," Jannie said, triumphant. "You got all dressed up, so *naturally* you put on shoes."

"Hey!" Laurie swung around and gestured wildly. "I got dressed—"

"You took a shower," I said. "I remember because—"

He shuddered. "I took a shower because *she* wouldn't let me have my good blue pants from the cleaners *unless* I took a shower."

"No gentleman escorts a lady to a public function unless he has bathed and dressed himself in completely clean clothes," my husband said.

“So I undressed in the bathroom because I always do and then when I went out I had this towel around me and I was carrying my clothes and the sneaker and I—”

“I saw it,” I said suddenly. “I did see it after all. I came upstairs to get two aspirin after you had finally gone to the dance and I remember the way the bathroom looked; the floor was sopping and dirty towels all over and the soap and—”

“The sneaker,” Laurie said impatiently, “keep on the subject. The sneaker, the sneaker.”

I meditated. “It was lying just inside the door and one wet towel was half on top of it. And I... and I...” I thought. “What *did* I do?”

“Think, think, think.” Laurie stood over me flapping his hands.

“Look,” I said. “I go around this house and I go around this house and I *go* around this house and I pick up shoes and socks and shirts and hats and gloves and handkerchiefs and books and toys and I always put them down again, someplace where they belong. Now when I went upstairs and saw that mess of a bathroom I had to clean up I would have taken the soap and put it in the soapdish. And I would have taken the bathmat and put it over the edge of the tub. And I would have taken the towels—”

“And put them in the hamper,” Laurie said impatiently. “We know.”

“You do? Because I have often wondered what happens all the times I say to you to put the towels—”

“Yeah, so next time I’ll remember, sure. What about the *sneaker*?”

“Anyway they were wet so I couldn’t put them in the hamper. I would have hung them over the shower rail to dry so *then* I could put them in the hamper. And then I would have picked up the sneaker—”

“Laurie’s sneaker is weaker and creaker and cleaker and breaker and fleaker and greaker...” Sally wound through the study, eyes shut, chanting.

Barry came behind her, doing an odd little two-step. Sally had a pail of sand and a shovel and she was making scattering motions.

“Now *wait* a minute here,” my husband began.

“It’s all right,” Sally said, opening one eye. “I’m just pretending. This is only sand.”

“We’re just untending,” Barry explained reassuringly. “Bleaker and sneaker and weaker and deaker.”

They filed out. My husband studied the floor morosely. “That certainly looked like magic to *me*,” he said, “and I don’t *like* it. Going to have footwear popping up all over, right through the floor, probably wreck the foundations.”

“Reconstruct the scene of the crime,” Jannie said suddenly. “Because Beverley Lee Girl Detective and her girl friend Piggy, that’s what *they* did. In *The Mystery of the Broken Candle*, when they had to find the missing will. They reconstructed the scene of the crime. They got everybody there and put everything the way it was—”

“Say!” Laurie looked at her admiringly. “You’re charged, girl. Come on,” he said, making for the stairs, and stopped in the doorway to look compellingly at me. “Come *on*,” he said.

“And creaker and beaker and leaker and veaker.”

“Gangway, birdbait,” Laurie said. He stopped to pat his younger sister on the head. “You keep sprinkling that there magic, Perfessor. Size six and a half, white.”

“Kindly do not poke the Sally,” said Sally, drawing away stiffly.

“Unpoke, unpoke,” Barry said.

“Come *on*,” Laurie said to me. He called ahead to Jannie, “You get the towels wet and throw them on the floor. I’ll get the other sneaker and when she comes we’ll have it all ready.”

“You might as well take two more aspirin,” my husband said.

“I might as well,” I said.

Wearily I headed up the stairs, sand grinding underfoot. The bathroom is at the head of the stairs, and by the time I was near the top I could see that everything was prepared. Rigorously, I put my mind back three days. It is eight-thirty in the evening, I told myself. I am coming upstairs to get myself two aspirin. Laurie has just gone to the dance, I have just told him goodbye, get home early, behave yourself, be careful, do you have a clean handkerchief? Jannie is reading. Sally and Barry are asleep. It is eight-thirty Wednesday evening, I am coming to get two aspirin. I came to the top of the stairs, and sighed. The bathroom floor was sopping, the bathmat was soaked and crumpled, wet towels lay on the floor. In the corner, half under a wet towel, was one white sneaker. I asked myself through my teeth how old people had to get before they learned to pick up after themselves and after all our efforts to raise our children in a decent and clean house here they still behaved like pigs and the sooner Laurie grew up and got married and had a wife to pick up after him the better off I would be and maybe I would just take his allowance and hire a full-time nursemaid for him. I picked up the bathmat and hung it over the edge of the tub. I put the soap in the soapdish and hung the towels over the shower rail. I picked up the sneaker and resisted the temptation to slam it into the wastebasket. Then, with the sneaker in my hand, I went to the other side of the hall to the linen closet to get clean towels and a dry bathmat and Laurie and Jannie burst out of the guest room shouting, “You see? You see?”

Jannie said excitedly, “Just like Beverley Lee and it turned out it *was* the caretaker all the time.”

“Look, look,” Laurie said, pointing. I had the door of the linen closet open and I reached up onto the towel shelf and took down Jannie’s Easter-egg hat.

“What?” I said, surprised.

“That’s my hat,” Jannie said.

“Why would I want to put your hat in the linen closet?” I demanded. “Don’t be silly.”

“My nice pink Easter-egg hat,” Jannie said, pleased.

“Craazy,” Laurie remarked. “Opens the closet and there’s the hat. Craazy.” He pushed past me and began to paw through the towels.

“Ridiculous,” I said. “I *never* put hats in linen closets. Linen closets are where I keep towels and sheets and extra blankets, not hats.”

“Not sneakers, either.” Laurie stood back and dusted his hands.

“You pick up every one of those towels,” I said, annoyed. “And then you and your sister can get right in there and clean up that bathroom. And the next time I find that pink hat lying around I am going to burn it. And you can tell Beverley Lee Girl Detective—”

“Any luck?” my husband called from the foot of the stairs.

“Certainly not.” I started down. “Of all the idiotic notions and now it’s too late in the year *any*way for a little hat like that.”

“Sneaker sneaker sneaker!” It was Sally and Barry, in glory. Laurie raced past me down the stairs. “Got it? Sal,” he yelled, “you *got* it?”

Proudly the little procession wound around to the front hall. Sally was still scattering sand but Barry was bearing the sneaker on high. “Gee,” Laurie said. “Hey, kids, thanks. Where was it?”

“Under your bed,” Sally said. “We did a lot of—” she glanced at her father “ — blagic,” she said. “And then we went up and looked. Very good, Barry.”

“Very good, Sally,” Barry said.

“Gosh.” Laurie was pleased. He turned and gave me an affectionate pat on the head. “Boy,” he said, “are *you* ever a tippy old lady.” Then, in a burst of gratitude, he added, “I’m going to go down right now on my bike and get you kids each a popsicle.”

“Well, me, too, I should *think*,” Jannie said indignantly. “After all, it was me thought of reconstructing the crime, and in *Elsie Dinsmore* when Elsie —”

“What is this crime talk?” I said. “Anyone would think that instead of spending all my time picking up and putting away—”

“The sneaker,” Laurie said to me, gesturing. “The other sneaker. I got to get down and get those popsicles, so let’s have it.”

“What?” I said.

“The sneaker, dear. The one you just had upstairs, for heaven’s sake.”

Uncomfortably I looked down at my empty hands. “Now let’s see,” I said. “I had it just a minute ago....”

• • •

I was sitting at the kitchen table grating potatoes for potato pancakes and was thus a wholly captive audience when Jannie came in from school with her arithmetic and spelling books, and, of course, *Little Women*. She put the books down, hung up her jacket and hat, took an apple, and sat down at the table across from me. “I been meaning to ask you for a long time,” she said. “Suppose I wanted to write a book. Where would I begin?”

“At the beginning,” I said smartly; I had just grated my knuckle.

“I wish Laurie and Barry were girls,” she said.

“Why on earth?”

“And Sally’s name was Beth.”

“Why put the whammy on Sally? Why don’t *you* be Beth?”

“I’m Jo.”

"And Laurie is Meg? And poor Barry has to be Amy?"

"If they were only *girls*."

"And does that make me Marmee? Or can I be the old cook?"

"Hannah? When *I* write *my* book—"

"I'd rather be crazy old Aunt March, come to think of it. Who do you like for Professor Bhaer?"

Jannie turned pink. "I didn't really think about that yet," she said.

Charitably, I changed the subject. "Don't you have any homework to do?" I asked.

She sighed. "I got to write a book report," she said. "That's why I'd like to write a book, so then I could write a book report on *that*, and save all that time."

"I see." Resolutely I took up the first onion and began to grate. "What I always wondered," Jannie went on, "was when they went on the picnic in the book and they played Authors. Because in *my* game of Authors there's Louisa May Alcott and she *wrote Little Women*." She looked at me inquiringly and I smiled bravely, tears running down my cheeks. "Well," she said, "in her own book did they play Authors with their own book on the cards? And if Louisa May Alcott had to do a book report for school then could she—"

"I see what you mean," I said, weeping.

She laughed. "You're crying like a fish," she said. "Now, what I wondered, if Louisa May Alcott wrote a book. Because she had to write *that* book because it was already on the Authors cards, you see? And *Eight Cousins* and *Rose in Bloom* and *Little Men*."

I sniffled. "*Jo's Boys*," I said. "Don't forget *Jo's Boys*."

"But if they were already playing Authors in the book how did they know she was going to finish it? Because suppose she got halfway and she didn't like it and threw it away how could they play Authors in the book with *Little Women* on the Authors card? Or if she changed her mind and decided to call it—"

"Suppose," I said, "she decided to have them play pinochle? Then she wouldn't have to write *any* books."

"But she would have to write *one* book anyway because otherwise she couldn't be in the Authors game."

I got up and went to the sink to rinse out the grater. "But if she weren't in the Authors game—" I began and then stopped myself, shaking my head violently.

Jannie giggled. "I suppose you *did* read the book?" she asked.

"I did."

"Then who," Jannie asked triumphantly, "said, 'That boy is a perfect Cyclops, isn't he'?"

"Amy," I said. "Who said, 'I never enjoyed housekeeping, and I'm going to take a vacation today'?"

"Marmee, but she didn't mean it. Who said, 'Birds in their little nests agree'?"

"Beth, on the first page." I took down the flour. "Who said, 'You can never get too much salt in potato pancakes'?"

"Who?"

"Your grandmother. Now go and write your book."

• • •

My husband is always making little remarks about money. Sometimes he says that it doesn't grow on trees, and sometimes he says that I must think he is made of it. When he buys a Greek drachma he says that we can't take it with us, and when I take the children to get shoes for school he says in a kind of high voice that there isn't enough of it in the world for this family. I once passed the door to the dining room when he and several friends were playing poker and I heard him laughing and saying it was a shame to take it away like this. When he pays the children their allowances he says that it is a great responsibility, and whenever any of us asks him for some he says he can't afford it. However, although the discussion of money in general is a constant and urgent theme in our family, I do not think I ever heard my husband say so many different things about money as he did when the man came from the income tax department. As a matter of fact, during the twenty-odd hours between the telephone call and the man's departure I do not think my husband spent more than a second or two reflecting on any other subject.

He was not pleased with the telephone call. It was a Wednesday evening, and our family was assembled at dinner. It was the kind of dinner I think of as a Wednesday evening dinner, because on Wednesday I always begin to think of economizing so we can have dinner on Thursday and Friday. As a result — although it hardly mattered, anyway, since my husband never did eat any dinner that night — we were having Monday night's meat loaf warmed over. Laurie had seized control of the conversation as we sat down, and I was trying to serve the meat loaf and gesture to Jannie to put her napkin in her lap and gesture to Sally to take her napkin ring out of her lap and gesture to Barry that he would not be served any meat loaf unless he put away his space gun and sat in his chair correctly and at the same time I was trying to ask my husband if he wanted noodles.

"Isn't it?" Laurie demanded of the table at large. "Because suppose I did and then no one but me danced with her, what could I do?"

"Certainly," his father said.

"Noodles?"

"Besides," Laurie said, waving his fork, "you figure it's forty cents if I go stag, and sixty cents I take a girl — I don't know any girls *worth* twenty cents. And I'd have to dance with her, maybe every dance except if she wanted to sit down or something."

He stopped for breath, and I opened my mouth, but Jannie said, "But if no one took any girls there wouldn't be any girls there and who would you dance with at all?"

"There's *always* girls there," Laurie said drearily. "And Mrs. Williams always coming up and saying whyn't you go ask that nice girl over there if she wants to dance. Yeah."

"Elbows off the table," I said.

"Why go at all?" his father asked. "Why not stay home and save forty cents?"

Laurie sighed impatiently. "Because I already save twenty cents by not taking a girl, and I need the money. Anyway, they match pennies in the cloakroom."

His father frowned. "Young man," he said, "I will not have you gambling. Other people's money—"

The phone rang. "Stop her!" Laurie yelled, and I made a fast grab, but Sally had gotten away in a nice running start and was out in the hall before anyone else could move. Sally can move with unbelievable speed from a sitting position, and also she is the only one in the family except Barry, who is slow, who can fit under the telephone table.

"Hello?" she said in her sweet clear voice, and Laurie sighed irritably. "It's a wonder anyone bothers to call here any more at *all*," he said. "Rob tried to call me all day yesterday and Sally answered every time."

"Well, whose daddy did you want to speak to?" Sally asked.

My husband looked up, alarmed.

"How do you know it's my daddy you want to speak to if you don't know my name?" Sally asked shrewdly.

I got up and followed my husband out to the hall. Sally, eying us, retreated still farther under the telephone table and sat hunched up around the phone. "Because if he doesn't want to talk to you I have to say he's taking a shower," she explained.

"Sally," I said, "give me that phone."

"Do you have a little girl six years old named Sally?" Sally asked into the phone.

"Sarah," said her father.

She poked her head out and looked up innocently. "Will I say you're taking a shower?" she asked. "It's just some man who hasn't got any children."

My husband started to speak, checked himself, and held out his hand. Unwillingly Sally put the phone into it and crawled out between his legs. "No one ever telephones *me*," she said sadly.

"Hello?" my husband said into the phone. I took Sally by the wrist and led her back to the table and sat her down firmly. "No dessert," I said, and she snarled. "Stop it," I said, and she giggled.

"Fifteen cents?" Jannie said to Laurie.

"Half a buck?" Laurie countered.

"Twenty cents?"

"Forty?"

"What?" I said.

"If Laurie clears the table tonight and scrapes the dishes and stacks them," Jannie asked me, "is it worth any more than fifteen cents if I pay him from my allowance?"

"That's a lot of dishes," Laurie said. He poked scornfully at his butter plate. "Look at all this stuff," he said. "Thirty cents."

"If you practice my piano lesson for me I could make it twenty-five," Jannie said.

My husband came back to the table. He sat down in his chair and stared straight ahead of him. The children looked at him curiously, and then Jannie said, "Every time we let Dad talk on the phone something happens. Remember when it was the man about the dogs stealing deer hides?"

"Or the library with the books overdue," Laurie said.

"Or that lady," Jannie said, "the one who keeps calling to find out if the phone is working all right and Dad never knows."

"Or girls for Laurie," Sally said.

Laurie turned to look at her balefully. "Yeah?" he said. "Yeah?"

"At least," my husband said to me suddenly, "we still have the children. Our dear children, and a roof over our heads." He thought. "I hope," he said.

"You always worry about every little thing," I said. "The man told us clearly that the roof would last through this winter and maybe even on into spring."

"Trusting little creatures," my husband said, reaching one hand out toward Sally, who looked as though she might bite it. "An affectionate family, a warm hearth, a scrap of bread on the table — a man needs little more than that."

"*I* don't know," I said to Laurie, who was making faces of astonishment at me. "Yes, dear?" I said to my husband. "Go on."

"I want you all to be brave," my husband said, looking around the table at us. "When misfortune strikes, a family must face the world together."

"Twenty cents?" Laurie whispered across at Jannie.

“Son,” his father said, “I am afraid that your dancing days are over. All allowances will very likely be cut, if not withdrawn altogether. There will be no color television set this year. Your mother will stop squandering all that money every week and learn to make simple nourishing meals out of rice and perhaps oatmeal. On gala days we will share an egg. Laurie can perhaps take a newspaper route—”

“Jannie can support us with her needle, as far as that goes,” I said.

“Where are *you* going to be?” Laurie asked. “In jail?”

His father turned pale. “Please don’t *talk* like that,” he said.

“You might as well tell us,” I said. “So we can start facing the world together. Who was on the phone?”

My husband sighed. “The Department of Internal Revenue,” he said. “A question has arisen about our income tax returns. The man will be here in the morning. I am to be ready with my books.”

“Well, that doesn’t seem very bad,” I said. “It seems silly for them to check up on *you*, but of course you just have to tell them...” I looked at my husband and stopped talking abruptly.

“We learned in Social Studies class how to make out an income tax return,” Laurie said. “After dinner I’ll be glad to help you, Dad.”

“I’ve *already* made out our return, thank you,” my husband said. “That’s why the man is *coming*. And I don’t think I want any dinner, thank you.” He got up and went into the study.

“Gosh,” Laurie said. “What’s *he* so bothered about, anyway?”

Sally nodded wisely. “That man on the phone sounded pretty mad,” she said.

I saw the children through their dinner and then took my husband’s coffee into the study. He was walking around and around in a little circle, carrying his checkbook. “Look,” I said, “I just can’t see what you’re so *worried* about. Here's your coffee. Why, that man probably checks income tax returns all the time, it's his job. Are you going to get all upset just because he's coming here to ask a question or two?"

"Yes, indeed," my husband said.

"But we're honest citizens, aren't we? We're law-abiding, we pay our taxes—"

"Yes, indeed," my husband said.

"Well, then," I said, "all you have to do is tell this fellow that there's nothing to check over, all your deductions are in order, and everything will be—"

"Yes, indeed," my husband said.

"Well," I said helplessly, "I just don't see what you're so *worried* about."

"Don't you?" said my husband.

I stopped following him around with the cup of coffee and sat down instead. He turned suddenly and looked at me. "When you drive the car into town, what do you think about?" he asked me.

"What?"

"When you *drive* the *car* into *town*, what do you *think* about?"

"Money," I said. "Whether I have enough, or maybe even a little bit extra so I can maybe buy myself something. Shoes, maybe. I could certainly use a pair of shoes."

"I took off a lot for business expenses for the car," my husband said. He turned and waved the checkbook at me. "From now on," he said, "you don't ever drive that car into town, see, unless it's on business."

"What possible business could I have—"

"I don't care what you do when you're *there*, just so when you're driving the car into town you have in mind some business expense you're doing it for. Typewriter ribbons, maybe. If you went all the way into town to get typewriter ribbons, that would be going on business, see? Because I use a typewriter ribbon in my typewriter. And then once you got there for a typewriter ribbon, then you could do any fool shopping you wanted, and it would be a business trip anyway. See?"

"Not really," I said. "If I buy a typewriter ribbon for you every time I go into town then pretty soon you'd have more typewriter ribbons than—"

"You don't really have to *buy* one," my husband said impatiently. "You just *think* about buying it on the way into town. As though you were really only driving into town just to get a typewriter ribbon and planned on kind of sneaking off to do your other shopping, but it was really just a trip to get a typewriter ribbon, a *business* trip. See?"

"But they'd get to thinking I was pretty silly, around the stationery store," I said. "Seeing me come in every day nearly for another typewriter ribbon, or else coming in *pretending* I was going to get a typewriter ribbon, because I have enough trouble now with running out of money all of a sudden and having to give things back." He opened his mouth again and I said hastily, "All right, though. I'll put it on my shopping list right away, and then I won't forget."

"Canceled checks," he said. He sat down at his desk and began to open drawers. I sighed.

"I just don't know what you're so *worried* about," I said.

"Four children?" he asked.

"Four."

"I wish..." he began, and then stopped. "Look," he said then, "I work in here, don't I? In this study?"

"I guess so," I said.

"So I was certainly justified in taking off the rent for one room in the house which is like an office for me. Couldn't I?"

“I guess not,” I said, bewildered.

“And you better get Barry’s train and stuff out of here before that fellow comes tomorrow. And I’ll kind of leave my typewriter out and some papers lying around.”

“I could go right into town tomorrow and think about a typewriter ribbon,” I offered hopefully.

“I wish I felt better about that car,” he said.

“Well, after all, four days a week I drive you up to your classes at the college, and then I come and get you. *That’s* a lot of wear and tear on the car.”

“No,” he said. “Commuting to and from your employment is not business driving.”

I stared at him. “You mean,” I said, and gasped, and caught my breath, “you mean I get up in the morning and I drive Barry to nursery school and then I come back and I get you and I drive you to the college and then I go back and I get Barry and bring him home and then I go back and get you and I bring you home and then I take you up again in the afternoon and then I go and get you again and they call that *pleasure* driving? Now, listen.” I got up and began to walk around and around the study. “Now, listen. There are a lot of things we have to put up with, like prices going up on everything and the children’s overshoes nearly triple what they were last winter and even the laundry raising prices again and the turn-in they gave us on the old car, and the way the mail is getting slower every day, but I can tell you right now that no G-man covered with badges is going to come walking right into my own house and stand there with machine guns and tear gas and whatever else they carry and abuse his authority pushing me around and trying to tell me that this amateur taxi service I run has got to be called *pleasure* driving. Now you listen to me—”

“I don’t *want* to listen to you,” my husband said. “And now I think of it, I would like you to go out somewhere while the man is here tomorrow. Maybe you better stay away for the whole day, because it says right on the tax blank in the small print that commuting back and forth to your place of employment is not a legitimate deductible expense for your car. Look,” he said. “If you drive me to the college, that’s not deductible. But if I walk to the college and you drive along behind me with my briefcase in the car, well, *that’s* deductible.”

“Drive your briefcase? Why can’t it walk?”

“No,” my husband said. “No, no.” After a while he went on in a very quiet voice, “I really can’t see that it will do any good for both of us to be worrying about this. I’ll just look over these old checks, and you go count the children again.”

I bribed the children into bed, and read a story to Sally and Barry, and got the dishes done and the dogs and cats fed. When the kitchen was in order I went and knocked on the study door and my husband said to go away and not bother him. I watched television for a while, and read a mystery story, and about eleven I went and knocked on the study door and my husband said to go away and not bother him. I said I just thought he might like a little something to eat and he said that later he might have a glass of milk but not to wait up for him. I read for a while longer and then knocked on the study door and said good night, and my husband said to go away and not bother him and good night. Sometime around two in the morning Barry had a nightmare and I went in to quiet him, and then downstairs where I knocked on the study door and said did he know it was two in the morning. My husband said *please* to go away and not bother him; didn’t he have enough on his mind without my coming to pound on the door every two minutes just to tell him what time it was?

When I came down in the morning he was asleep in the study chair. All his old checkbooks were lined up neatly on the desk, along with a stack of old bills. I covered him with a blanket and went into the kitchen and made breakfast for the children and got them dressed and fed and washed and off to school. I put Barry into his snowsuit and drove him to nursery school, and on the way home I picked up the morning papers. When I had the coffee made and the paper all ready by my husband's plate I went into the study and woke him and he opened his eyes and said, "I forgot the depreciation on the pencil sharpener."

The man was supposed to come at ten. Between ten, when he was stationed in the study, and five past ten, when the doorbell finally rang, my husband came into the kitchen four times, once to ask if I thought he ought to change into another shirt, the one with the darns on the elbows, once to ask if I had any idea what our garbage disposal came to by the year, once to ask if there was any aspirin in the kitchen, and once to complain that it was positively heartless to leave a victim like this, kicking his heels and waiting in agony.

When the doorbell rang I heard him go down the front hall with a dignified, measured step, as of one going manfully to his fate, and I closed the kitchen door and sat down on the kitchen stool and wondered what to do. I do not ordinarily find much difficulty in disposing of my morning time, which frequently seems too short for any reasonable occupation, but this morning the dishes were done and the table was set for lunch and I had made brownies and a nut cake the day before, and all that was left was the study rug, which needed vacuuming, but I thought my husband might not like having me coming through with the vacuum while he was talking to the man from the income tax. I heard his voice raised once; he was shouting

“Depreciation,” and then he was quiet, and I could hear the low reasonable murmur which was the man from the income tax.

My husband told me afterward that the man’s name was Mr. Kelly and that, all things considered, he was quite an agreeable fellow, but I never saw him. I sat on the kitchen stool for about fifteen minutes and then I gathered up all the library books and went out and got into the car and drove down the street to the library. A couple of new mystery stories had come in, and I read one of them sitting at the library table, and I watched the library desk for a few minutes while Mrs. Johnson went out for a cigarette, and we talked about the P.T.A. and the Starlight 4-H Club food sale. After I left the library I picked up the mail and sat in the car for a few minutes reading a letter from my mother, and then it was almost time to pick up Barry at nursery school, so I stopped in the grocery and asked the grocer if he had a typewriter ribbon. He said no, but they had some pencils, so I bought four pencils.

When Barry and I got home a few minutes later the voices were still going on in the study. Barry headed directly for the study door to show Daddy the airplane he had made in nursery school, and I caught him and gave him a piece of paper and the four pencils to play with. By the time the other children came home I had vegetable soup ready, and grilled cheese sandwiches. As each child came up onto the back porch I opened the kitchen door and said “Shh.” They came in quietly, casting uneasy glances at the study door, and sitting in silence at the table.

Finally Laurie burst out “Golly!” and I said “Shh,” and he whispered, “I can’t *stand* it. Golly, poor old Dad.”

“I asked my teacher did she think my daddy would get arrested by the policeman if he took that man’s money,” Sally remarked, looking darkly into her vegetable soup. “She said she certainly hoped not.”

“Shh,” I said.

“Where’s Daddy?” Barry asked.

“Shh,” I said. “Eat your lunch.”

“Shh,” Laurie said.

“Poor old Dad,” Jannie said.

“Shh,” I said. We all heard the door between the study and the front hall open, and then footsteps going along the hall to the front door. We could hear the man from the income tax saying clearly, “Of course, you know by now it doesn’t mean a thing to me. It’s only a word, that’s all. A hundred dollars — five hundred dollars — ten cents; it doesn’t really *mean* anything to us fellows; it’s just a word.”

“Well, I can see where it might be,” my husband said. “Goodbye.”

“No, no,” said the man from the income tax. “In our business we *never* come right out and say ‘goodbye’ to a victim. We always figure we’ll be seeing him again some time.” He laughed uproariously, and we could hear the front door close.

After a minute my husband’s footsteps sounded again in the hall and he came through the dining room and into the kitchen. We all sat around the kitchen table looking at him.

“Well, well, well,” he said. “What’s for lunch?” He pulled out his chair and sat down.

There was a silence and then Laurie said, “How is everything?”

“Fine,” my husband said, surprised. “Why?”

“We just thought you might be tired or something,” I said. “You had so little sleep.”

“Never felt better,” my husband said. “That was a nice fellow, by the way. He gave me a few pointers on next year’s income tax. Giant fan,” he said to Laurie.

“That’s too bad,” Laurie said politely.

“Did he come all this way just to ask you to play for the Giants?” I asked.

“For the *Giants*?” He was astonished.

“I only thought,” I said elaborately, “that there was some difficulty about your income tax. Some questions about your income tax.”

“Oh, that,” my husband said. “Yes. Got my figures wrong, as a matter of fact. I put it down eight times nine was fifty-six.”

“Dad.” Laurie put down his soup spoon. “For *gracious* goodness sakes. Oh, Dad, for gracious goodness *sakes*.”

“It’s seventy-four,” Jannie said helpfully.

My husband leaned back and took out one of the cigars he ordinarily saves for after dinner. “It never pays to worry about money,” he said. “After all, money isn’t everything.”

• • •

Suddenly it was only two weeks to wait until Christmas, and the temperature was twenty-two below the night of the school Christmas pageant. Then it was only eight days to go; formally, the children and I hung a Christmas wreath on each gatepost. Then, some hours less than a week, and my husband’s present, ordered from that place in Seattle, might not come in time; then it was five days and then sixty hours and fourteen minutes, and we brought the Christmas tree home and stood it on the back porch. The store in Seattle was criminally slow, perhaps even forgetful; it was only thirty-seven hours before Christmas. Then, the morning of Christmas Eve I stuffed the turkey and decided on apple pie, after all, because last year no one had touched the pumpkin. All afternoon the children and I drove around town to the houses of their friends, leaving little packages of candy, and chocolate apples, and all afternoon their friends had been stopping off at our house ("Can't stay; just want to leave this, and Merry Christmas!") and leaving little packages of Christmas cookies and fruit cake. Then at last it was five o'clock in the afternoon, and the special delivery truck pulled up outside with the package from Seattle. Laurie and his father went to bring in the tree and I signed for the package and Jannie stirred the eggnog and Sally salted the popcorn and Barry sat in a corner of the kitchen, wide-eyed and still.

"Deck the halls with boughs of holly," Jannie sang, and Sally chanted, "Christmas, Christmas."

"You'll have to get the ax," my husband told Laurie. "Unless your mother would prefer a hole cut in the ceiling."

"You say that every year," I said, going past him sideways so he would not see the package I was holding behind me. "If you would only measure the tree before you bring it in—"

"You say that every year," he said. "Why are you walking like that?"

"Because I have your Christmas present behind me and I don't want you to notice," I said with dignity, and scurried into the kitchen to put the package behind the washing machine.

It takes three enormous cartons to hold all our Christmas decorations, and all during the green spring and the hot summer months and the long sunny days and the gray rainy days the cartons sit on a shelf in the far corner of the barn. Then, at last, Laurie and Jannie lift them down and carry them together through the snow to the house, going very slowly, cautioning one another, coming indoors with snow on their boots. I never look at the cartons labeled CHRISTMAS: LIGHTS, ORNAMENTS, DECORATIONS without remembering the sadness of putting them away last year, assuring the children that Christmas would come again, it would surely come again, they would hardly notice the length of the year before Christmas came again. Then Christmas comes again and I perceive that I, at least, have certainly not felt the year slip away; it has gone before I knew it.

Sighing, I lifted the carton named LIGHTS onto one of the dining room chairs to open it. "By the way," my husband asked Laurie very casually, "what *was* in that package, the one your mother just took into the kitchen?"

"Why, I wouldn't have any idea," Laurie said innocently. He called to me, "Did you remember to cut holes in the top so it could breathe?" he asked.

"Come on, you," his father said. "Get up on that ladder."

Jannie ladled eggnog into cups, Sally sat on the couch next to Barry with her lap full of popcorn, and spoke to him softly. "In the morning," she said, "when you wake up, what do you do?"

"I wake Laurie and I wake Jannie and I wake Mommy and I wake—"

"No, no," I said. "Tomorrow I plan to sleep very late."

"Eight o'clock by the playroom clock," Sally said.

"Eight-thirty," I said.

"Nine," my husband said.

"But *last* year it was eight o'clock," Sally said indignantly, "you know perfectly *well*. Last year and the year before that and the year before that and the year before *that* it was eight o'clock."

"Yeah." Laurie turned. "And no setting back the playroom clock, either, like you did that time."

Sally murmured to Barry, "So when you wake up tomorrow morning, what do you do?"

"I wake Laurie and I wake—"

My husband and Laurie had cut the tree down to size, and Jannie took the cut branches into the dining room and wreathed them around the punch bowl. She began to sing "Joy to the World," and my husband caught the tree as it toppled forward. “Hey,” Laurie said, peering down between the branches, “you trying to knock me off this ladder or something? Entertain the kids seeing me go crash on the floor?”

“We need a new tree stand,” my husband said.

“Don’t be silly,” I said. “We’ve *always* used that one.”

We keep a spool of fine wire with the tree stand, and Laurie and his father contrived to secure the tree upright by fastening it with wire and thumbtacks to the frames of the bay window. “Look,” Laurie called down, “last year it was maybe three inches farther over left; here’s one of last year’s thumbtacks.”

I can remember, back in the dim time when I was a little girl, my father taking the strings of Christmas tree lights out of the flowered box, standing with his hands full, saying wistfully, “These lights again? No new ones?” and my mother, turning, frowning slightly, “But you said they were good for another year; last Christmas you said they were—”

“These lights?” my husband said. “You didn’t get any new ones?”

A good deal of the tire tape which holds the light strings together was put on by my father, and some by my brother — kneeling on the floor, entangled, asking madly, “Why can’t we get *new* lights, will someone please tell me?” — and of course my husband has put on tape of his own. He has taken off some of the tape my father put on and replaced it where it was getting ragged, and last year there was a new spot which Laurie taped. I went out one year (as I suppose my mother must have done at least once before me) and bought three new strings of lights, but somehow their bright green cord was so gaudy among the soft old ornaments, and there was nothing for my husband to do during the half hour when the rest of us were drinking eggnog and he would usually have been taping the light cords, so I put the new lights in the box with the old ones and they are still there; every year my husband takes them out of the box, looks at them, and puts them back again. “We ought to get new tree lights,” Laurie said, unwinding the tire tape, “for heaven’s sake, how long do you expect these will last?”

“They’ll do for another year or so,” my husband said absently. “Look, here’s more of Grandpa’s tire tape peeling off.”

“ — and Donner and Blitzen and Dasher and Prancer—” Sally told Barry. Jannie tugged at my arm. “Can you come a minute?” she asked. “I got to show you something.” I followed her up the back stairs to her room, which had a sign on the door threatening the most dire vengeance on any who entered for any reason whatsoever. Jannie shut the door tight behind us and I sat down on her bed while with much pausing to listen apprehensively she took from her bottom dresser drawer a candy box. She set this down on the bed next to me and opened it carefully. Taking out one of the small packages inside, she set it on my lap. It was brightly wrapped, and the card on it read, “To Daddy from Jannie.”

“It’s fine,” I said. “What is it?”

“Not so loud,” Jannie said, whispering. “It’s a potholder.”

“A potholder?”

“Yes, we learned how to make potholders in Starlight 4-H Club. And this is for Sally.”

“A potholder?”

“Yes, and this is for Laurie, and this is for Barry.”

“A potholder for Barry?”

“Yes, because in the mornings when his cereal’s too hot. Oh, golly.” Hastily she snatched the bottom package from the box and put it under her pillow. “You weren’t supposed to see that,” she said.

“I didn’t see it,” I told her. “I never even noticed it.”

"Good," she said, "because that's a secret, that one. I won't even tell you who it's for."

Voices called from downstairs, and I helped Jannie get the packages back into the box and the box back into her dresser drawer and her dresser drawer shut and then we closed the door of her room behind us, with its forbidding sign, and hurried downstairs. The tree burst into light as we came into the living room, turning itself suddenly from an alien, faintly disturbing presence in the house into a thing of loveliness and color. "Ooh," said Sally, and Barry nodded, smiling.

I took up the box named ORNAMENTS and opened it. On top was the stuffed Santa Claus doll which is always the responsibility of the youngest child, who must see that it is put under the Christmas tree and then put safely away again when the Christmas tree comes down. The Santa Claus doll is always on top of the last box because it must always be wrested at the last minute from the youngest child ("Christmas will come again, *really* it will") and gotten hastily into the box and hidden. Now, just as I had promised last year, I took the Santa Claus doll and handed it into Barry's waiting arms. "Santa Claus," Barry said in confirmation, and returned to his place on the couch, holding the Santa Claus doll tight. Jannie began to sing "O Little Town of Bethlehem" and Laurie said sharply, "No, Dad, please. Let *me* do it; you'll fall."

Sally sat on the floor as close to the tree as she could get and chanted musically, "When *I* was youngest child it was the year of two trees, because when Mommy came to the man he had forgotten and our tree was gone for someone else. So Mommy said to the man where will I get a Christmas tree for my little children and for my little child Sally and the man said here are two thin trees with almost no branches will they do and Mommy said yes, I will take these two thin trees for my little children and for my little child

Sally and we made red chains and golden bells and frankincense and garlands of red flowers and we put them around and about the two thin trees and it was Christmas and the loveliest Christmas there ever was....”

“And the Christmas when Laurie was covered with spots,” Jannie said. “That was before you were born,” she told Sally.

“But I know it was because they gave him a paintbox and they thought *that* was why he was spotty,” Sally said.

“Remember the Christmas the furnace went off and we opened our presents all wrapped in blankets?” Laurie peered out from under the star he was fastening on top of the tree. “Boy, *that* was a real cool Yule.”

“Did you notice that I put ‘fur coat’ on my Christmas list again this year?” I remarked to my husband. “Not that I really expect—”

“Here it is, here it is,” said Jannie breathlessly. “The one I am going to give to my own dear daughter someday.” She had taken out her own particular treasure, a little china lady with a wide spun-glass skirt. “My own little daughter,” Jannie said.

“And you will tell her,” Sally continued smoothly, “how you used to hang it on *your* Christmas tree when you were a little girl, and how your mommy used to hang it on *her* Christmas tree when *she* was a little girl—”

“Mommy?” said Barry, perplexed. He turned to look at me curiously.

“When *Mommy* was a little girl,” Sally said, “they used to go in sleighs and sleigh bells and bring in a Yule log, but of course that was *very* long ago.”

“Hey,” I said, protesting, and Jannie started “God Rest Ye Merry, Gentlemen.” Barry gave me a reassuring nod, shifted his Santa Claus to his other arm, and reached out for the popcorn.

I began to lift out the bright fragile ornaments. I handed them carefully to Jannie and Sally, who went back and forth from the tree, carrying the ornaments carefully with both hands and setting them with caution on the tips of the branches. Barry took the funny little wooden man, colored red and yellow, and hung him on a bottom branch, and then he came back for the little cardboard pictures of drums and soldiers and old-fashioned dolls which had come with my grandmother from England. He took them one by one and with great concentration, always holding the Santa Claus, tucked the little strings over the ends of the low branches and the little soldiers and dolls swung around and back, bending down the branches. Laurie came to the dining room table to select ornaments for the top of the tree. "Varnish dry yet?" I whispered.

"Shh." He turned to watch his father, who was helping Sally with an ornament. "I think so," he whispered. "You think he'll like it?"

"It's exactly what he's been wanting," I said.

"He's going to be so surprised I can't *wait*," Laurie said happily. "By the way," he added, "you just didn't happen to notice a.22 rifle tucked away in a closet somewhere?"

"I wouldn't even know what a.22 rifle looked like," I assured him. "You know perfectly well I'm afraid of guns."

"Brother," Laurie said. "When Sally sees that—"

"Shh," I said.

Laurie took up two ornaments and made for the tree. "Watch out here, you kids," he said grandly. "This is where the professionals go into action." He climbed onto his ladder again.

" — you will hear bells jingling and reindeers' feet on the roof," Sally told Barry confidentially.

I poured my husband a glass of eggnog and Jannie began to sing "The First Noel."

“And milk and crackers for Santa Claus,” Sally went on busily, “and then we have breakfast, and you are all always *my* guests at breakfast and we sit on the floor in my room and eat cereal from the new cereal bowls green and red, red and green. And what do you do when you wake up?” she demanded suddenly of Barry.

“Wake Laurie and—”

I opened the last carton, labeled DECORATIONS. There on top was the cardboard candle Jannie had made in kindergarten. That always went on the dining room buffet and then there was the big Santa Claus face Sally had done in first grade and that went on the back door and the red and green paper chains Laurie had made when he was a Cub Scout went over the doorway. Not two weeks ago Barry had come home from nursery school with a greenish kind of a picture of a Christmas tree and that had somehow got itself established on the refrigerator next to the big chart Laurie always made early in December so we could all fill out our Christmas lists and keep them in plain sight. Here were the popcorn strings my mother strung when *I* was youngest child, and the paper bells Laurie and I made when he was so small it seems unbelievable now, and the jigsaw Santa my husband cut out that same year, and the painted candy canes and the red ribbons and the green paper wreaths. “Oh, my,” I said, looking at all of it.

“Here, you just sit down,” Jannie said. “You just don’t remember, is all. You sit down and I’ll do it.”

She sent Sally with the paper bells for the front door and Barry with the Santa Claus face and Laurie got back on his ladder and put up the paper chains and Jannie put the candy canes on the doorknob and the paper wreaths on the kitchen cabinets and the popcorn strings went around the foot of the tree because they were so old and delicate by now that they broke if we tried to hang them. Jannie and Laurie together put up the paper bells and Sally set the jigsaw Santa in the center of the dining room table. Sally reached into the box and took out the string of bells and Jannie sang "Jingle Bells." Barry hung the bells on the nail by the front door where they hang every year. "Bells and reindeers and presents," Barry sang, and Jannie came over to drape a piece of tinsel in my hair.

"Tell me," my husband asked Jannie confidentially, "what *was* in that package?"

Jannie thought. "A lovely new tie," she said at last. "Colored red and green for Christmas and pink and yellow for Easter and red and white and blue for Fourth of July, and black."

"I been telling you and telling you and *telling* you," Sally said to Barry. "Now, do you peek?"

"No?" Barry said uncertainly.

"You get up in the morning and what do you do?"

Barry opened his mouth and said "I wake—" Sally sighed and said, "Well, then, who is coming tonight?"

Jannie began to sing "Silent Night."

The tree was growing; it was hung with tinsel now, and every possible corner of the house held some touch of Christmas. "If one more child makes one more decoration," my husband said, "we'll have to move out to the barn next year."

"You'd think some of it would fall apart from one year to the next," I said helplessly.

"Tomorrow morning," Sally said, "all under the tree will be presents."

"That reminds me," my husband said to Laurie, "you'd better get out the screwdriver and the hammer, for a couple of construction jobs we've got to do later. Last year I needed the wrench, too."

“ — and an orange in your stocking,” Sally said, and then at last it was time. Solemnly, reluctantly, Barry climbed down from the couch with the stuffed Santa Claus. He stood for a minute looking up at the lighted tree, his small face touched with reflected color, and then, bending low and wiggling, he crept underneath and set the Santa Claus against the trunk of the tree. “Now,” he said to the Santa Claus, “make it be Christmas.”

“He ought to say ‘God bless us every one’ or something like *that*,” Jannie pointed out.

“Say,” my husband said to Sally in a low voice, “how about that package hidden in the kitchen?”

“Mice,” Sally said firmly. “Full of mice.”

“Listen,” Laurie said in my ear, “suppose he *doesn’t* like it, after all? I mean, suppose he doesn’t *like* it?”

“Don’t worry about *that*,” I said. “It’s just beautiful.”

Barry climbed up into his father’s lap to look further at the tree and his father bent and whispered in his ear. “What package?” said Barry, turning.

“Careful,” said Laurie warningly.

“Don’t tell,” Sally said.

Barry chuckled. “A elephant,” he said.

Jannie sang “Hark the Herald Angels Sing,” Laurie took out the cartons to stack them on the back porch until we took the tree down again, Sally sat cross-legged on the floor watching the tree. Suddenly Sally and Barry spoke at once.

“Last Christmas—” Sally said.

“Next Christmas—” Barry said.

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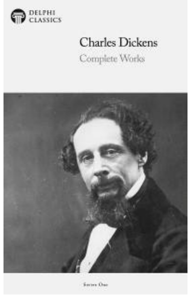

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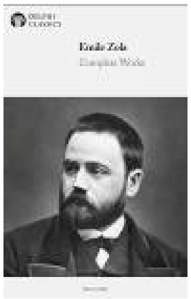

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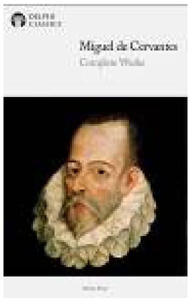
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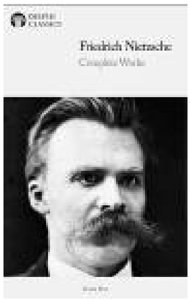
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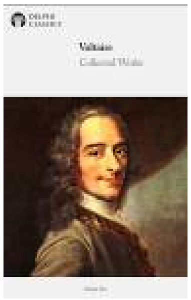

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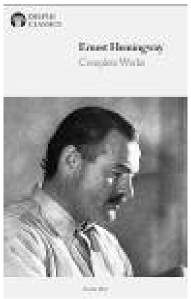

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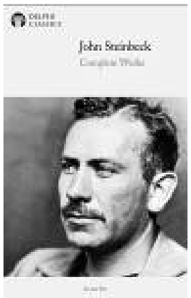

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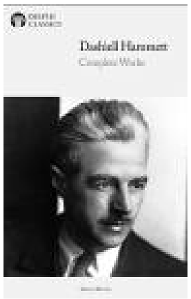

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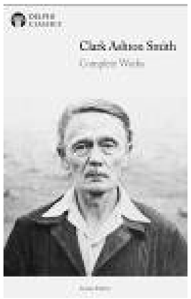

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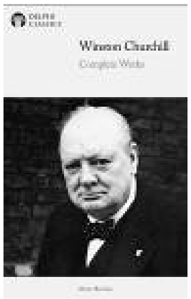
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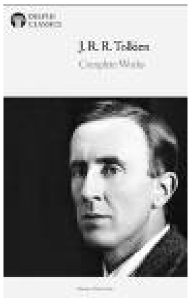
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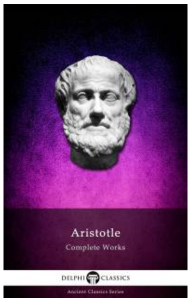
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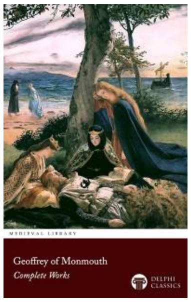
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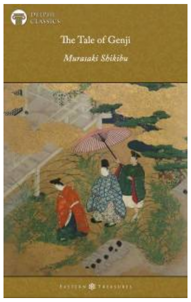
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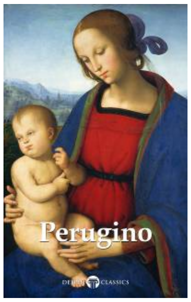

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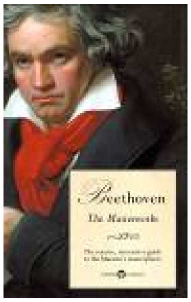

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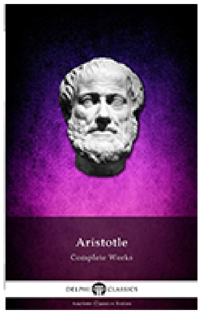
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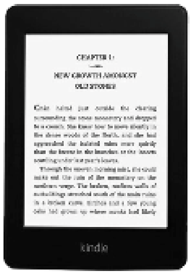

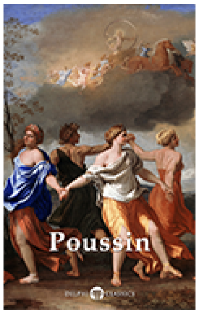
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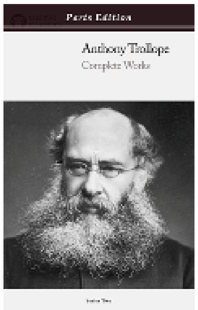
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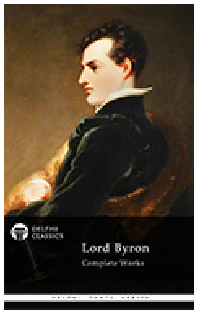
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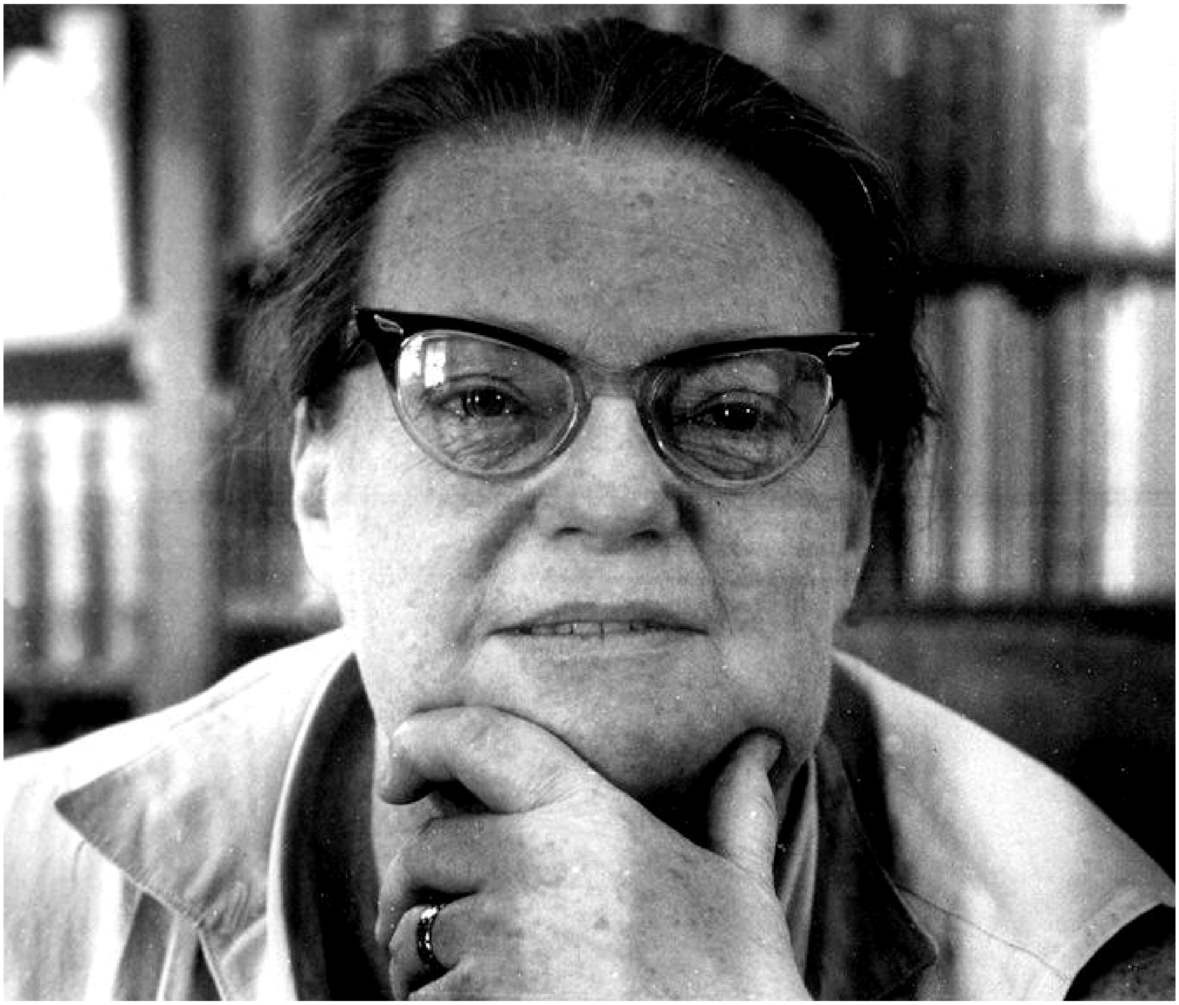

Jackson close to the time of her death — in early August 1965, she wrote a letter to her agent Carol Brandt, saying soon she "will be leaving on a wonderful journey and must go alone". Days later, she died of heart failure during an afternoon nap. In accordance with her wishes, there was no funeral or memorial service; her body was cremated and her ashes were kept in the family.